

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English – meaning and origin of 'at his heels'

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What is the difference between 'bogie' and 'coach'?

(Syed Shanawaz, Trichy)

In India, both words are used to refer to a railway compartment or carriage. According to the Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary, this use of the word 'bogie' to refer to a railway compartment is very Indian. In native varieties of **English**, only the chassis or the undercarriage – axles, wheels, etc. – of a railway carriage or any locomotive is called a 'bogie'. The word 'coach' is defined in some dictionaries as a train compartment that is primarily used for day travel.

What is the difference between 'I have seen the film' and 'I saw the film'?

(M Sandeep, Hyderabad)

In terms of meaning there is not much of a difference. In both cases, you are saying that you saw the movie sometime in the past – when in the past, we do not really know. You could have seen the movie a year ago, or you may have seen it just an hour ago. The difference is that with the simple past – I saw the movie – you can afford to be precise about the time. I saw the film yesterday/two months ago/last year. This is not possible with the present perfect tense. You cannot say, I have seen the movie yesterday/last month. It would be considered ungrammatical.

How is the word 'beleaguered' pronounced?

(R. Hemant, Bangalore)

The word consists of just three syllables. The first 'e' is like the 'I' in 'big', 'pig' and 'dig', while the second syllable is pronounced like the word 'league'. The 'r' is silent and the final 'e' is like the 'a' in 'china'. The word is pronounced 'bi-LIIG-ed' with the stress on the second syllable. It is mostly used nowadays to mean to be troubled or pestered by someone or something. When you are beleaguered, you face many difficulties, and have a lot harsh comments directed at you.

*As expected, the Prime Minister spoke in defence of his beleaguered government.

The word comes from the Dutch 'belegeren' meaning 'camp round'. In the old days, one way of capturing an enemy fort was to encircle it. The troops put up tents and camped there

ensuring that no one entered or left the fort. The troops laid siege till the occupants inside surrendered – very often because they ran out of food and water. When the word 'beleaguered' was borrowed into English in the 16th century, it originally meant 'surrounded by the enemies'.

What is the meaning and origin of 'at his heels'?

(Aditi Gupta, Hisar)

If someone who is pursuing you is 'at your heels', he is right behind you; he is following you very closely. Other expressions which have more or less the same meaning are 'hot on the heels of someone', 'hard on the heels of someone' and 'right on the heels of someone'.

*The thief sensed that the policeman was at his heels.

Scholars believe that the idiom 'at someone's heels' comes from what puppies do – follow the master wherever he goes. It stays so close to his heels that sometimes the master trips over the poor animal. The idiom was first used in the 14th century classic, 'Sir Gawain and the Green Knight'.

"Anybody who doesn't know what soap tastes like never washed a dog." – **Franklin P. Jones**

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