

Get Your 'Kick' with Words

From the first signs of life until the time they “kick the bucket,” people “kick around” many phrases to use in everyday life | Words and Their Stories

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

From birth to death, the word “kick” has been given an important part in expressing human experience. The proud and happy mother feels the first signs of life “kicking” inside her womb. And that same life -- many years later -- comes to its end in a widely-used expression, to “kick the bucket,” meaning to die.

The expression to “kick the bucket” is almost 200 years old. One belief is that it started when an English stableman committed suicide by hanging himself while standing on a pail, or bucket. He put a rope around his neck and tied it to a beam in the ceiling, and then kicked the bucket away from under him.

After a while, to die in any way was called “kicking the bucket.”

Another old expression that comes from England is to “kick over the traces,” meaning to resist the commands of one’s parents, or

to oppose or reject authority. "Traces" were the chains that held a horse or mule to a wagon or plow. Sometimes, an animal rebelled and "kicked over the traces."

The word "kick" sometimes is used to describe a complaint or some kind of dissatisfaction. Workers, for example, "kick" about long hours and low pay.

There are times when workers are forced to "kick back" some of their wages to their employers as part of their job. This "kickback" is illegal. So is another kind of kickback: a secret payment made by a supplier to an official who buys supplies for a government or company.

"Kick around" is a phrase that is heard often in American English. A person who is kicked around is someone who is treated badly. Usually, he is not really being kicked by somebody's foot -- he is just not being treated with the respect that all of us want.

A person who has "kicked around" for most of his life is someone who has spent his life moving from place to place. In this case, "kicking around" means moving often from one place to another.

“Kick around” has a third meaning when you use it with the word idea. When you “kick around an idea,” you are giving that idea some thought.

There is no physical action when you “kick a person upstairs,” although the pain can be as strong. You kick a person upstairs by removing him from an important job and giving him a job that sounds more important, but really is not.

Still another meaning of the word “kick” is to free oneself of a bad habit, such as smoking cigarettes. Health campaigns urge smokers to “kick the habit.”

This VOA Special English program *Words and Their Stories* was written by Marilyn Rice Christiano.

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