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Know Your English: Difference between 'graveyard' and 'cemetery'

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What is the difference between 'graveyard' and 'cemetery'?

(**R. Bharath**, *Chennai*)

Though these two words are used interchangeably to refer to a place where people are buried, there is a subtle difference in meaning between the two. 'Graveyard' is the older of the two terms, and it is mostly used to refer to a burial ground which adjoins a church. In the old days, people were buried close to the church; the nobles and the rich, in fact, were sometimes buried in crypts beneath the church. With the increase in population, the old graveyards became full and new burial sites, called 'cemeteries', came up a little away from the town/city. The word 'cemetery' comes from the Greek 'koimeterion' meaning 'dormitory, resting place'. It was seen as a person's final resting place; unlike a graveyard, a cemetery does not adjoin a church. People are buried in graveyards; in a cemetery, it is possible to bury an individual's ashes as well.

What is the meaning and origin of 'skeleton in the cupboard'?

(**Musharab Hussain**, *Delhi*)

If someone has a skeleton in his cupboard, he has an embarassing or a dark secret which he hopes will remain hidden; he doesn't want anyone to find out what it is. Americans tend to say 'closet' instead of 'cupboard'.

*When the press started snooping around, they found several skeletons in the CM's cupboard/closet.

There are several explanations as to the origin of this idiom. Some believe it is based on a story. Others believe that the idiom is the result of something that many practicing doctors actually did in the 17th and 18th centuries — hide a human skeleton at home. Before the 19th century, the only body that a doctor was allowed to cut open was that of a dead prisoner. In order to study human anatomy, some unscrupulous doctors hired grave robbers to steal recently buried bodies for them. Once the dissection had been done, they proceeded to store the skeleton in a cupboard. Soon people started suspecting that every doctor had a skeleton in his cupboard!

What is the meaning of 'beau geste'?

(**R. Shukla**, *Pune*)

First, let us deal with the pronunciation of this French expression. The 'eau' in 'beau' sounds like the 'o' in 'so', 'no', and 'go'. The 'g' in 'geste' is pronounced like the 's' in 'pleasure', 'leisure', and 'measure'. The 'este' that follows is like the 'est' in 'best', 'west', and 'nest'. The phrase is pronounced 'bo ZEST' with the main stress on the second word. It literally means 'beautiful gesture'. The expression is mostly used to refer to a noble, but meaningless gesture.

*When they heard that I'd been dropped, the other team members said they would talk to the manager. But their beau geste didn't really change anything.

What do you call someone who fears germs?

(**N. S. Madhusudhan**, *Bangalore*)

The fear of germs is called 'mysophobia'. The first syllable is pronounced like the word 'my' and the second like the word 'so'. The word is pronounced 'my-so-FO-bia' with the main stress on the third syllable. The word comes from the Greek 'mysos' meaning 'uncleanness'. Other common expressions to refer to this fear are 'germaphobia', 'bacteriophobia' and 'bacillophobia'. A mysophobe is someone who keeps washing his hands very frequently because he is mortally afraid of dirt and contamination.

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"Men are like Government bonds. They take a long time to mature." — **Unknown**

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