

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - "Swear like a trooper"

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What is the meaning and origin of 'swear like a trooper'?

(Dinesh Kumar, Kanpur)

One of the meanings of the word 'swear' is to use abusive or filthy language – something that the young guns in our cricket team seem to excel in. Whenever they do something – like scoring a hundred or taking a wicket/catch – they celebrate the occasion by swearing! They let out a string of juicy adjectives that make a lot of people shudder.

*Everyone was shocked when Uma walked in swearing like a trooper.

A 'trooper' was a soldier of low rank. Unlike the officers in the army, a trooper had little or no **education**, and the language he used in his everyday speech was full of profanity. Therefore, when you 'swear like a trooper', you are being as coarse as the soldier in the English army. It is also possible to say 'swear like a trouper'; meaning, to curse or swear like an actor!

Why do people say 'Mayday' when they are in trouble?

(J. Madhusudhan, Chennai)

'Mayday' has been used as an international distress signal in radio communication since 1927. It replaced 'SOS'; the distress signal used when the telegraph was the main means of long distance communication. When the pilot of an aircraft or the captain of a ship/boat is in serious trouble and wishes to let the authorities know that he has a major problem, he usually says, 'Mayday, Mayday, Mayday'. The word is always said three times in quick succession. This distress signal was coined by Fredrick Stanley Mockford, a radio officer working at Croydon airport in London. 'Mayday' does not have anything to do with the month of May. The expression comes from the French 'm'aider', which is the shortened form of 'venez m'aider', meaning 'come help me'. With the passage of time, 'm'aider' became 'mayday'.

What is the difference between 'swap' and 'swop'?

(S. Viswesh, Madurai)

As far as the meaning is concerned, there is no difference between the two. When you 'swap' or 'swop' something with someone, you 'exchange' things with the individual. Both words

are used in informal contexts. Though the two words are listed in most standard dictionaries, there are people who believe that 'swop' is non-standard; that it is a regional variant of 'swap'!

*The two classmates swapped/swopped email ids before the teacher walked in.

How is the word 'obsequious' pronounced?

(N. Subramanian, Chennai)

The 'o' in the first syllable and the 'ou' in the final syllable sound like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'se' is pronounced like the word 'see', and the following 'qui' sounds like the 'qui' in 'quick', 'quit', and 'quiz'. The word is pronounced 'eb-SEE-kwi-es' with the stress on the second syllable. Someone who is eager to please others by doing whatever they want is labelled 'obsequious'. The word is mostly used in formal contexts to show disapproval. An obsequious person is very submissive, and usually flatters those in power. He is a 'toady'. The word comes from the Latin 'obsequiosis' meaning 'compliant', 'obedient'.

*Ganesh implored Rekha to stop being so obsequious to her husband.

*Anand's obsequious PA stepped into the Boardroom wearing a fake smile on his face.

"The two most beautiful words in the English language – check enclosed." – **Dorothy Parker**
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