

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English -- What is the meaning of ‘pussyfoot’?

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What is the meaning of ‘pussyfoot’?

(Subhayu Saha, Murshidabad)

This word is mostly used in informal contexts and has several different meanings. One of them is to tread or walk softly like a cat. We all know that cats – including big ones like lions, tigers, leopards, etc. – can sneak up on their prey without making a sound.

*The burglar pussyfooted down the stairs.

In the early 1900s, the word was frequently used in America to refer to a detective. Understandable, I guess, since detectives have to keep an eye on others without being seen or heard. With the passage of time, ‘pussyfoot’ acquired a negative connotation. Nowadays, when you tell someone to ‘stop pussyfooting around/about’, you want the person to stop being indecisive. You would like him to stop being timid, and commit himself to a course of action.

*Das, will you please stop pussyfooting around and tell us what you want done.

*Stop pussyfooting about, and tell me what you think of my painting.

Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of the United States, popularised the use of the word.

What is the origin of the idiom ‘to pull someone’s leg’?

(R Gautham, Bangalore)

The expression has been part of the language for several hundred years, and it is mostly used nowadays to mean to tease or play a joke on someone.

*I enjoy pulling Devi’s leg once in a while.

Remember, it is always ‘leg’ and not ‘legs’. No one is really sure about the origin of this idiom. Some believe that in the past, it was common practice among robbers to make use of a wire or a cane to trip unsuspecting passers-by. While the stunned victim was on the ground, the other members of the gang relieved him of his valuables.

How is the expression ‘tete-a-tete’ pronounced?

(Dhanraj, Kasaragod)

There seem to be several ways of pronouncing this French expression. According to the Cambridge Dictionary the ‘tete’ rhymes with words like ‘mate’, ‘fate’ and ‘date’, while the following ‘a’ is like the ‘a’ in ‘china’. The expression is pronounced ‘tate-e-TATE’ with the main stress on the final syllable. It is also possible to make the word ‘tete’ rhyme with ‘pet’, ‘set’ and ‘bet’. In French, the expression literally means ‘head to head’. When you have a ‘tete-a-tete’ with someone, you have a private conversation with the person. The expression suggests that only two persons are involved.

*The young couple had a quiet tete-a-tete over lunch this afternoon.

What is the difference between ‘Please come’ and ‘Please do come’?

(R Simon, Chennai)

In both cases, you are inviting a person to an event. ‘Please come’ is a straightforward request; it is something that we all say in order to sound polite. The word ‘do’ is sometimes included to add emphasis to a request; in this case, you genuinely want or very strongly feel that the person to be present at the event. You are urging him to come. Please take/do take another sweet.

*Sneha looks/does look pretty in that dress.

“Bachelors should be heavily taxed. It’s not fair that some men should be happier than others.” –

Oscar Wilde

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