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'Do me a favor: Can you say 'senator' instead of 'ma'am'?' Barbara Boxer (pictured) asked Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh. Photo: AP

What do you call a lawmaker, anyway?

By ANDIE COLLER | 6/22/09 5:09 AM EDT

With all due respect, it ain't easy to be duly respectful on Capitol Hill.

With regulations that govern everything from hemlines in the Speaker's Lobby to the circumstances under which a member can accept a box lunch, you'd think the matter of how to address or refer to a U.S. senator or representative would be pretty simple.

There are, indeed, rules of protocol, but even following them to the letter doesn't guarantee you'll get it right, as legislators tend to tweak them to reflect their personal preferences, which are as diverse — and ego-driven — as the legislature itself. What's just fine by one member could be fighting words to another — and sometimes screwing up is the only way to know for sure.

Consider the plight of Brig. Gen. Michael Walsh, who drew a rebuke from Sen. Barbara Boxer (D-Calif.) last week for calling her “ma'am” instead of “senator” at a hearing before the Committee on Environment and Public Works. In the Army, “ma'am” is about as respectful as it gets — but Boxer didn't see it that way.

“Do me a favor: Can you say ‘senator’ instead of ‘ma'am’?” Boxer asked the general. “It's just a thing. I worked so hard to get that title, so I'd appreciate it. Thank you.”

“To me, when I looked at it, I thought it was a real cross-cultural issue,” says Robert Hickey, deputy director of The Protocol School of Washington. “From that military point of view, his term of address was totally respectful.”

“It was a culture clash,” says Cynthia Lett, executive director of the International Society of Protocol & Etiquette Professionals. For those in the military, using “ma'am” to refer to female superiors “is something they learn in basic training and they never forget,” she says.

But among civilians, the word is perceived differently. “If you just think back on normal relations, if you call a woman ‘ma'am,’ they say, ‘No, no, no, that's my mother,’” Lett says.

On the other hand, Hickey ventures, most male senators would probably not object to being called “sir” — and, indeed, during the hearing, Walsh

used that term repeatedly without incident. (If Walsh was technically in error, he is in high-ranking company; as president, George W. Bush once provoked gasps at the Vatican by calling the Pope “sir” instead of “your holiness.”)

“It’s always the substance of the conversation that is the most important thing, but it is interesting how often these titles and things determine how the conversation goes,” says Hickey (who recently received two orders for his book “Honor & Respect — The Official Guide to Names, Titles & Forms of Address” from the Office of the Governor in Juneau, Alaska).

Ultimately, however, it is the preference of the individual being addressed that should prevail, says Hickey: “A person is entitled to be called whatever they want to be called.”

Yes, but what if it’s impossible to guess what that is?

A preference for protocol is one thing, but what about a preference that sounds like protocol but actually isn’t? For example, Lett says that while “senator” is indeed a title used before a name, it is technically inaccurate to call someone “Congressman So-and-So” — the word is a descriptor, not an honorific. But most members either don’t know that or elect not to mention it.

“They’ve gotten used to it, because it sounds like it sets themselves apart from everybody else, and they like that,” says Lett. “Part of being in politics is about ego, and they like being called something other than ‘Mr.’”

While most politicians tend to err on the side of inflating their importance, some complicate the picture by going the other way.

Take, for example, Rep. Jared Polis (D-Colo.).

In his inaugural entry for CNN’s “Freshman Year” series, which follows Polis and Rep. Jason Chaffetz (R-Utah) through their first year in Congress, Polis wrote, “One change I will never get used to is that everyone keeps calling me ‘Congressman.’” Polis once told The Denver Post that “being stuffy undercuts the authority of a member of Congress,” and he says that people should “just call me Jared.”

Spokeswoman Lara Cottingham says Polis isn’t offended if someone calls him “congressman” — he just finds it somewhat impractical. On the Hill in particular, it’s the equivalent of someone yelling, “Dad!” at the top of a crowded ski slope and watching every adult male in sight snowplow to a stop.

“There’s so many other members of Congress that, especially in a large group of them, it is much easier to get his attention saying ‘Jared’ than saying ‘Congressman,’” Cottingham says. “If you say, ‘Congressman,’ not only might you get the attention of 434

other people, but it's not the first thing that comes to his mind — that he's 'Congressman' — because in his head he's 'Jared.'”

Polis is hardly the only one on the Hill to have a hard-to-predict preference. Sen. Tom Coburn (R-Okla.) goes by “Dr. Coburn,” and Rep. Marsha Blackburn (R-Tenn.) prefers the term “congressman” to “congresswoman” — although both have said they're not picky about enforcing their predilections.

Perhaps the most vexing title to pin down, however, is the one bestowed upon those who lead committees.

In the Senate, men are uniformly identified as “chairmen” on committee websites, as is Boxer — although in the Environment and Public Works hearing, while her nameplate said “chairman,” Boxer was uniformly addressed as “Madam Chair.” On the Small Business Committee, Sen. Mary Landrieu (D-La.) is identified as “chair.”

In the House, things are even harder to figure out. Earlier this year, the body changed its rules to make its official language gender-neutral, replacing words such as “chairman” with “chair” and eliminating words such as “he” and “his.”

Yet all the committee Web pages still say “chairman” for men; Rep. Nydia Velazquez (D-N.Y.) uses “chairwoman,” while Reps. Zoe Lofgren (D-Calif.) and Carolyn Maloney (D-N.Y.) use the official “chair.”

So how does one avoid being chastised by a member who thinks “congressman” sounds better than “Mr.,” who finds “chairman” sexist — or who thinks the word “chair” should be reserved for Barcaloungers?

Says Hickey, “The only think you can do is to move forward the best way we know how, until you find out that someone has a preference other than what is the standard.”

In other words, make your best guess — and prepare to be spanked.