

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

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

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What is the meaning and origin of 'break the ice'?

(D Srinivasan, Tenkasi)

Very often, people find it difficult to have a lengthy conversation with someone they have just been introduced to. The two strangers find the situation awkward, and as a result, they don't really say much to each other. The conversation, if one can call it that, has lengthy pauses. When you try to 'break the ice', you say or do something which will put the other person at ease — by reducing the tension or anxiety, you are hoping to get a conversation going.

*The professor broke the ice by telling the students a really funny joke.

*The ice was broken when they started talking about cricket and old films.

There are several theories regarding the origin of this idiom. According to one, in the past, traders and businessmen relied heavily on the river to transport their goods from one place to another. This became a problem during winter when the rivers froze. To ensure that the ships didn't get stuck in the ice, smaller ships called 'icebreakers' were used to break the ice and make a path for the cargo ships. Before the 'icebreakers' came into existence, when a ship got stuck, sailors got off the ship and attempted to break the ice using an axe. In the past, people broke the ice to keep the ships moving; nowadays, we break the ice to keep a conversation flowing.

How is the word 'dishevelled' pronounced?

(Sunaina, Delhi)

The 'i' in the first syllable is like the 'i' in 'bit', 'sit' and 'hit', while the following 'sh' sounds like the 'sh' in 'sheep', 'ship' and 'shoot'. The 'evel' rhymes with 'devil' and 'revel'. The word is pronounced 'di-SHEV-ld' with the stress on the second syllable. This is one way of pronouncing the word. 'Dishevelled' comes from the French 'dishevely' meaning 'bare headed'. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to mean 'untidy'. When someone says that you look

'dishevelled', it means you look a complete mess – perhaps the clothes that you are wearing are dirty and your hair looks unkempt. In American English, this word is spelt 'disheveled'.

*Some of the bowlers in our cricket team always look dishevelled.

*Ishant always comes to work looking rather dishevelled.

What is the meaning of 'country cousin'?

(Nirmala Mishra, Dehradun)

In native varieties of English, this term is used to refer to a cousin who lives in the countryside. He is a rustic, and like most people from a village, he is unsophisticated. For someone who has spent all his life in the city, a 'country cousin' can be source of embarrassment and amusement. This relative does not know anything about city life; having led a sheltered existence, he is quite naive about the ways of the world. He can therefore be duped or tricked easily. The term is mostly used to show disapproval.

*My country cousins are paying us a visit next month.

In India, a person who comes from the same state as you do and speaks your language is sometimes jokingly referred to as 'your country cousin'.

"I like being a woman, even in a man's world. After all, men can't wear dresses, but we can wear the pants." – **Whitney Houston**

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