

## SCHOOLS

# How well do you know your English?



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How is the word 'schadenfreude' pronounced? What is the meaning of 'bumf'? Can the expression 'double whammy' be used with good things? For twenty years now, S. Upendran has been dealing with such questions and more through his 'Know Your English' column in

*The Hindu* but sourcing the quote that ties up this weekly column is what takes up more of his time, he says.

In an interview, Dr. Upendran talks about how the English language has changed over time and feels there is a need for newer forms of literature to be studied. He also shares his views on English grammar, the syllabus and job opportunities for those pursuing higher studies in the English language.

How important is keeping up with changing trends in the English language?

Nowadays, there are so many interesting things happening with the language. Everyday, a new phrase is born. For instance, the phrase 'cell phone samba' refers to a person who runs around a room trying to catch the signal. Or, 'textual satisfaction' is when people pick up their phones to check if they have a new text message and if they do, they are satisfied.

It is important to see how language has changed in the present context. For instance, the title of the movie, 'The Gay Sisters' [a 1942 American drama film], has a completely different meaning today.

If changing trends have to be taken into consideration, will we see Indian universities offering electives in subjects such as the analysis of Harry Potter books or fantasy novels like some universities abroad are doing?

The problem with the traditional B.A. or M.A. literature courses that are offered is that most students find the reading material rather boring. The course is also such that there is little or no focus on what is being written now. Why not give students a choice which will create an interest in reading? Once, an interest is cultivated, the students themselves will pick up old texts and have a read. Books such as Harry Potter create this interest in reading.

Any suggestions for a change in syllabus?

One of the things the traditional courses can do is to begin by teaching the latest work that is out, get the students interested and then offer two or three optional courses to choose from. This will be similar to the credit system that is available in some universities abroad such as in America which lets you choose the subjects. The interesting thing is that if a person is pursuing an M.A. in English Literature, he can also opt for a few courses in linguistics or cultural studies.

However, for this to work, teachers should be interested in teaching newer pieces of work. While most teachers are used to dealing with older texts, for people who decide on the syllabus for higher **education**, classics are important.

What are the job opportunities for a person pursuing higher studies in English?

When I was growing up if a person said he wanted to specialise in English he was immediately termed dumb as such courses were usually the last option people would

resort to. But today, if a person's English is good and he has good communication skills then he can find employment in several places. For instance, multinational companies look for people, who can communicate well both verbally and orally and so do publishing firms. While teaching is a wonderful profession, unfortunately, it is the last option people seem to resort to. I even tried to convince some of my brightest students to take up teaching.

Have the number of students opting for English courses increased or decreased over the years?

The numbers are more or less the same. Nowadays, students are a lot more demanding from what they were 15 or 20 years ago. Back then, they listened and maybe questioned occasionally. Now, they challenge you a lot more.

Is the focus more on grammar and the rules of the language?

The problem is that people tend to focus a lot on grammar. If you don't know the rules it is no big deal. As long as you are communicating properly it is all fine. Interacting with English speakers is the best way to learn and pick up the language.

Have there been any questions you have received for your column that have bowled you over?

I sometimes get requests about words that I never knew existed. A couple of months ago, I was asked about a word which means the fear of the number 13 [Triskaidekaphobia].

How do you find the standard of English in the dailies?

Nowadays, many of the old timers are complaining about the style of writing in newspapers. I find that the style of writing is very chatty. Perhaps, this is the style that this generation wants. While twenty years ago, a sentence was as big as a paragraph; now, stories are much shorter and simpler.

The key is to keep the language as simple as possible. Make use of simple language and use it in a creative sort of way.

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