

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English

S. Upendran

JULY 03, 2016 18:23 IST

UPDATED: JULY 03, 2016 18:23 IST

“I read about your new principal in the papers yesterday. What do you think of her?”

“I haven’t been well the past couple of days. So, I haven’t been to school. According to my friends, she is very friendly.”

“That’s good to know. The newspapers say that she’s a brainiac.”

“Brainiac? Does it mean someone who is very intelligent or something?”

“Very good. In informal contexts, someone who is very intelligent can be called ‘brainiac’. The word is a combination of ‘brain’ and ‘maniac.’”

“The brainiac next door is leaving for London this weekend.”

“If you need help solving the problems, ask the brainiac who sits next to you. He is really good at maths.”

“I seldom open my mouth when I’m in the company of my brainiac cousins.”

“Wise thing to do. Brainiac, by the way, is the name of a character in the Superman comics. He’s a super smart alien.”

“Really? You’re pulling my legs, aren’t you?”

“Why would I want to pull your leg? Do you even know what the expression means?”

“Of course, I do! It means to play a trick on someone. When you pull someone’s legs, you joke with them. Mayank and Sameer enjoy pulling each other’s legs.”

“And they seem to have a lot of fun doing it. By the way, it’s not ‘legs’, but ‘leg’. I enjoy pulling my sister’s leg once in a while.”

“Did Raju really win the lottery, or is he pulling my leg?”

“Why don’t you ask him? I’m sure he’ll tell you...”

“No way! I’m scared of him. He gets angry for no reason at all. And when he does, he can be quite nasty. The last time...”

“Yes, I remember. He threw several verbal punches at you.”

“He threw verbal punches at me? What are you talking about?”

“When you throw verbal punches at someone, you say things that are meant to hurt the feelings of the individual. You’re being very nasty.”

“So instead of punching someone physically, you’re using words to hurt him!”

“Exactly! During the weigh-in, the two boxers exchanged several verbal punches.”

“How about this example? What did you say to Rekha to make her so angry? Why was she throwing so many verbal punches at you?”

“That’s a good example. Sometimes, it’s the verbal punches that really hurt.”

“True. They hurt a lot more than the physical punches. Tell me, does ‘verbal punches’ have the same meaning as ‘altercation’?”

“No, it doesn’t. When you have an altercation with someone, you have an argument with him. In this case, both of you are doing the shouting.”

“I see. Sridhar had an altercation with his neighbour.”

“The young couple had an altercation on the train. The other passengers were amused.”

“So, in the case of an altercation, both parties are involved in the shouting. Whereas...”

“Both parties may not be throwing verbal punches at each other. It could be just one person.”

“But it could also be both?”

“That’s right! It could be both or just one.”

* * *

I not only use all the brains that I have, but all that I can borrow. – Woodrow Wilson

Email: upendrankye@gmail.com

Printable version | Apr 22, 2018 1:30:25 PM | <http://www.thehindu.com/books/know-your-english/Know-Your-English/article14469007.ece>

© The Hindu