

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English - What is the origin of 'blackmail'?

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JANUARY 29, 2013 04:47 IST

UPDATED: MARCH 12, 2013 14:26 IST

What is the origin of 'blackmail'?

(Kavita Kumar, Cochin)

In our films, the villain somehow gets his hands on the letters written by the heroine to her former boyfriend, and makes money by blackmailing her. Before you jump to any conclusion, let me quickly add that the word 'mail' in 'blackmail' has nothing to do with letters. The word actually comes from the Scottish 'mail' meaning 'tax' or 'rent'. In the old days, when the law and order situation was quite bad, farmers living along the borders of Scotland had very little protection against gangs who robbed and plundered. Instead of fighting these looters on a regular basis, farmers chose to pay them off in order to be left in peace.

This payment that they made was called 'blackmail' because the usual form of payment was black cattle – in the old days, a man's wealth was determined by how much cattle he had. If a farmer chose to pay in silver coins, then it was called 'white mail'.

What is the meaning of 'nomophobia'?

(I Murtuza, Melvisharam)

What is the present generation's greatest fear? Being without a mobile phone, of course! 'Nomophobia' is the short form of 'no mobile phone phobia'. A nomophobe is afraid of the following things: losing his cell phone, being out of cell phone range, the battery going dead, etc. The term 'nomophobia' was coined in the U.K.

Why is a worker sometimes referred to as a 'blackleg'?

(Bindita Shrimali, Nadiad)

Usually, when a trade union calls for a strike, it expects all its workers to put down their tools and stop attending work. Sometimes, however, there are individuals who go against the wishes of the union and report for duty. These people go to the factory while their fellow workers are busy protesting at the picket lines. Such people who go to work when their fellow workers are on strike are called 'blacklegs'. It is a term mostly used in British **English** to show disapproval. Another term that is frequently used to refer to such a person is 'scab'.

*All blacklegs will be dealt with severely.

The term comes from the crow or the rook, a bird that is black in colour. The Europeans disliked the rook because it came up with cunning ways to steal food. Soon the term 'rook' began to be used to refer to a cheat who lived by his wits and took advantage of gullible individuals. Since the bird had black legs, cheats soon began to be called 'blacklegs' as well. It was not long before workers who went to the factory while others were protesting began to be called 'blacklegs' – after all, they were cheating their fellow workers. According to some scholars, it is from 'rook' that we get the word 'rookie'. Nowadays, the word is mostly used to mean an inexperienced individual. The original meaning of 'rookie' was someone who could be 'rooked' – in other words, someone who could be easily cheated because he was inexperienced.

Why do commentators say 'clean bowled'?

(C.K. Anbazhagan, Namakkal)

The word 'clean' in this context is not the opposite of 'dirty'. It means 'comprehensively'. When a batsman is 'clean bowled', the ball crashes into the stumps without any obstruction; neither the bat nor any part of the batsman's body comes into contact with it.

"I hope you go before me because I don't want you singing at my funeral." – **Spike Milligan**

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