

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English - talk nineteen to the dozen

**S. UPENDRAN**

JULY 02, 2012 21:06 IST

UPDATED: JULY 02, 2012 21:06 IST

**What is the meaning and origin of ‘talk nineteen to the dozen’?***(R. Shakunthala, Chennai)*

We have all come across people who can speak non-stop at a very fast pace. Words just pour out of their mouth, and it becomes very difficult for the listener to get a word in. It is impossible to have a conversation with such an individual; it is more of a monologue than a dialogue. When someone talks nineteen to the dozen, he/she speaks very fast without stopping.

\*Gayathri was on the phone talking nineteen to the dozen.

No one is really sure about the origin of this rather informal idiom. According to one theory, the expression comes from the world of mining. In the 18th century, when a mine flooded, engines powered by steam were used to pump the water out. To keep these engines running, coal was burnt. A steam engine that was running or going ‘nineteen to the dozen’ was pumping out 1900 gallons of water while burning only 12 bushels of coal.

**How is the word ‘profligate’ pronounced?***(Praveen Kumar, Mumbai)*

The first syllable sounds like ‘prof’, the abbreviation for ‘professor’. The ‘l’ in the second syllable is like the ‘l’ in ‘bit’ and ‘sit’, and the ‘a’ in the final syllable is like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. The word is pronounced ‘PROF-li-get’ with the stress on the first syllable. A ‘profligate’ is someone who is reckless with his money; he wastes it.

\*Rahul accused his former Vice-Chancellor of profligate spending.

The word comes from the Latin ‘profligare’ meaning ‘ruin’ or ‘defeat’. Profligate can also be used to refer to someone who has little or no moral values; a degenerate – a person who has been defeated by vices.

\*The bad company he kept turned him into a profligate.

**What is the difference between ‘homonym’ and ‘homophone’?***(J. Sarah, Hyderabad)*

'Homo' means 'same' and 'phone' means 'sound'. Two words which have the same pronunciation, but are spelt differently and have completely different meanings are said to be 'homophones'. Flower, flour; bare, bear; write and right are all examples of homophones. 'Homonym', on the other hand, refers to words that have the same spelling and pronunciation, but their meanings are entirely different. 'Bear' (animal) and 'bear' (carry) and 'left' (past tense of 'leave') and 'left' (opposite of right) are examples of homonyms.

### **Is it okay to say 'He misused his friends'?**

*(K. Jayaraman, Kochi)*

Yes. The word 'misuse' can be used with people as well as things. People in power are often accused of 'misusing their authority' and 'misusing public funds'. In both these cases, the word 'misuse' means 'use for the wrong purpose' or 'used wrongly'. When you 'misuse' someone, you 'mistreat' him; you treat the person harshly and rather unfairly. Some dictionaries list this use of the word 'misuse' as obsolete.

\*No one wants to work for Susie because she is in the habit of misusing people.

### **What is the difference between 'He's gone to Moscow' and 'He's been to Moscow'?**

*(T.S. Shivakumar, Chennai)*

The first sentence implies that the individual is in Moscow right now. When you say, 'He's been to Moscow', it implies that the individual visited Moscow in the past. When in the past, you don't really know. But the individual is not in Moscow right now.

*"When it comes to work, there are many who will stop at nothing."* – **Bob Phillips**

*upendrankye@gmail.com*

Printable version | Apr 23, 2018 7:06:56 AM | <http://www.thehindu.com/books/know-your-english/know-your-english-talk-nineteen-to-the-dozen/article3595133.ece>

© The Hindu