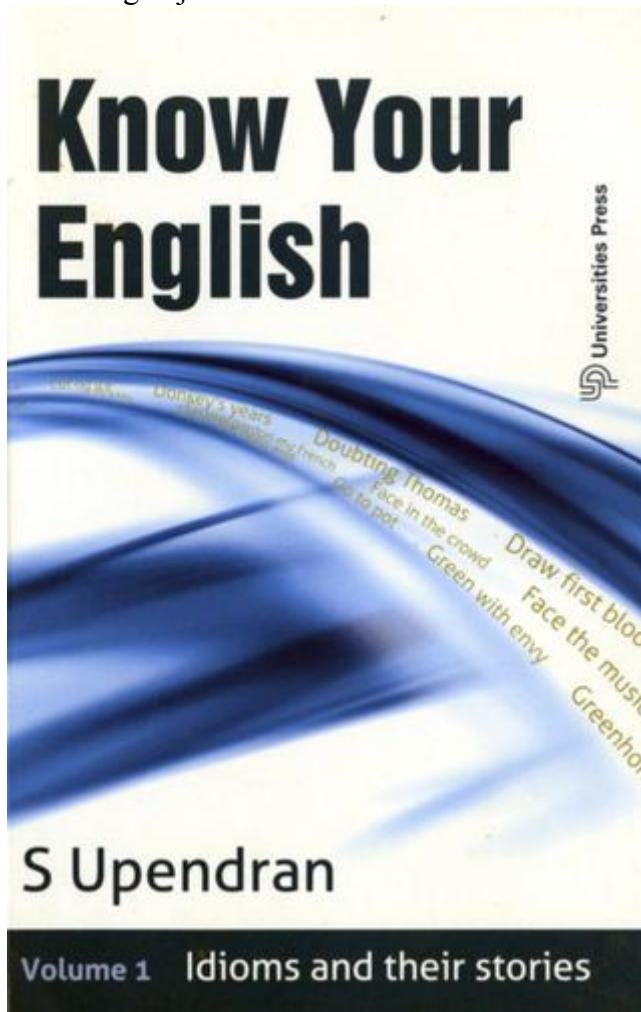


A ready reckoner on idioms

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KNOW YOUR ENGLISH —Idioms and their Stories: S. Upendran; Universities Press Pvt. Ltd., 3-6-752, Himayatnagar, Hyderabad-500029. Rs. 195.

English is perhaps the most difficult language to gain mastery of. For one thing, it is the most unphonetic language in the world. As for its usage, since its linguistic and structural variations are far too many and far too complex, there is always the danger of slipping into a pitfall.

It is quite easy to write and speak faulty English. We have standard, authoritative reference books which are meant to guide us in proper usage and expression. Fowler's *King's English* (1906) and its sequel *Modern English Usage* (1918), which were considered a benchmark for correctness in the language, are deemed rather outdated in the present context, with the language continually evolving, growing, and enriching itself with additions to its vocabulary.

These books offer proper — often prescriptive — advice on syntax, style, choice of words, etc., with illustrations drawn from literary and popular writers.

Fowler's wise counsel runs thus: "Anyone who wishes to become a good writer should endeavour, before he allows himself to be tempted by the more showy qualities, to be direct, simple, brief, vigorous and lucid." Mcmordie's *English Idioms* provides comprehensive information on a large number of chosen idioms. There have been scores of books on English style, grammar, and composition which are being used as manuals by students as well as avid learners of the language.

Starting from 1982, *The Hindu* has been successfully running a Tuesday weekly column under the caption "Know Your English" (a more appropriate title could be "Learn Your English") for the benefit primarily of the common reader, who may not have easy access to the scholarly tools found in the reference section of libraries. This column has a wide readership as evidenced by the large number of queries seeking clarification for doubts and advice on the correction of common errors.

310 Entries

The book under review, *Know Your English: Idioms and their Stories*, based on this weekly column, is the first among four projected volumes. It is a selection of 310 entries (featured between 1992 and 2009) arranged alphabetically; each idiom contains its meaning, and its origin with two examples provided in simple, self-explanatory sentences.

The allusions drawn from fables, stories, mythologies and popular customs are explained with a view to throwing light on the possible origin of the idioms. A guide to the pronunciation of unfamiliar words (mostly proper nouns) is supplied.

The compiler says anyone who is 16 years of age or older should find the book useful. The widely known idiom "Homer nods" is listed as "Even Homer sometimes nods"; "Make a silken purse out of a sow's ear" is given as "Make a silk purse out of a sow's ear." Idioms, by their very nature, attain their resonance by their appearance in the right context. Forcing these idioms in sentences, devoid of any contextual reference, makes them dull and lose their lustre. This, perhaps, is unavoidable since examples have to be provided for the learner.

All the same, Upendran's compilation of idioms is a useful ready reckoner for the second language learner. Teachers and students keen on polishing and perfecting their written and spoken English will find this handy volume most beneficial.