

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

Making choices is necessary, but not always easy. Many of our expressions tell about this difficulty.

One of these expressions is Hobson's choice. It often is used to describe a difficult choice. But that is not what it really means. Its real meaning is to have no choice at all.

The Hobson in the expression was Thomas Hobson. Mr. Hobson owned a stable of horses in Cambridge, England.

Mr. Hobson often rented horses to the students at Cambridge University. But, he did not really trust them to take good care of the horses. So, he had a rule that prevented the students from riding his best horses. They could take the horse that was nearest the stable door. Or, they could not take any horse at all.

Thus, a Hobson's choice was really no choice.

Another expression for having no real choice is between a rock and a hard place. It is often used to describe a difficult situation with few choices, none of them good.

For example, your boss may ask you to work late. But you have plans to go to a movie with your friends. If you refuse to work, your boss gets angry. But if you do not go to the movies with your friends, they may get angry. So what do you do? You are caught between a rock and a hard place.

Another expression -- between the devil and the deep blue sea -- also gives you a choice between two equally dangerous things.

Its meaning seems clear. You can choose the devil and his burning fires of hell. Or, you can choose to drown in the sea. Some word experts say the expression comes from the days of wooden ships. The devil is a word for a seam between two pieces of wood along the water-line of a ship. If the seam or crack between the two pieces of wood begins to leak, then a sailor must fix it. The sailor ordered to make the repairs was in a dangerous situation. He was hanging over the side of the ship, working between the devil and the deep blue sea.

There is still another expression that describes a situation with only bad choices: being on the horns of a dilemma.

The dictionary says a dilemma is a situation in which you must make a decision about two equally-balanced choices. When your dilemma has horns, a choice becomes impossible. When you are on the horns of a dilemma, no matter which horn you choose, something bad will happen.

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