

Now, the VOA Special English program Words and Their Stories.

“Hot” is a simple, easily understood word. So are most of the expressions made with the word hot -- but not always, as we shall see.

The words hot potato, for example, give you no idea at all to the meaning of the expression “hot potato.”

The potato is a popular vegetable in the United States. Many people like baked potatoes, cooked in an oven or fire. Imagine trying to carry a hot, baked potato in your hand. It would be difficult -- even painful -- to do so.

Now we are getting close to the meaning of “hot potato.”

Some publicly-disputed issues are highly emotional. The issues must be treated carefully, or they will be difficult and painful if an elected official has to deal with them -- as difficult and painful as holding a hot potato.

One such hot potato is taxes.

Calling for higher taxes can mean defeat for a politician. And yet, if taxes are not raised, some very popular government programs could be cut. And that

also can make a politician very unpopular. So the questions must be dealt with carefully -- the same way you would handle any other hot potato.

Another expression is "not so hot." If you ask someone how she feels, she may answer "not so hot." What she means is she does not feel well.

"Not so hot" also is a way of saying that you do not really like something. You may tell a friend that the new play you saw last night is "not so hot." That means you did not consider it a success.

A "hot shot" is a person -- often a young person -- who thinks he can do anything. At least he wants to try. He is very sure he can succeed. But often he fails. The expression was born in the military forces. A "hot shot" was a soldier who fired without aiming carefully.

Hot is a word that is often used to talk about anger.

A person who becomes angry easily is called a "hothead." An angry person's neck often becomes red. We say he is "hot under the collar." You could say that your friend "is no hothead." But he got "hot under the collar" when someone took his radio.

In 1963, "hotline" appeared as a new expression.

The hotline was a direct communications link between the leaders of the Soviet Union and the United States. The hotline had an important purpose: to prevent accidental war between the two competitors during the period known as the Cold War. The American president and the Soviet leader were able to communicate directly and immediately on the hotline. This helped prevent any conflict during an international crisis.

You have been listening to the VOA Special English program Words and Their Stories.

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I'm Warren Scheer.