

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

Monkeys are very similar to us in many ways. Most have ten fingers and ten toes, and brains much like ours. We enjoy watching them because they often act like us. In fact, Charles Darwin's theory of evolution says that monkeys and humans share a common ancestor.

Songwriter William Gilbert, in the musical "Princess Ida," wrote: "Darwinian man, though well-behaved, at best is only a monkey shaved."

His words -- sung to Sir Arthur Sullivan's music -- make listeners smile. Well, monkeys make us smile, too, because they are creatures full of playful tricks.

This is why many monkey expressions are about tricky people or playful acts. One of these expressions is "monkeyshines," meaning "tricks or foolish acts."

The meaning is clear if you have ever watched a group of monkeys playfully chasing each other -- pulling tails, stealing food, doing tricks. So, when a teacher says to a group of students "Stop those monkeyshines right now!," you know that the boys and girls are playing, instead of studying.

You might hear that same teacher warn a student not to "monkey around" with a valuable piece of equipment. You "monkey around" with something when you do not know what you are doing. You are touching or playing with something you should leave alone.

Also, you can "monkey around" when you feel like doing something, but have no firm idea of what to do. For example, you tell your friend you are going to spend the day "monkeying around" with your car. Well, you do not have any job or goal in mind -- it is just a way to pass the time.

"Monkey business" usually means secret -- maybe illegal -- activities. A news report may say there is "monkey business" involved in building the new airport, with some officials getting secret payments from builders.

You may “make a monkey out of” someone when you make that person look foolish. Some people “make a monkey out of” themselves by acting foolish or silly.

If one monkey has fun, imagine how much fun “a barrel of monkeys” can have. If your friend says he had “more fun than a barrel of monkeys” at your party, you know that he had a really good time.

“Monkey suits” are common names for clothes or uniforms soldiers wear.

In earlier years in many American cities, you would find men playing musical hand organs on the street. Dancing to the music would be the man’s small monkey dressed in a tight-fitting, colorful jacket similar to a military uniform. So, people began to call a military uniform a “monkey suit.”

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