

KNOW YOUR ENGLISH

Know your English: What is the meaning of 'kith'?

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What is the meaning of 'kith'?**(N. Srinivasan, Chennai)**

'Kith' is not used on its own nowadays; it only survives in the expression 'kith and kin'. It comes from the Old English 'cythth' which was an umbrella term for everything known – relatives, friends, acquaintances, places, country, etc. In the 14th century, the expression 'kith and kin' was used to refer to one's 'country and relatives'. With the passage of time 'kith' acquired a narrower meaning. Nowadays, 'kith' is mostly used to mean one's friends and acquaintances.

*Ramya invited all her kith and kin to her wedding.

What is the meaning of 'omerta'?**(Heramba Dongre, Bangalore)**

New members of certain criminal organisations are often made to take an oath that they will remain silent if they are ever caught by the police. This vow not to divulge information about the activities of the organisation to any outsider is called 'omerta'. I understand that the Mafia practises this code of silence. There are various theories about the origin of the word. Some believe that it comes from the Spanish 'hombredad' meaning 'manliness'. Others think it comes from the Italian 'umilta', meaning 'humility'.

*As expected, the two arrested men remained loyal to the oath of omerta.

How is the expression 'billet-doux' pronounced?**(Sharmila, Coimbatore)**

The 'bi' in 'billet' sounds like the 'bi' in 'bit' and 'bin', and the following 'llet' is pronounced like the word 'lay'. The 'doux' sounds like the word 'do'. This French expression is pronounced 'bi-lay DO' with the stress on the second word. 'Doux' in French means 'sweet' and a 'billet' is a note or a document. A billet-doux is a 'sweet note' that you write to someone whom you are extremely fond of; in other words, it's a love letter. The plural is 'billets-doux'.

*When he was in college, Rahul wrote at least three billets-doux a week to his girlfriend.

What is the difference between 'manly' and 'mannish'?

(Vijay Kumar, Patna)

The word 'manly' has a positive connotation; it is mostly used to refer to the characteristics or qualities that people associate as belonging ideally to a man. For example, in most cultures, qualities like courage, decisiveness, strength, bravery, etc. are seen befitting a man. 'Mannish', on the other hand, has a negative meaning. The word is mostly used with women who either look masculine or possess qualities that are mostly associated with men. The manner in which this individual dresses or behaves is considered unbecoming of a woman.

*The foul-mouthed, beedi smoking Nalini always wore mannish clothes.

*The girls swooned when they heard Jai's manly voice on the radio.

What is the origin of 'honeymoon'?

(Becky John, Hyderabad)

In the old days, it was customary in Greece for the newly married couple to drink mead, a fermented drink made out of honey, for a period of one month. The 'moon' in the word refers to the thirty days they drank and made merry. After the initial euphoria, the couple realised that their love for each other would not remain constant, but would wax and wane like the moon! Nowadays the word honeymoon is being used to refer to the early stages of any relationship where both parties are exceedingly happy with each other.

*The Chief Minister's honeymoon with the media is definitely over.

"The man who reads nothing at all is better educated than the man who reads nothing but newspapers." – **Thomas Jefferson**

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