

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - meaning and origin of 'Soapy Sam'

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What is the meaning and origin of 'Soapy Sam'?

(Rakesh Sharma, Chandigarh)

This is an expression that is mostly used to show disapproval. When you label someone 'Soapy Sam', you are suggesting that the smooth talking individual is a slippery customer and is not to be trusted. When he is in the company of others, this individual will put on a show of being very friendly; he will try to please people by praising them.

*I wouldn't get too close to Sandeep, if I were you. Everyone calls him Soapy Sam.

The name in the expression refers to Samuel Wilberforce, a bishop in the Church of England, who lived in the 19th century. He excelled in the art of public speaking, and on several occasions viciously attacked Darwin's theory of evolution. It was Benjamin Disraeli who gave the bishop his nickname. He is believed to have said that Wilberforce's behaviour at times was "unctuous, oleaginous, saponaceous". Dictionaries define 'saponaceous' as 'soapy or having the characteristics of a soap'.

What is the meaning of 'tongue typo'?

(N. Mallesh, Nellore)

The spelling mistakes that you make while typing a document are called 'typos'. Sometimes when we speak, we make mistakes as well. For example, instead of saying 'India will win the match', we might accidentally say, 'England will win the match'. Such an error was earlier called 'slip of the tongue'. It is now being called 'tongue typo'.

*The new teacher was nervous; his lecture was full of tongue typos.

What is the difference between 'detract' and 'distract'?

(Vasanthi Rao, Bangalore)

The word 'detract' is usually followed by 'from'. When something detracts from another, it takes away or reduces the importance or value of the thing. It diminishes the importance of the object or person; in other words, it makes the object seem less valuable or less important than it really is.

*The shortcomings in no way detract from the remarkable achievements of the player.

'Distract', on the other hand, means to divert the attention of someone. When you distract someone, you take his attention away from what he is doing; the individual loses focus. This act of diverting one's attention may be intentional or accidental.

*Mukund didn't allow the noise from the crowd to distract him.

How is the word 'voluminous' pronounced?

(R.N. Sanjay, Hyderabad)

The first 'o' and the final 'ou' sound like the 'a' in 'china'. The 'u' in the second syllable is pronounced like the 'oo' in 'pool', 'fool', and 'cool', and the following 'i' is like the 'i' in 'it', 'pit', and 'sit'. The word is pronounced 've-LYOO-mi-nes' with the stress on the second syllable. When you say that something is voluminous, you are implying that it is large; it contains many things.

*Sangeetha requires time to go through the voluminous file.

Sometimes it rains when there is bright sunshine. Is there a term for this?

(Ajit Kumar, Ernakulam)

Yes, there is. I understand the general term for this is 'sunshower'. This word, which is not found in most dictionaries, can also be written as two words – sun shower. In informal contexts, in some varieties of **English**, this phenomenon is referred to as 'monkey's wedding'.

"God created man, but I could do better." – **Erma Bombeck**

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