

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – How is the word ‘profligate’ pronounced?

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What is the meaning and origin of ‘son of a gun’?

(Mythreye Ramdas, Secunderabad)

The expression was originally used to refer to an illegitimate child. Over the years, ‘son of a gun’ has been used to express very different emotions. In American **English**, it is frequently used to indicate surprise or shock. “That son of a gun actually beat up the Principal.” It can also be used in informal contexts to refer to a mean person; it is a euphemistic way of calling someone a ‘mean bastard’. “Anand, that son of a gun, still hasn’t returned my money.” Strangely enough, ‘son of a gun’ can also be used as a term of endearment. “The son of a gun won the championship!”

In the old days, it was standard practice for women to accompany sailors on long voyages. Babies were often delivered on the ship. The delivery normally took place next to the canons. Since all deaths and births on a ship had to be recorded, the newborn’s details were written up as well. If it was unclear as to who the father was, then next to the father’s name, the word ‘Gun’ was written – referring to the cannon next to which the child was born. Against the child’s name, the word ‘son’ was written!

Why do we say, ‘He works for the UN’, but ‘He works for IBM’?

(L Santosh, Chennai)

The definite article is used when we are referring to a well-known organisation. For example, ‘Sheela works for the UN/BBC’. But in the case of well-known international business companies, the definite article is not used.

*Aditya is keen on working for IBM/Sony/BP.

Is it okay to refer to a student as being a ‘backbencher’?

(Kasturi, Mysore)

In India, the term ‘backbencher’ is used to refer to a student who sits in the back row; he is someone who is not interested in his studies. He is every teacher’s nightmare for he takes great delight in disrupting class. This meaning of ‘back-bencher’ does not exist in native varieties of English.

In British English, the word is normally used to refer to Members of Parliament who sit in the backbench. These individuals are not Ministers and do not hold a prominent position in the Government or in the opposition. While in our Parliament, both 'frontbenchers' and 'back-benchers' create pand-emonium, mercifully in our classrooms, it is the backbencher!

*The backbenchers don't want a special class.

How is the word 'profligate' pronounced?

(M. Harish, Tiruchi)

The first syllable is pronounced like the word 'Prof' the following 'l' is like the 'l' in 'bit' and 'kit'. The 'a' is like the 'a' in 'china' and the final 'e' is silent. The word is pronounced 'PROF-li-get' with the stress on the first syllable.

This is one way of pronouncing the word. When used as a noun, the word means someone who spends recklessly.

It can also be used to refer to someone with very low morals.

*Vinita doesn't realise she is married to a profligate.

*The Minister's profligate activities went unpunished.

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