

Some “Funny” Words in English

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One of the many charms of English that can trouble any translator or interpreter is a set of funny-sounding compounds that consist of a pair of hyphenated or conjoined words related to each other either by rhyme (*willy-nilly*) or a vowel change (*knickknack*), or a smaller set consisting of a multi-syllable word and a following one-syllable one in a rhyming or alliterative relationship (*tattle-tale*). Note that the word “word” here is used advisedly: sometimes both elements are legitimate independent members of the English lexicon (*flip-flop*) but more often one of them is a “real” word and the other is a mirror or reduplication of it that exists only in the compound (*mish-mash*). Occasionally, neither word has an independent existence, or if it does the meaning is not related to that of the compound (*riffraff*). Sometimes the two elements are joined by the conjunction *and*, with or without the hyphen (*spick-and-span*).

They are extremely expressive and may occur even in the formal register of a conference address, although they tend to belong to an informal style. Moreover, the

formation of the terms is productive — it is on-going. Who can forget the arrival of the pooper-scooper when American cities started requiring dog owners to clean up after their pets?

For someone whose first language is English, these are virtually all recognizable at first glance or hearing. They are an intimate part of our popular and even erudite culture. The problem is not in decoding, but re-encoding. As with idiomatic expressions in general, if we cannot find an equivalent idiom with the same stylistic flavor, we adopt the standard practice of converting to “conventional” language with the same denotative meaning. The native speaker of English may find this list useful in helping to come up with ready equivalents in the target language, and will probably be able to add many more to it.

For the second-language speaker of English these terms can present a challenge. They were probably not part of any standard ESOL course, but may have been learned in the field, on the job, or through years of immersion in the language. Moreover, they are some-

A. RHYMING WORDS

fuddy-duddy	n., an old-fashioned, fussy person He's just an old fuddy-duddy.
fuzzy-wuzzy	adj., warm and comforting She gave me a fuzzy-wuzzy feeling.
hanky-panky	n., an illicit affair or unseemly sexual activity There will be no hanky-panky around here.
helter-skelter	adv, adj., n., in disorderly haste They went through the program helter-skelter.
hobnob	v., to socialize with one's betters He hobnobbed with the rich and famous.
hocus-pocus	n. v., magic words or magic and/or deception It was all just a lot of hocus-pocus.
hodgepodge	n., a mixture of unrelated items, same as mish-mash. That's just a big hodgepodge of things.
hoity-toity	adj., pompous, putting on airs She left with her hoity-toity friends.
hokey-pokey	n., a children's game or dance Do the hokey-pokey and turn yourself about. (song lyrics)
huff and puff	v., to breathe heavily during work or exercise They huffed and puffed their way around the course.

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times not very transparent, with meanings that can be hard to guess. Some terms have crossed language boundaries (*zigzag*) and the onomatopoeic ones (*ticktock*, *splish-splash*) are easy to recognize or learn.

We have identified only a few words of similar composition in Spanish (*teje-meneje*) and Portuguese (*songa-monga*; *mundos e fundos*; *trancos e barrancos*). We invite the reader to produce a list in his or her non-English language, but the process seems to be more at home in English than at least in Romance languages.

This small collection may be your point of departure for a fuller glossary. At any rate, the words are fun to learn and say, but care must be used in employing them, especially for those whose second language is English. Note that spelling with or without a hyphen is according to the Microsoft Bookshelf

Dictionary 1996-97. As words become more established in the language, hyphens get removed, suggesting that non-hyphenated words have been with us longer than those still written with a hyphen or as separate words. Not all of these terms are to be found in the Bookshelf dictionary, though all but a very few (e.g., *fuzzy-wuzzy*, *Kit-Kat*) have been verified in at least one of the three works listed below. ●

References

- Microsoft Bookshelf 1996-1997 Edition*. On CD-ROM.
The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, College Edition. New York: Random House, 1968.
Dicionário DIC Michaelis. Amigo Mouse Software, Ltd. 1996. On CD-ROM.

jeepers-creepers	excl., surprise, wonder Jeepers-creepers! Where'd you get them peepers? (words of a song)
okey-dokey	excl., a variant of OK Okey-dokey. Let's go!
pell-mell	adv., hastily, confusedly They ran pell-mell down the street.
pooper-scooper	n., instrument to scoop up <i>poop</i> (dog dung) Take the pooper-scooper with you on the walk.
powwow	n., a meeting for negotiation; meeting between whites and Native Americans They had a powwow with the union representative.
ragtag	adj., shaggy, poor, without good outfitting (cf., <i>rag</i>) The rebels had only a ragtag army.
razzle-dazzle	adj., n., excitement, a lot of show The new guy has a lot of razzle-dazzle.
silly-billy (or silly-willy)	n., a foolish or silly person (generally a child) Come here, you silly-willy!
super-duper	adj., better or bigger than <i>super</i> I want a super-duper size.
willy-nilly	adv., haphazardly, at random, slow They went about the project willy-nilly.
wingding	n., a non-alphanumeric figure in typography; a wild party You'll find that symbol in the wingding font.

B. VOWEL CHANGE (most commonly, i ~ a)

chit-chat	n., v., casual conversation, small talk They chit-chatted for hours.
dilly-dally	v., to dawdle, take a long time Quit dilly-dallying around and finish it up.
dribs and drabs	n., preceded by <i>in</i> or <i>by</i> : little by little The work came in by dribs and drabs.
fiddle-faddle	n., foolishness, lies Don't listen to him. It's all fiddle-faddle.

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flimflam	n., deception, a swindle He's a flimflam man: don't trust him.
flip-flop	n, adv., change of course or position The senator did a flip-flop on the issue.
hip-hop	n., a contemporary, urban style of music or dance, rap The hip-hop group performed for an hour.
jig-jag	v., to change direction or form a jagged edge; a sexual act They jig-jagged all around the map.
jingle-jangle	n., the sound of bells, especially harsh sounds We heard the jingle-jangle of the ice cream man.
Kit-Kat	n., a brand of candy bar Give me a Kit-Kat bar.
knickknack	n., small collectible, souvenir, trinket My knick-knack shelf is full.
mishmash	n., a random mixture The proposal is a mishmash of issues.
ping-pong	n., table tennis, also a bouncing sound The book has a ping-pong rhythm.
pitter-patter	n., sound of rain or children running I can hear the pitter-patter of little feet.
riffruff	n., inferior "trashy" people, "trailer trash" Those people are just riffruff.
shipshape	adj., in excellent condition, clean and ready I want this place shipshape by one o'clock.
sing-song	adj., n., a poorly modulated voice, drowning or repetitive The girl had a sing-song voice when she spoke.
spick-and-span	adj., very clean, spotless The room is spick-and-span.
thick and thin	n., preceded by <i>through</i> : hard times and good times They stayed together through thick and thin.
Tic-Tac	n., a brand of breath mint Please give me a Tic-Tac.
ticktock	excl., sound of a clock or similar instrument They heard the tick-tock of a time bomb.
wishy-washy	adj., unsure of oneself, changing one's mind The politician is wishy-washy on that issue.
zigzag	n, adj., adv., v., changing direction side to side They zigzagged around the course.

C. MULTI-SYLLABLE + SINGLE SYLLABLE

dribbles and drabs	same as <i>drips and drabs</i> , above Payment came in dribbles and drabs.
gobbledygook	n., incomprehensible language, esp. government-speak It was written in gobbledygook.
kitty-cat	n., a baby cat, kitten (child's word) What a cute kitty-cat!
lickety-split	adv., quickly They came down lickety-split.
tattle-tale	n., one who tells tales on other people, an informer Don't be such a tattle-tale.