

## KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

# Know your English — Is it okay to say 'most favourite'?

**S. UPENDRAN**

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## What is the meaning and origin of 'three sheets in the wind'?

(M Vijay, Chennai)

Sailors used this rather informal expression several hundred years ago to refer to someone who was intoxicated or drunk. Nowadays, people tend to say 'three sheets to the wind' and not 'in'. The 'sheets' in the idiom have nothing to do with the sheets we normally use to cover a bed; they do not refer to the sails of a ship either. They, in fact, refer to the ropes or the 'lines' that are usually attached to the bottom corner of a sail. These lines played an important role in keeping the sails in place. If all the 'sheets' were loose, then the sails fluttered about in the wind causing the boat/ship to 'wallow': the vessel rolled from side to side making it difficult for those on deck to maintain their balance. This movement reminded people of the erratic manner in which a drunken sailor moved when returning from shore leave. A sailor who was tipsy and not really drunk was said to be 'one sheet in the wind'!

\*Don't pay any attention to her. She is three sheets in/to the wind.

## What is the difference between 'portly' and 'chubby'?

(Anand Rao, Bangalore)

Both words are used to refer to people who are overweight. 'Portly' is mostly used with men who are either middle aged or old. A 'portly gentleman' is someone who is heavysset, but there is something dignified about him. The word 'chubby', on the other hand, is mostly limited to children. When you say that a child or a baby is chubby, you are suggesting that he is plump in an appealing sort of way. Unlike portly, chubby can be used with individual parts of the body as well. For example, one can talk about 'chubby cheeks' and 'chubby fingers'; one cannot say 'portly cheeks/fingers'. The word 'chubby' comes from 'chub', a 'thick bodied European river fish'.

\*The chubby baby gave Vrinda a cute smile.

\*The portly gentleman climbed the stairs effortlessly.

## Is it okay to say 'most favourite'?

(CK Pooja, Chidambaram)

When you say that something is your 'favourite', it suggests you like it better or more than anything else. Books on usage would argue that since 'favourite' means 'most liked/loved/favoured', there is no need to add the intensifier 'most' before it. Adding 'most' before 'favourite', in their opinion, would be illogical. But as we all know, language has nothing to do with logic; both native and non-native speakers of English do say 'most favourite' quite frequently in their everyday conversation. It is best avoided in writing.

\*Gladiator is my most favourite film.

## What is the meaning of 'undertrial'?

(H Jyothi, Hyderabad)

The word 'undertrial' is frequently used in the Indian media to refer to someone who has been accused of wrongdoing; someone who has been charged with a crime. A person who has been imprisoned and is awaiting trial can be called an 'undertrial'. So could someone who is currently on trial. The use of this word is limited to India; native speakers of English do not use it. They generally prefer to use 'accused', instead.

\*The accused was shot and killed while he was entering the courtroom.

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*"Beauty lies in the eye of the beer holder."* — **Kinky Friedman**

*upendrankye@gmail.com*