

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English: Origin of 'high tea'

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**How is the word 'insouciance' pronounced?***(RG Veliyappa, New Delhi)*

The first syllable is pronounced like the word 'in' and the second like the word 'sue'. The 'I' sounds like the 'I' in 'it' and 'hit', while the following 'a' is like the 'a' in 'china'. The final 'e' is silent. One way of pronouncing this formal word is 'in-SUE-si-ens' with the stress on the second syllable. Someone who is 'insouciant' is laid-back; the individual has a relaxed and easy-going manner, and gives the impression that he doesn't have a care in the world.

The person looks as if he has nothing to worry about. The word comes from the French 'soucier' meaning 'to care' and 'in' meaning 'not'. Insouciance literally means carefree.

\*There were times when Ram admired his son's youthful insouciance.

**What is the origin of 'high tea'?***(Dinesh Babu, Hyderabad)*

In some government offices, people are invited to 'high tea' and given a stale samosa, a couple of biscuits and a cup of tea. This 'snack' would certainly not qualify for high tea. For most Englishmen, 'high tea' would consist of something more substantial; it is a meal that people have in the late afternoon or early evening. Prior to the 19th century, most Englishmen had only two meals a day – a heavy breakfast followed by an early dinner in the evening.

The story goes that Anna, the seventh Duchess of Bedford, in order to overcome the 'sinking feeling' she had in her stomach in the late afternoons, ordered her servants to bring sandwiches and tea to her bedroom. Soon, she invited her friends to her 'boudoir' to join her for a snack. With the passage of time, the idea of having afternoon tea not only became popular, but also fashionable.

The aristocrats and the well to do began to host this event in their drawing and dining rooms – the 'high tea' was no longer confined to a person's bedroom. The guests also had a wide variety of food to choose from – scones, cakes, sandwiches, pickled salmon, ham, potatoes, roast beef, pies, etc. The event itself began to be called 'high tea' because all the items of food and the tea were placed on the 'high' dining table.

Normally, the teapot, cups and sandwiches were placed on a much lower table – what we now call ‘coffee table’! Tea served using such a table was called ‘low tea’! The term ‘high tea’ is mostly used in British **English**.

**In the case of some people, there is no gap between the two eyebrows – they are joined together. Is there a term for this?**

*(R. Uditha, Chennai)*

It is true that in the case of some individuals the two eyebrows meet over the bridge of their nose. The terms usually used to refer to this are ‘unibrow’ and ‘monobrow’. In some cultures, the unibrow/monobrow is considered a sign of beauty. The Australian actor, Colin Firth, is well known for his monobrow.

**Is it okay to say ‘enjoin from’?**

*(T. Ganpat, Mysore)*

Yes, it is. The expression is mostly used in the context of law. When the court ‘enjoins you from doing something’, it prohibits you from doing it. It passes an order (an injunction) telling you not to do it.

\*The company was enjoined from using the new logo.

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*“Authors with a mortgage never get writer’s block.” – Mavis Cheek*

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