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Know Your English, Volume 1 Idioms and Their Stories by S. Upendran

A Review by Sindhu.V. Ph.D. Scholar



Part of an Important Series

Know Your English, Volume 1 Idioms and their stories (Universities Press, Hyderabad, India, 2011, pages 195+xix. ISBN : 978 81 7371 729 1) is a treasure house of idioms by S. Upendran. It is a series of four volumes. The series of four volumes is a resource for teachers, students and people who want to improve their spoken and written communication. Each volume deals with different aspects of English i.e. idioms, grammar and usage, words frequently confused, and vocabulary and pronunciation.

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Much Sought-after Details of Idioms

Know your English, Volume 1 Idioms and their stories is the first volume in the series that emerged out of the selection of idioms from the weekly column ‘Know your English’ published in *The Hindu* between 1992 and 2009. The weekly column ‘Know your English’ clarifies readers’ doubts related to English vocabulary, phrases, idioms, usage, pronunciation, etc. This book is a compact dictionary which gives the much sought-after details of idioms. It caters to the needs of general readers who come across the idioms in written and spoken language. In the preface, the author says that anyone at the age of 16 or more than that can enjoy and find the book useful.

Organization of This Volume of Idioms

The alphabetically arranged idioms with their page numbers are clearly listed in content page. The idioms are organized in three columns: meaning, examples, origin and pronunciation. The meanings of idioms along with the examples are given in simple language. Origin of idioms provides the background of the idioms. The pronunciation details enhance the articulation of difficult and infrequent words. This comprehensive arrangement of details ensures readability of the book.

Real Life Usage

The examples for each idiom are taken from real life contexts (not necessarily for the present situations only), and they help understand the idioms easily. Two examples are given for each idiom except for “chuck 22” (p. 51).

History and Story of the Idiom

The author narrates the story or the history of the origin of each and every idiom. Some idioms like “damp squid”, and “nook and cranny” (p. 70 & 179) are provided with word by word clarification. The change in word meaning is identified through such clarification. However, stories of the origin of the idioms may make the idioms easy to commit to memory, a common practice at the various levels of education such as high school, higher secondary school and college. One wonders when we will focus more on the active use of current idioms than memorizing old as well as present-day idioms. Some additional and more adequate tips in this regard may be added in the reprints or revised editions of the present volume.

The Pronunciation and Meanings

The pronunciation of the unfamiliar words in a few idioms such as “Achilles heel, Albatross around the neck, Gobbledygook” (p. 1, 5 & 112 respectively) is an extra detail. The author also comments on the formal and informal use of some idioms. The common mistakes committed in India is also made note of in idioms like “neck and neck” (p. 176) and not “neck to neck.” I’d suggest much stronger focus on this point in subsequent reprints and

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revised editions. The idioms with the same meaning but with alternative expressions are also pointed out. The differences become clearer when their origins are described. This is a good technique adopted by the author of this volume.

Aid for Understanding English Classics

Many idioms contributed by Shakespeare, Defoe, Aesop, mythology, etc., are listed in the volume. The idioms “hoist with one’s own petard”, “give a dog a bad/ill name and hang him” (p.126, 104 respectively) are from Shakespeare’s plays. The story behind the origin of “hoist with one’s own petard” is from the expression used in ‘Hamlet.’ The idiom means creating a problem for oneself. “Give a dog a bad/ill name and hang him” means once bad reputation acquired by a person will stick with him the rest of the life, and this idiom is from ‘Othello.’ At the same time, the idiom “Man Friday” has originated from a character in Daniel Defoe’s ‘*Robinson Crusoe*’. Likewise “one swallow does not make a summer,” “lion’s share,” “don’t count your chickens before they hatch” are from Aesop’s Fable. As part of Greek/Roman mythology, “Apple of discord,” and “Pandora’s Box” are the idioms in the list. The other idioms such as “lose face,” “love me, love my dog” (p. 162 & 163) are taken from translated Latin phrases. Similarly “murder someone in cold blood” (p.175) is from Joseph Addison’s *The Spectator*. These fascinating facts behind the origin of idioms are meticulously presented. Exciting stories and facts like these kindle the spirit of reading. Such interesting information holds one’s attention completely.

Yet one may raise the question whether this focus on history and classical English literature will help teach current idiom. English spoken and written by Indians is heavily influenced by the use of idioms of the past centuries. Current conversations would demand currently used idioms. There is need to transition from rote-learning of idioms to active use of the idioms, and this is possible if idioms are seen very relevant to our day-to-day, technical and business communications.

A Good Resource for Teaching and Learning English as a Second Language

The book is a resource for English teachers who teach English as a Second Language, even though many idioms are from the past. The book will help the teachers introduce the idioms to the students. The original meaning of the idioms has the ability to motivate extensive reading. Activities based on the idioms listed will be of great fun to the learners.

One of the activities is to ask the learners to predict the origin of the idioms in pairs before they come to know the actual origin. On the other hand, the learners can write a story based on the idiom that they learned recently. Later, a learner can narrate the story and so the others can find out the actual idiom after listening to the story. These activities will stimulate creative thinking as well as writing.

Useful for Culture Learning

The cultural relevance and differences are apparent from the meaning and the story behind the origin. In the same way, cultural uniqueness also plays an important role in the

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perception of some idioms. For example, the word ‘blue’, in general, means colour to most people but in the idiom “feeling blue and Monday morning blue” (p. 90 & 170), it refers to the ‘blues music’ of African Americans. Sad themes are the signature tune of those songs. Similarly, one should know the English person’s belief and low regard for the Dutch to understand the idioms “Dutch act/cure,” and “Dutch courage” (p. 80 & 81).

Avoidable Proofreading Errors

There are only a few errors not caught in the proofreading. For instance, “he needed to how many ropes there were” (p. 145) instead of ‘he needed to know how many ropes there were.’ Whereas “he made the many slaves” (p.168) is given for ‘he made the slaves.’ These could be corrected in the next edition.

To Conclude

The book irons out the wrinkles of the readers when they come across a confusing idiom. The author traces the origin and explanations of the idioms from various sources and presents them in an orderly fashion and this is a lot of help for the readers. This perhaps is the kind of extraordinary book which a reader can get once in a blue moon!

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