

Grammar Guru 10

V Saraswathi

As children in primary school, we have enjoyed learning the nouns referring to the different parts of the body. We have faithfully repeated sentences like the following:

This is my nose.

These are my eyes.

I have two ears and one nose.

Well, if you say these sentences now people will look askance at you and wonder what has gone wrong with you.

Words referring to different parts of the body serve different grammatical functions. Let us look at some compound nouns where the parts of the body function as adjectives:

I hate flights which don't provide enough legroom.

Diamond earrings would look beautiful on you.

Other such examples: head-start; eyeliner; mouthpiece; fingerprint; tongue-twister, etc.

Body parts are also used as action words or verbs.

Don't mouth words when you are reading silently.

Vinay is shouldering the entire burden of his family.

Metaphoric use of body parts is quite common.

There are riddles relating to such usage:

What has an eye but cannot see? Needle

What has teeth but doesn't bite? Comb

What has an ear but cannot hear? Corn

In the case of idioms, body parts have done yeomen service. Idioms are special to each language and cannot be translated word for word. Take, for instance, the idiom **to fight tooth and nail**. It means 'to fight bitterly,' not fight with teeth and nails! Thus, an idiom may be difficult to understand because its meaning is different from the meaning of the separate words in the expression. Here is an example for the idiom:

A lady manicurist had a date with a male dentist. They liked each other a lot. But, finally, they

decided not to marry on the grounds that, if they married, they would be sure to end up fighting tooth and nail!

Would you like to enjoy one more instance of a delightful play with the literal and the idiomatic meaning of a phrase?

Do you know what the Eskimo girl did to her boyfriend?

What?

She gave him the cold shoulder!

The origin of some of these idioms is quite interesting. Animals like pigs use their snout to sniff for food. This has given rise to various phrases to do with curiosity or 'nosiness'. e.g., **to keep your nose out, to poke your nose.**

The expression '**get your teeth into something**', meaning working productively and energetically on a task, paints a picture of a ferocious animal gnawing hungrily on a carcass. Other examples: **with your eyes open; out of hand.**

Would you like to unravel the meaning of the idioms below?

1. The funny thing about going to a psychiatrist is that you have to lie down to learn how to **stand on your own two feet.**

2. I once knew an acrobat who **fell head over heels in love.**

3. A robber was recently arrested for stealing a painting from an artist's studio. The painting was still wet and he was caught **red-handed.**

Dr V. Saraswathi, (Formerly) Professor of English (ELT), University of Madras.

[Editor's Note: This is part of a series of articles contributed by the author and published earlier in The Times of India, Education Times from May 2008 to May 2013. We are thankful to the author for permit us to publish those articles in our journal.]