

STATE OF MINNESOTA
IN SUPREME COURT

A19-0675

Court of Appeals

Anderson, J.

State of Minnesota,

Respondent,

vs.

Filed: July 8, 2020
Office of Appellate Courts

Darryl Dewayne Gibson, Jr.,

Appellant.

Keith Ellison, Attorney General, Saint Paul, Minnesota; and

Joseph M. Sanow, Nobles County Attorney, Travis J. Smith, Special Assistant County Attorney, William C. Lundy, Certified Student Attorney, Slayton, Minnesota, for respondent.

Brittany B. Sandager, Hedeem, Hughes & Wetering, Worthington, Minnesota, for appellant.

Teresa J. Nelson, Isabella Salomão Nascimento, Minneapolis, Minnesota, for amicus curiae American Civil Liberties Union of Minnesota.

S Y L L A B U S

A law enforcement officer has a lawful basis to conduct a traffic stop of a driver for a violation of Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) (2018) when the officer observes the driver fail to stop his or her vehicle at the stop line or stop sign before coming to a complete stop.

Affirmed.

OPINION

ANDERSON, Justice.

Appellant Darryl Dewayne Gibson, Jr. challenges the traffic stop of his vehicle after he failed to stop at a stop sign and stop line in violation of Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) (2018). The district court determined that the law enforcement officer illegally stopped Gibson and suppressed the evidence seized from the vehicle during the stop. The court of appeals reversed. *State v. Gibson*, No. A19-0675, 2019 WL 6284334 (Minn. App. Nov. 25, 2019). On appeal, this court must interpret the statutory language of Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) to determine under what circumstances a driver violates the statutory requirement to “stop at a stop sign or at a clearly marked stop line before entering the intersection.” Because we conclude that Gibson’s traffic stop was lawful, it was error for the district court to grant the suppression motion. Accordingly, we affirm the court of appeals’ decision to reverse the district court and remand to the district court for further proceedings.

FACTS

Gibson was driving his vehicle eastbound on Interstate 90 and used an exit ramp to access Highway 59 in Worthington. At the end of the exit ramp was a stop sign with a white stop line painted on the roadway. A Worthington police officer observed Gibson bring his vehicle to a complete stop after he had driven the vehicle entirely past the stop line but before entering the intersection of Highway 59 and the Interstate 90 exit ramp. The

officer initiated a traffic stop for failing to stop at the stop line in violation of Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b).¹

After making the stop, the officer requested Gibson's identification. Although Gibson initially gave the name of his brother, he subsequently gave the correct information as to his identity. Based on Gibson's lack of physical identification and responses to questioning about his travels, the officer extended the stop and asked to search the vehicle. Gibson consented to a search of his vehicle. The officer found blank checks, a printer, and a computer in the trunk. He also found a wallet that contained several identification cards for various unknown individuals. Gibson was arrested and charged with felony aggravated forgery and a gross misdemeanor for giving a false name to a peace officer.

The district court granted Gibson's motion to suppress the evidence seized from his vehicle and dismissed the charges based on its finding that the officer's traffic stop was unlawful. Specifically, the district court interpreted Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) to require a driver "to stop at the intersection, not at the stop sign or stop line." The court of appeals reversed, holding that Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) requires a driver to "stop at, near, or in proximity to the stop sign and stop line." *State v. Gibson*, No. A19-0675, 2019 WL 6284334, at *3 (Minn. App. Nov. 25, 2019). We granted Gibson's petition for review.

¹ During the omnibus hearing, the officer testified that "[t]he stop line is there for a reason" because "if vehicles do not stop at the appropriate stop line, behind the stop line, it is difficult for oncoming traffic to see those vehicles and be sure if they're going to stop or going into the . . . intersection."

ANALYSIS

“When reviewing a pretrial order on a motion to suppress evidence, we review the district court’s factual findings under a clearly erroneous standard and its legal determinations de novo.” *State v. deLottinville*, 890 N.W.2d 116, 119 (Minn. 2017) (citing *State v. Lugo*, 887 N.W.2d 476, 483–85 (Minn. 2016)).

The facts in this case are undisputed, which means that we focus solely on the legal question presented by Gibson: whether the officer had a lawful basis to stop Gibson’s vehicle. The United States and Minnesota Constitutions govern the legality of searches and seizures, including investigatory stops of vehicles. U.S. Const. amend. IV; Minn. Const. art. I, § 10. A traffic stop is lawful if the officer is able to articulate a particularized and objective basis for suspecting the particular person stopped of criminal activity. *Berge v. Comm’r of Pub. Safety*, 374 N.W.2d 730, 732 (Minn. 1985) (citing *United States v. Cortez*, 449 U.S. 411, 417–18 (1981)). When “an officer observes a violation of a traffic law, however insignificant, the officer has an objective basis for stopping the vehicle.” *State v. George*, 557 N.W.2d 575, 578 (Minn. 1997).

In this case, the officer believed that Gibson had violated Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) because Gibson drove his entire vehicle past the stop line before coming to a stop. According to the statute, “[e]very driver of a vehicle shall stop at a stop sign or at a clearly marked stop line before entering the intersection, except when directed to proceed by a police officer or traffic-control signal.” Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b). Gibson argues that the phrase “stop at” in the statute does not require him to make a complete stop before a stop

sign or stop line. The State argues that the statute required Gibson to stop before the stop sign or before the vehicle crossed the stop line.

When interpreting a statute, the first step is to determine whether the language of the statute is ambiguous. *State v. Thonesavanh*, 904 N.W.2d 432, 435 (Minn. 2017). “A statute is ambiguous only when the statutory language is subject to more than one reasonable interpretation.” *State v. Fleck*, 810 N.W.2d 303, 307 (Minn. 2012). When determining whether a statute is ambiguous, “words and phrases are construed according to rules of grammar and according to their common and approved usage.” Minn. Stat. § 645.08(1) (2018). When “the legislature’s intent is clearly discernable from plain and unambiguous language, statutory construction is neither necessary nor permitted and [we] apply the statute’s plain meaning.” *State v. Stay*, 935 N.W.2d 428, 430 (Minn. 2019) (citations omitted) (internal quotation marks omitted).

First, we must interpret the meaning of the phrase “stop at” in Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b). The Legislature defines the word “stop” as a “complete cessation from movement.” Minn. Stat. § 169.011, subd. 79 (2018). Applying this definition to Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) means that a vehicle must make a complete cessation from movement “at” a stop sign or stop line.

The term “at” is not defined by the Legislature. “In the absence of a statutory definition, we generally turn to the plain, ordinary meaning of a statutory [word or] phrase.” *State v. Leathers*, 799 N.W.2d 606, 609 (Minn. 2011). Although we may look to dictionary definitions to determine a term’s plain and ordinary meaning, the plain meaning of a

statutory phrase is also dependent upon context. *In re J.M.M.*, 937 N.W.2d 743, 747 (Minn. 2020).

The term “at” is defined as “expressing location or arrival in a *particular* place or position.” *Oxford Dictionary of English* 99 (2010) (emphasis added) (defining the term “at” when used as a preposition). This dictionary definition aligns with the common usage of the phrase “stop at” in the context of a stop line or a stop sign because stop lines and stop signs are used for controlling traffic. A stop line and a stop sign are signals that specify the precise place, location, or position where a driver must stop a vehicle to maintain a safe and orderly flow of traffic. This definition also aligns with the command that a driver “shall” stop at a stop line or stop sign. This command is not merely a suggestion, but rather a mandatory requirement for traffic control and safety.

Gibson cites to a dictionary that defines “at” as “in or near the position of.” He then cites a dictionary definition of the word “near,” as meaning “to, at, or within a short distance or interval in space or time.” Stringing these dictionary definitions together, Gibson interprets the language of the statute to mean that a driver must “stop his vehicle near the position of a stop sign or clearly marked stop line.” And thus, he argues, because he was within a “short distance of the stop sign” he satisfied, under his interpretation, the statute’s requirement to stop near the stop sign. The problem with Gibson’s definition is that it transforms a precise stopping location into a nebulous stopping area. Therefore, we reject Gibson’s definition because the definition he chose neither fits within the context of the statute nor accords with the common usage of the phrase “stop at.”

Further, we are not bound by dictionary definitions when context directs us otherwise. *See State v. Scovel*, 916 N.W.2d 550, 555 (Minn. 2018) (“It is not unusual to set aside dictionary definitions when context makes clear that dictionary definitions may not fit.”); *see also City of Brainerd v. Brainerd Invs. P’ship*, 827 N.W.2d 752, 760 (Minn. 2013) (Anderson, J., dissenting) (“[W]e must not look simply at a dictionary definition Instead, we must assess whether applying the dictionary definition makes sense in context.”). A dictionary is merely evidence of common usage; it is not dispositive in defining common usage. *State v. Cowdery*, 81 N.W. 750, 751 (Minn. 1900) (stating that a “dictionary is an evidence, rather than an originator, of definitions” and that when a “dictionary conflicts with popular understanding, the latter will be adopted”). Common usage of the word “at” in relation to a line or boundary is that, once something completely crosses a line, it is no longer at the line. It simply cannot be said that the popular understanding of “at” is such that stopping *at* a stop line or *at* a stop sign means that vehicle movement ceases at some point *after* the stop line or the stop sign.

We hold that Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b) is violated when the driver of a vehicle drives past the stop sign or stop line before coming to a complete stop. This holding is based on the plain meaning of the statute.

Because the parties do not dispute, and video evidence introduced during the omnibus hearing demonstrates, that Gibson failed to bring his vehicle to a complete stop before he drove his vehicle past the stop line and the stop sign, the officer conducted a

lawful traffic stop for a violation of Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b).² Thus, it was error for the district court to suppress the evidence seized from Gibson’s vehicle and dismiss the charges.³

CONCLUSION

For the foregoing reasons, we affirm the decision of the court of appeals.

Affirmed.

² Because the facts of this case show that a violation of the statute occurred, it is not necessary to resolve the issues raised by the parties in the form of various hypotheticals regarding the spatial relationship of the stopped vehicle to the stop sign or stop line.

³ Gibson also argues that a stop sign signals the type of intersection that one is approaching and tells the driver that he must stop, rather than yield, before entering a through highway. For support, Gibson cites Minn. Stat. § 169.20, subd. 3 (2018), which requires a driver to stop at the entrance to a through highway, and *Bohnen v. Gorr*, 47 N.W.2d 459, 464 (Minn. 1951), which discusses the duty to stop at a stop sign before entering a highway. Gibson misunderstands our precedent. *Bohnen* was a personal injury case in which we held that stopping at a stop line or stop sign might not be sufficient to satisfy Minn. Stat. § 169.20, subd. 3, which sets forth the duty of care a driver must exercise before entering the highway.

Neither *Bohnen* nor any statute cited by the parties suggests that a driver may ignore the command to halt a vehicle at a stop line or a stop sign as required by Minn. Stat. § 169.30(b). In addition to obeying the stop line or stop sign requirement, the driver also must stop at the entrance to the through highway pursuant to Minn. Stat. § 169.20, subd. 3(a). And the driver “must exercise a degree of care commensurate with the extra hazards created by obstructions to his view surrounding the intersection.” *Bohnen*, 47 N.W.2d at 463. These requirements may result in multiple stops in close proximity to each other, or, depending on the situation, a single stop may satisfy all three requirements. But satisfying any one requirement does not automatically satisfy other stopping requirements imposed by Minnesota law.