

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - A hundred years ?

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Is it okay to say ‘a hundred years’ when the person you’ve been talking about suddenly appears?

(G. Harish Kumar, Mysore)

This is an expression mostly used in India; it’s a translation of an idiom that exists in most of our languages. Native speakers of English would not say ‘a hundred years’ in such contexts. The expression that they would normally use is ‘talk/speak of the devil’. The full form is ‘speak of the devil, and he shall appear’ and ‘talk of the devil, and in he walks’.

Which is correct? ‘Garima is married to Raj, a tennis player’ or ‘Garima is married to Raj, the tennis player’?

(C. Bhavani, Chennai)

In terms of grammar, both are acceptable. Their meaning, however, is different. The first sentence implies that Raj is a tennis player by profession, but you don’t really expect the listener to know who he is because he is not that famous. When you say ‘Raj, the tennis player’, you expect the listener to know who he is. The use of ‘the’ suggests that Raj is well known.

*Last night, I ran into Kamal, the actor.

*Anita introduced me to Jacob, a painter.

What is the meaning of ‘put paid to’?

(J.K.Shaji, Thiruvananthapuram)

This rather informal expression means to be prevented from doing what one had hoped to or planned to – things come to a halt rather abruptly. Some dictionaries define it as ‘to finish off’ or ‘destroy’ something.

*A broken finger put paid to his chances of being included in the Test squad.

According to some scholars, the expression comes from certain practices followed in the past by bookkeepers in England. Whenever an individual settled his account, the bookkeeper would stamp or write the word ‘paid’ on the bill and return it to the customer. In India, this tradition still continues in many shops.

What is the meaning of ‘helicopter siblings’?

(Anuj Saini, New Delhi)

In informal contexts, parents who keep a very close watch on their children and all their activities are called ‘helicopter parents’. They are so called because like the helicopter they hover, and in the process become overly involved in their children's life. Some would call this ‘over-parenting’. ‘Helicopter siblings’ are your overprotective brothers and sisters who make your life miserable!

What is the meaning and origin of ‘cut the Gordian knot’?

(J. Anthony, Bangalore)

This is an expression that comes from the world of Greek mythology. The story goes that Gordius, a peasant before he became the King of Phrygia, had connected a yoke to his ox cart using an intricate knot. When he dedicated the cart to Zeus, an oracle predicted that the man who succeeded to untying the knot would go on to become the ruler of Asia. Many tried, but failed. When Alexander the Great came to Gordion, he heard about the strange prophecy and proceeded to the temple of Zeus. Instead of attempting to untie the knot, he merely took out his sword and slashed right through it. He went on to become the ruler of Asia! Nowadays, the expression ‘to cut the Gordian knot’ means to find an innovative solution to a complex problem – a solution that is quick and bold.

*There was too much bickering. The CEO cut the Gordian knot by firing all his managers.

“The problem with children is that they have to put up with their parents.” – **Charles DeLint**

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