

A Lesson on English



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The Cliché—when what was fresh and new has gotten old and stale

Humans use words to communicate (through speaking, reading and writing) with others. Although social scientists say that only about 10% of our communication is verbal (the other 90% being through body language and other non-verbal messages), and psychologists say that we rarely say exactly what we mean (or even know what we mean, for that matter), still we make use of words every day, in an attempt to share our inner selves with other people.

Words, therefore, are precious. The shades of meaning in words are even more precious. Most educated people strive to be precise in their choice of words, and those speaking English are especially fortunate, as English has so many words to express the exact idea being communicated. Just try to describe a particular shade of blue. Is it navy, cerulean, cadet, sky, baby, midnight, storm, pale, deep—all these words describe a shade of blue.

Thus speakers of English should have no problem to use the precise words that best communicate their exact meaning. They have no need to depend on tired, stale phrases—they can invent their own fresh, vital ways to describe their unique view of their world. They don't need clichés.

What's a cliché?

by Sara Tusek

The definition of cliché is this: “a phrase that was once bright, novel and eye-catching but has, through much use, become so familiar that its ability to paint an intriguing picture the mind of its hearers is sadly diminished.

An example of a cliché is “pretty as a picture.” The first person who said this (a long, long time ago!) must have been pleased to connect his or her own personal standard of beauty with something as worthwhile and universally appreciated as a picture. This phrase was arresting in its originality and freshness of perspective. At a time when art was hard to obtain except for the wealthy, perhaps this phrase conveyed the fabulous value of a particular person's prettiness.

But now, what does the phrase convey? A picture is no big deal in a culture where pictures are everywhere, so many that we now delete them from our digital camera without a second thought. And with the postmodern obsession on authenticity, pictures are automatically seen as merely images, not as reality itself.

To p. 2

A few clichés

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1. *“What goes around, comes around.”*
2. *“It is what it is.”*
3. *“Everything happens for a reason.”*
4. *“That's so cliché!”*
5. *“Let sleeping dogs lie.”*



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Sara and Jarda Tusek with Klaus

“A Lesson on English” is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

“Clichés”

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Why we use clichés

Added to this over-familiarity with pictures is the knowledge that a picture can be enhanced, changed and even completely fabricated with any computer. “Pretty as a picture” now means, literally, as pretty as a common (perhaps unreliable) image that is probably being used to deceive you or to sell you something. You might just as well say “False as a touched-up representation meant to fool people.”

Yet people still say, “pretty as a picture” and their meaning is usually understood. Why? Because this particular phrase has taken on a life of its own, apart from its literal meaning. It’s become a cliché.

Note: Sometimes the understood meaning of a cliché has moved so far from the actual meaning of the words that it’s become an idiom, a completely untranslatable saying such as “it’s raining cats and dogs,” the kind of phrase that baffles language learners. This is a cliché “taken to the limit” (that’s another cliché!), one that has shaped language for its own purposes.

So what’s the problem with clichés?

If clichés are understood even when they are no longer original wordings that express an individual’s view of life, then what’s the problem? Why not use them?

If your main goal in communicating is to be sure you’re understood, then clichés are useful. People speaking English as a second language, children and relatively uneducated people use clichés quite effectively. Clichés are like a set of social keys—just go through the keys till you find the key that fits, and use it. Then move on to the next key.

But constant use of clichés is a problem:

1. If you’re talking to a native English speaker, say in the U.S., your communication may be seen as that of a person with only a limited grasp of the language, relegating you to a relatively inferior social status (the status of people speaking English as a second language, children and relatively uneducated people).
2. You won’t stretch your basic understanding of and affinity for English. Instead, you’ll fall into a trap of not learning new words, but simply using and reusing the same words. *This is boring!*

Where’s the fun of having the “ah-ha!” experience of really comprehending a new word, with all its nuances and shades of meaning? Where’s the pleasure of using a new phrase correctly, with other people, and feeling that you’ve mastered another aspect of their language and culture? Where’s the satisfaction of forcing your brain to grapple with a concept and then find a word or words that exactly express that concept? Using clichés deprives you of these small triumphs.

No more clichés!?

Originality, intellectual satisfaction, finding a way of saying something in a way no one has ever said it before, the possibility of gleaming a golden nugget of understanding about a different culture by wrestling with its words—these are reasons to avoid using clichés. But if that sounds like too much trouble to you, then just “kick back!” “Take a chill pill!”

And, oh, by the way, “Hasta la vista, baby!”