

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English — 8-4-14

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During the Sony Open in Miami, one of the commentators kept saying, ‘Djokovic seems dialled in’. What is the meaning of ‘dialled in’?

(J Uday, Mysore)

This rather informal expression is mostly used to mean to give your complete attention to the task at hand. When you ‘dial in’, nothing distracts you; you remain focussed, and as a result, are able to perform splendidly. The commentator was implying that Djokovic was so focussed in the final that he wasn’t making too many errors; he was beating his opponent – in this case, Nadal – quite easily.

*Federer didn’t get dialled in till the middle of the second set.

This expression, which is frequently used in sports, has nothing to do with having someone’s number on speed dial. I understand that ‘dial in’ is something that mechanics do when they are tuning engines.

What is the difference between ‘slim’ and ‘skinny’?

(Rajeev Shukla, Meerut)

Both words are used to describe the physique of an individual – they can be used with men as well as women. Nowadays, there is a tendency to use these two words with things as well – particularly, electronic gadgets. For example, people talk about ‘ultra slim TVs’, ‘skinny mobiles’, etc. When used with people, ‘slim’ has a much more positive connotation than ‘skinny’. When you say that someone is slim, it suggests that the individual is rather attractive. This explains why people who need to knock off a few pounds, do ‘slimming exercises’ and not ‘thinning exercises’.

‘Skinny’, on the other hand, is mostly used to show disapproval. A ‘skinny’ person is very thin and weighs far less than he should. He may be nothing but skin and bones – making him hard on the eyes.

*They make an odd couple. She is short and fat and he is tall and slim.

*They told him he was too skinny to be a fast bowler.

What is the meaning and origin of ‘let your hair down’?

(V Rohini, Chennai)

The idiom is considered to be rather old fashioned, and when used, is mostly limited to informal contexts. When you ask someone to let his hair down, you are telling him to chill out. In other words, you want the person to be less formal than he usually is; you would like him to relax and enjoy himself.

*Many people find it difficult to let their hair down when Bala is around.

*It was nice to see John let his hair down at the party.

Several centuries ago, when a woman appeared in public, she had to put her hair in a bun; she wasn't allowed to let it hang freely. It was only in the privacy of her bedroom that a woman could let her hair down.

Is there a difference between ‘We are usually having lunch at noon’ and ‘We usually have lunch at noon’?

(Dilip Kumar, Hyderabad)

Yes, there is. The first sentence suggests that you generally start eating before 12:00 o'clock; at what time you start is not known. The only certainty is that when the clock strikes twelve, you are already eating. The second sentence suggests that you sit down for lunch at noon.

“Kids called me ‘Skeletor’ as a kid because I was so skinny.” – Cameron Diaz

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