

Dialects and Phrases: FCE Leader Lesson

Materials: Appalachian words quiz handouts
10 Phrases handout

Objective:

To discuss the beginnings of everyday phrases as well as difference in regional dialects.

Background information:

The beginnings of phrases we use every day are often obscure. So is the origin of our dialects, or why we say the words the way we do. The Eastern Region of Tennessee has a special dialect, referred to one website as Smoky Mountain English. It is notable for features in pronunciation, vocabulary and grammar that are the same as old British as well as many unique features that developed on its own. The development of this unique dialect occurred because the area had everything needed to bring it about.

The three things are needed for a new dialect to develop:

- A group of people living in close proximity to each other
- The above group to live in an isolated area
- Passage of time.

The mountains made all three possible for the language to become its own.

However distinct, there is little information about where phrases used in this area began. Therefore, the quiz to handout is on phrases and words unique to Smoky Mountain and Southern Appalachian English. The phrases that discuss the origin are general English.

The Lesson:

Go over the handout on common phrases with Historical Origins. Discuss which phrases they use and if their use differs than the origin. Then hand out the quiz, letting the participants know that they are Appalachian words and phrases. Go over the quiz and discuss, words or phrase unique to their families, where they heard them from and if any participants have different meanings to the same phrases or words.

Answers to quiz:

1. J 2. D 3. E 4. I 5. A 6. C 7. H 8. F 9. B 10. G
1. B 2. A 3. B 4. C 5. A

Further information on dialects can be found on the webpage [A Dialect Map of American English](http://www15.uta.fi/FAST/US1/REF/dial-map.html)
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Origin of Phrases

Have you ever wonder who the first person was to “turn a blind eye”? or why the “riot act” needs to be “read”? If so, the following are some common sayings with historical backgrounds.



Turn a blind eye

The phrase “turn a blind eye”—often used to refer to a willful refusal to acknowledge a particular reality—dates back to a legendary chapter in the career of the British naval hero Horatio Nelson. During 1801’s Battle of Copenhagen, Nelson’s ships were pitted against a large Danish-Norwegian fleet. When his more conservative superior officer flagged for him to withdraw, the one-eyed Nelson supposedly brought his telescope to his bad eye and blithely proclaimed, “I really do not see the signal.” He went on to score a decisive victory. Some historians have since dismissed Nelson’s famous quip as merely a battlefield myth, but the phrase “turn a blind eye” persists to this day.

White elephant

White elephants were once considered highly sacred creatures in Thailand—the animal even graced the national flag until 1917—but they were also wielded as a subtle form of punishment. According to legend, if an underling or rival angered a Siamese king, the royal might present the unfortunate man with the gift of a white elephant. While ostensibly a reward, the creatures were tremendously expensive to feed and house, and caring for one often drove the recipient into financial ruin. Whether any specific rulers actually bestowed such a passive-aggressive gift is uncertain, but the term has since come to refer to any burdensome possession—pachyderm or otherwise.

Crocodile tears

Modern English speakers use the phrase “crocodile tears” to describe a display of superficial or false sorrow, but the saying actually derives from a medieval belief that crocodiles shed tears of sadness while they killed and consumed their prey. The myth dates back as far as the 14th century and comes from a book called “The Travels of Sir John Mandeville.” Wildly popular upon its release, the tome recounts a brave knight’s adventures during his supposed travels through Asia. Among its many fabrications, the book includes a description of crocodiles that notes, “These serpents sley men, and eate them weeping, and they have no tongue.” While factually inaccurate, Mandeville’s account of weeping reptiles later found its way into the works of Shakespeare, and “crocodile tears” became an idiom as early as the 16th century.

Resting on laurels

The idea of resting on your laurels dates back to leaders and athletic stars of ancient Greece. In Hellenic times, laurel leaves were closely tied to Apollo, the god of music, prophecy and poetry. Apollo was usually depicted with a crown of laurel leaves, and the plant eventually became a symbol of status and achievement. Victorious athletes at the ancient Pythian Games received wreaths made of laurel branches, and the Romans later adopted the practice and presented wreaths to generals who won important battles. Venerable Greeks and Romans, or “laureates,” were thus able to “rest on their laurels” by basking in the glory of past achievements. Only later did the phrase take on a negative connotation, and since the 1800s it has been used for those who are overly satisfied with past triumphs.

Read the riot act

These days, angry parents might threaten to “read the riot act” to their unruly children. But in 18th-century England, the Riot Act was a very real document, and it was often recited aloud to angry mobs. Instituted in 1715, the Riot Act gave the British government the authority to label any group of more than 12 people a threat to the peace. In these circumstances, a public official would read a small portion of the Riot Act and order the people to “disperse themselves, and peaceably depart to their habitations.” Anyone that remained after one hour was subject to arrest or removal by force. The law was later put to the test in 1819 during the infamous Peterloo Massacre, in which a cavalry unit attacked a large group of protestors after they appeared to ignore a reading of the Riot Act.



Running amok

“Running amok” is commonly used to describe wild or erratic behavior, but the phrase actually began its life as a medical term. The saying was popularized in the 18th and 19th centuries, when European visitors to Malaysia learned of a peculiar mental affliction that caused otherwise normal tribesmen to go on brutal and seemingly random killing sprees. Amok—derived from the “Amuco,” a band of Javanese and Malay warriors who were known for their penchant for indiscriminate violence—was initially a source of morbid fascination for Westerners. Writing in 1772, the famed explorer Captain James Cook noted that “to run amok is to ... sally forth from the house, kill the person or persons supposed to have injured the Amock, and any other person that attempts to impede his passage.” Once thought to be the result of possession by evil spirits, the phenomenon later found its way into psychiatric manuals. It remains a diagnosable mental condition to this day.

The above are excerpts from the History Channel’s website and the Phrase Finder website. You can find more information at <http://www.history.com/news/history-lists/10-common-sayings-with-historical-origins> and <http://www.phrases.org.uk/index.html>

Appalachian Phrases and Words Quiz

Match the word to the meaning:

1. Poke	a. breezy
2. Sigogglin	b. liquid left in pot after cooking
3. Cut a shine	c. small wild onion
4. Petticoat government	d. tilted or crooked
5. Airish	e. to dance
6. Ramp	f. almost
7. haint	g. dried green beans
8. purtnigh	h. ghost
9. pot likker	i. woman wears the pants
10. leatherbritches	j. bag or sack

Complete the phrase:

1. Like a hen on a ----- A. nest , B. june bug, C. farm
2. Looks like _____ eatin' a cracker A. death B. fool C. bull
3. Meaner than a _____ snake A. black B. striped C. hot
4. Tough as a _____ A. bear B. coon hide C. pine knot
5. Steep as a _____ A. mule's face B. wall C. hank's nose

Have you ever heard . . .

A whack of jacks 2 tall men couldn't shake hands over - or plate full of flapjacks

Live so fer back in the woods you havta pipe sunshine - live back in a holler

Tard as far and twic'd as hot - very tired

Whar in the round brown world - where is it

Tighter than Dick's hatband - to be stingy