

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English — How is the word 'portmanteau' pronounced?

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How is the word 'portmanteau' pronounced?

(V. Govindarajan, Chennai)

The first syllable sounds like the word 'port', and the second, like the word 'man'. The final syllable is like the word 'toe'. The word is pronounced 'port-MAN-toe' with the stress on the second syllable. The word comes from the French 'porter' meaning 'to carry' and 'manteau' meaning 'mantle' or 'cloak'. The word, I understand, was originally used to refer to the person who carried the King's cloak. With the passage of time, the meaning was transferred to the bag in which the cloak was kept. Nowadays, the word is used to refer to a large leather bag/case containing two compartments. In the late 19th century, Lewis Carroll, the author of 'Alice in Wonderland', gave the term a new meaning. He referred to a new word created by combining the meanings of two words as 'portmanteau'. In Carroll's 'Through the Looking Glass', Humpty Dumpty explains this practice of combining the meanings of two words in the following manner: "You see, it's like a portmanteau — there are two meanings packed up into one word." 'Brunch' (breakfast + lunch), 'chillax' (chill + relax), 'edutainment' (education + entertainment) and 'chocaholic' (chocolate + alcoholic) are all examples of portmanteau words.

What is the meaning and origin of 'touch wood'?

(J.S. Gandam, Phagwara)

When a native speaker talks about the good luck he has had or is having, he usually knocks on or touches a wooden surface and says 'touch wood'. For the sake of humour, people sometimes touch their own head! 'Touch wood' is mostly used in British **English** to ward off bad luck. You use the expression in the hope that the good luck you have had so far will continue. Americans tend to say 'knock on wood'.

*There have been no protests from the students so far. Touch wood.

*The train has been on time this week. Knock on wood.

Some people believe that the 'wood' refers to the wooden cross that people used to wear around their neck. Whenever they were scared, they would touch or hold the cross to ward off the evil. Other scholars believe that the expression comes from the ancient belief that spirits lived in trees found in woods and forests. Tapping on these trees was supposed to bring a person good luck.

What is the difference between 'They didn't bring enough big bowls' and 'They didn't bring big enough bowls'?

(K. Arpita, Delhi)

In terms of grammar, both sentences are acceptable. In the first sentence, 'enough' modifies 'big bowls'. The sentence suggests that the people did not bring a sufficient number of big bowls. In the second sentence – 'big enough bowls' – the word 'enough' modifies only the word 'big'. In this sentence, you are suggesting that the bowls that they brought were not big enough; they should have been bigger. The people brought an adequate number of bowls, but none of them was of the appropriate size.

*We lost the game because we didn't have tall enough players.

*We lost the game because we didn't have enough tall players.

"I once bought my kids a set of batteries for Christmas with a note on it saying, toys not included!" –

Bernard Manning

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