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Phat

Professor David Crystal

Now, this is a difficult one for speech, 'phat', not 'fat'. You can usually tell the difference because 'fat' is for animates: people and animals and things, people are 'fat', animals are 'fat'. 'Phat' is used with things or general states of affairs, people say, 'You know, that's a phat beat!' or 'It's very phat down by the river!'

Well, it sounds like a modern usage, doesn't it? It means, excellent, great, cool... you know, it's phat down by the river, it's lovely to be down by the river.

As a word, it's been around since the early 1990s. It's from hip-hop slang. It originally meant sexiness, real sexiness in a woman. Although, it had all sorts of etymologies, I wouldn't believe them all - I mean, one was, 'pretty, hot and tempting', p-h-a-t, and there are some ruder etymologies as well, let me tell you.

You'll still encounter it, but the homophony, the fact that the two words sound the same - phat and fat - has made it ambiguous. I don't think it ever really caught on. I do hear the word around a lot in 2006, but I think it's on the way out. It's not phat, to say phat, anymore!



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