

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know Your English - Difference between 'comic' and 'comical'

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JANUARY 09, 2012 23:33 IST

UPDATED: OCTOBER 18, 2016 12:47 IST

What is the difference between 'comic' and 'comical'?

(D. Ananth, Vijayawada)

Both words are derived from the Greek 'komos' meaning 'intentionally funny'. When you say that something was 'comic' or 'comical', you mean that it made you laugh or brought a smile to your face. Careful users of the language maintain a subtle distinction between these two words. Something that is 'comic' is intended to be funny; it is a deliberate attempt to make you laugh. The use of the comedian in films is meant to keep the audience amused – he is meant to make people laugh. Sometimes, we end up laughing even when the person is not trying to be funny. For example, in some of our old films, the way the characters talk and the way they act are rather 'comical'. The situation may be serious, but the manner in which the hero cries sometimes has us in splits. In this case, the hero's intention is not to make us laugh, but feel sad. A 'comical' situation is one that makes us laugh although it may not have been the original intention.

What is the meaning of 'to be well-heeled'?

(Shaheen, Hyderabad)

The expression is mostly used in informal contexts to mean 'prosperous' or 'wealthy'. The opposite is 'down-at-the-heels'.

*We should be able to get some money from Javed. His family is well-heeled.

Several theories have been put forward to explain the origin of this idiom. According to one, the 'heel' refers to the heel of a shoe/boot. People who were fairly well to do, always wore a good pair of shoes/boots and a good pair of socks. Those who were poor, usually walked around with shoes/boots that were worn out and their socks invariably had holes in them. Hence the term, 'down-at-the-heels' to refer to the poor. There is a saying, "You can tell a man by his shoes."

How is the word 'impugn' pronounced?

(R. Meenakshi, Chennai)

The first syllable sounds like the 'im' in 'impossible' and 'imply', and the following 'pugn' rhymes with the words 'tune' and 'dune'. The word, which is mostly used in formal contexts, is pronounced 'im-PYUUN' with the stress on the second syllable. Politicians in our country are always questioning the integrity of people belonging to another party. They are constantly levelling charges against an opponent in order to plant seeds of doubt among the people about the individual. When you impugn someone's character, you are calling into question his integrity; you are implying that he is not as honest as he seems to be. The word comes from the Latin 'impugnare' meaning 'to assault, to attack'. Impugn originally meant to beat someone physically; nowadays, it is used to refer to a verbal assault.

*When nothing else worked, the candidate started impugning his opponent's character.

*I don't think you should impugn Govind's competence as a teacher.

Is it okay to say 'Mrs.X, the widow of the late Prime Minister ...'?

(M. S. Rukmani, Mysore)

The word 'widow' suggests that the woman in question has already lost her husband. 'The late Prime Minister' suggests the same thing; it makes it clear that the individual is no longer alive. There is no need to include both 'widow' and 'the late' in the same sentence. Books on usage suggest it would be better to replace 'widow' with 'wife'!

"Of all the things I've lost, I miss my mind the most."

– **Mark Twain**

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