

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – Is it okay to say ‘I’m running 75’?

S. UPENDRAN

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Is it okay to say ‘I’m running 75’?

(D. Parthasarathi, Hyderabad)

We Indians are always in a rush. When we are driving, we are in such a tearing hurry to get to our destination that we ignore all traffic rules.

It is not surprising, therefore, that we are always ‘running’ some particular age. In our country, when you ask someone his age, we usually get a complicated reply: “I’ve completed 39 and am now running 40”.

The expression ‘running 40’, though common within India, is unheard of in native varieties of **English**. Instead of ‘running’, they tend to say ‘going on’. Remember the famous song from ‘Sound of Music’: ‘I am sixteen going on seventeen’? Is it wrong to say ‘running 40’? In India, you can ‘run’ with the expression!

What is the meaning of ‘puffery’?

(VP Bhaskaran, Kochi)

This is a word mostly used in American English to refer false praise.

Whenever a new product is launched, there is usually hype around the event. In order to promote the product, people praise it to the skies – often, making it sound like it is the best thing since sliced bread!

This hype or exaggerated praise that is often resorted to by advertisers and those in the public relations profession is called ‘puffery’. In informal contexts, the British refer to it as ‘puff’.

*Don’t believe a word Mukund says. It’s just marketing puffery.

*Tell it like it is. There should be no puffery in the ad.

Some people drop the ‘e’ and pronounce the word ‘PUFF-ri’. Otherwise, the word is pronounced ‘PUFF-e-ri’.

What is the meaning and origin of ‘a fig leaf’?

(PN Ranganathan, Chennai)

According to the Bible, when Adam and Eve tasted the fruit from the Tree of Knowledge, they became aware that they were naked. In order to hide their nudity, they used fig leaves to cover themselves. Nowadays, the expression 'a fig leaf' is used figuratively to mean something that is used to conceal a problem, difficulty or embarrassment.

*Voluntary retirement is just a fig leaf. The man is actually being fired. What is the difference between 'skulking' and 'sulking'? (Ritu, Chennai) When you 'sulk', you are unhappy about something, and as a result, do not interact with those around you. You make it clear to everyone that you are unhappy; you sit in one corner of the room, and mope. One can be 'in a sulk' or one can have a 'case of the sulks'.

*What's wrong with Meera? She's been sulking all morning.

*Don't go anywhere near Swami. He's got a serious case of the sulks.

The word 'skulk' comes from the Norwegian 'skulke' meaning 'to shirk or malinge'. In British English, the word is used to refer to someone who pretends to be unwell in order to avoid doing work. It can also be used to mean to lie in wait for someone or move about in a stealthy manner. People usually skulk when they intend to harm another person.

*Get on with the job. I know you are just skulking.

*The girls panicked when they spotted three men skulking behind the building.

"My idea of housework is to sweep the room with a glance." – **Erma Bombeck**

upendrankye@gmail.com

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