

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English — 24-6-14

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What is the meaning and origin of ‘queer the pitch’?

(K Nitya, Warangal)

The expression is mostly used in rather informal contexts. When you ‘queer someone’s pitch’, you ruin his plans. This act of interfering may be deliberate or it may be an accident. In either case, you are making it difficult for someone to achieve his goals. Another expression that has a similar meaning is ‘to rain on someone’s parade’.

*Seetha queered my pitch by applying for sabbatical leave before I did.

*I wanted to go for a long drive. But my wife queered the pitch by lending the car to her brother.

The expression comes from the world of street markets. The place where a vendor sets his barrow down or where he puts up his stall for the day is called a ‘pitch’. ‘Queer’ originally meant to ‘spoil’ or ‘ruin’. Very often, the location of the ‘pitch’ played a key role in determining the success of a business. To make sure they found a good spot – one that customers would gravitate to – vendors usually arrived early to the market place. Those that couldn’t find a suitable place often came up with innovative ways of attracting the attention of potential customers. They would shout, sing, tell jokes, chatter non-stop, etc. to get people to look in their direction. By doing this, they often ruined or spoiled (‘queered’) the chances of other vendors doing good business.

What is the difference between ‘ambiguous’ and ‘equivocal’?

(M Lakshmi, Pune)

First, let us deal with the pronunciation of ‘equivocal’. The first vowel sounds like the ‘i’ in ‘it’ ‘bit’ and ‘sit’, while the following ‘qui’ sounds like the ‘qui’ in ‘quit’, ‘quiz’, and ‘quill’. The ‘o’ and the ‘a’ that follow sound like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. The word is pronounced ‘i-KWI-vi-kel’ with the stress on the second syllable. When something that someone says lacks clarity, it can be said to be ambiguous or equivocal. Both words suggest that what the person has said can be interpreted in several different ways; the statement can have several different meanings.

When you accuse a politician of being ‘equivocal’, you are suggesting that he has deliberately or intentionally chosen to be vague. An ambiguous statement, on the other hand, can be intentional or unintentional.

*The Minister’s equivocal remarks made some of the reporters angry.

*Rewrite the sentence. It is ambiguous.

Is it okay to say ‘I am shifting house’?

(Sarath Kumar, Pollachi)

In India, when we change our place of residence, we normally say ‘I am shifting house’ or ‘I am shifting’. The few dictionaries that list ‘shift house’ as a possibility, insist that it is an expression used only in India. Native speakers of **English** do not ‘shift house’, they ‘move house’.

*We will be moving house next month.

What is the meaning of ‘Grey hair becomes you’?

(N. Sidhesh, Tiruchi)

When you tell someone that something becomes him/her, you are paying the individual a compliment. In the example you have given, you are suggesting that grey hair suits the person; it makes him/her look attractive or dignified. The expression ‘becomes you’ is mostly used in formal contexts.

*The blue saree she is wearing becomes her.

*Don’t try to be a stand-up comedian in class. It doesn’t become you.

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