



TOPICS

Ask an American: private gun ownership; north of; compulsory versus mandatory versus obligatory; mayday

GLOSSARY

semiautomatic – a gun that moves the next bullet (small piece of metal) into position automatically, or without one having to do anything, so that multiple shots can be made very quickly

* The criminal used a semiautomatic weapon to fire 10 shots in just a few seconds.

round – one bullet; one shot from a gun

* How many rounds did you fire at the firing range last weekend?

to ban (something) – to not allow something; to make a law against having, using, or doing something

* Their church bans dancing and rock-and-roll music.

outlawed – against the law; not legal

* In which countries is same-sex marriage outlawed?

to arm (oneself) – to buy a gun for one's own use; to have or carry a gun

* Last month there were several robberies on his street, so he decided to arm himself just in case the criminals come into his home.

social issue – something that affects society in non-financial ways

* Education and healthcare are two very important social issues in most elections.

law-abiding – following or obeying the law; not breaking the law

* The writer argued that children who receive a good education in a loving family are more likely to become law-abiding adults.

hunting – the practice of killing wild animals, for sport, for entertainment, for meat, or for their skins

* We went hunting and killed a large deer, so now we have meat for the next few months.



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high heels – shoes that have a long, narrow part underneath the round part on the bottom and back of the foot, worn by a woman who wants to appear taller than she really is

* Her feet hurt after she wore high heels all day at work.

part of the equation – something that is relevant or influential in a particular situation

* I hope that age won't be a part of the equation when manager decides who to hire.

north of – an informal phrase meaning higher than a given amount

* They're asking just north of \$8,000 for their boat.

compulsory – enforced; required

* Is voting compulsory in your country?

mandatory – required by law or rules, implying a command

* In the United States, it is mandatory for all drivers to have auto insurance.

obligatory – required by social rules or conventions (common way of doing things)

* The speaker's joke was followed by the obligatory laughter, although no one really thought it was very funny.

mayday – an international call for help used by pilots of ships, planes, or other vehicles, or by people in trouble

* The boat's captain turned on the radio and cried, "Mayday, mayday! Can anyone hear me?"



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Gunsmoke

One of the most popular drama “series” (a group of related shows) ever on American radio and television was Gunsmoke. The series started on the radio, where it was “broadcast” (heard or seen) from 1952 to 1961. It continued on television from 1955 to 1975. Gunsmoke is about the “settlement” (the process of people beginning to live in a new place) of the “American West” (the western part of the United States). The stories were all near Dodge City in the state of Kansas.

Especially at the beginning, the series was very “realistic,” (showing how something actually was or is) and didn’t “match” (align with) people’s “romanticized” (idealized) views of the West. Many of the stories were violent and the “villains” (criminals and other bad people) often didn’t get punished. But the show captured people’s attention and imagination and became very successful. Unlike other “Westerns” (shows about the American West) at the time, Gunsmoke was written for adults – not children.

Gunsmoke was Americans’ most popular television show from 1957 to 1961, and although it lost its number-one “ranking” (the order of popularity), it remained very popular. Years after the series ended, members of the “cast” (the group of actors on a show) created five Gunsmoke movies for television. The series also “inspired” (helped to create) “comic books” (small books with many pictures and few words), novels, and games.

The writer, John Meston, once made a “humorous” (funny) comment: “If I had known it would last this long, I would never have created the ‘darn’ (damn) thing.” But millions of Americans are glad that he did.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 192.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 192. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Our website is eslpod.com. On it, you can visit our ESL Podcast Store, which has some additional courses in business and daily English that you will enjoy, I think. You can also download the Learning Guide for this episode, and all of our current episodes.

On this Café, we're going to have another one of our Ask an American segments, where we listen to other native speakers talking at a normal rate of speech – at a normal speed. We're going to listen to them and explain what they're talking about. Today we're going to talk about a controversial issue in the United States, gun ownership (owning guns). As always, we'll also answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

Our topic today is private gun ownership, or guns that are owned by individual Americans who are not part of the army or police. In the United States, it is legal for Americans to own guns, it's one of the rights in our Constitution, but some people wish that it was not allowed, or at least was restricted. These people usually call for something called "gun control," controlling the number of guns, restricting the access to guns making sure that fewer people have them.

There are certain very dangerous guns that the government has said individuals cannot own. Under President Clinton, there were some types of guns that were made illegal for individuals to own. Some of those laws, however, were changed; those regulations were changed by President George Bush. Some people now think that the laws may change again. In any case, there are still people who want to buy guns; there are some people who think that the law may change again and so they want to buy a gun before it does change.

We begin this Café by listening to someone who sells guns; he's going to talk about the types of guns that he sells. We'll listen first. Try to understand as much as you can, then we'll go back and talk about what he says. Let's listen:

[recording]



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“Any semiautomatic handgun with more than a 10-round capacity was banned. This gun, outlawed – 18 shots. This gun, okay – 10 shots. Now that’s under the Clinton plan. The Obama plan, nobody knows.”

[end of recording]

That man we listen to here sells guns. He begins by talking about the law under President Clinton; there were certain kinds of guns that were restricted – that were banned. “To ban (something)” means to no longer allow it, to make it against the law. He says any semiautomatic handgun with more than a 10-round capacity was banned. A “semiautomatic” weapon or gun is one that moves the next bullet into position without you having to do anything. A “bullet” is the small piece of metal that comes out of the gun and flies through the air. People can shoot bullets more quickly with a semiautomatic handgun than with guns where they have to load each bullet individually.

He says that any semiautomatic handgun (a “handgun” is a small gun that you can hold in one hand) with more than a 10-round capacity was banned. A “round” is one bullet, or one shot from a gun. So a gun with a 10-round capacity is a gun that holds 10 bullets and can be shot 10 times before it needs to be reloaded, before you need to put more bullets into the gun. He says that guns with more than a 10-round capacity, or guns that could hold more than 10 bullets, were banned, they were made illegal under a law signed by President Clinton.

Then the man turns to a gun – points at a gun and says, “This gun, outlawed – 18 shots.” “Outlawed” means the same as banned; it means against the law. So, he’s saying that the gun with 18 shots – with 18 rounds was outlawed because all guns with more than 10 rounds were banned. Then he points to another gun and says that one is okay, because it has only 10 shots or rounds.

He ends by saying that this was how things were under the Clinton plan, or when Bill Clinton was president. These laws changed when George W. Bush became president. He says no one knows what types of laws President Obama might make for guns, or whether guns with more than 10 rounds will be allowed or not. He says, “The Obama plan, nobody knows.”

Let’s listen to him talk about this one more time.

[recording]



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“Any semiautomatic handgun with more than a 10-round capacity was banned. This gun, outlawed – 18 shots. This gun, okay – 10 shots. Now that’s under the Clinton plan. The Obama plan, nobody knows.”

[end of recording]

The quotes today are all taken from a story that was reported by Voice of America. One of the things they said is that the sales of guns, the number of people who are buying guns, has been increasing; there have been more people recently buying guns. The question is: Why? Why are more people buying guns now? This gentleman gives a explanation for at least one reason why he thinks that gun sales have been increasing. Let’s listen:

[recording]

“I think most first-time gun buyers are scared. The economy’s bad. People are losing their jobs. People are scared. People are spending money they don’t have to arm themselves. That reaches deeper than economics. That’s a social issue.”

[end of recording]

The man says that he thinks most first-time gun buyers, or people who are buying a gun for the first time, are scared. He says, “The economy’s bad (meaning that the economy isn’t very strong right now). People are losing their jobs. People are scared.”

Then he says that people are spending money they don’t have to arm themselves. He means that the people who are buying these guns are not rich – they don’t have a lot of money, but they are buying them anyway to arm themselves. “To arm,” as a verb, means to give someone a weapon like a gun. You can arm yourself with a knife; you could arm yourself with a baseball bat (a long stick we use to play baseball). These are possible weapons, things that you can use to hurt someone else with. People are arming themselves with guns; they’re buying guns for themselves because they are scared.

The man says that this is something deeper than economics, something that is more important or a bigger issue than just the economy. It’s a social issue, something that affects society in non-financial ways, something that is not just about money. He says people are scared of other people in the country – in society, and they think they need guns to protect themselves from those other



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people who might want to hurt them. That's an example of gun ownership being a social issue.

Let's listen to the quote one more time.

[recording]

"I think most first-time gun buyers are scared. The economy's bad. People are losing their jobs. People are scared. People are spending money they don't have to arm themselves. That reaches deeper than economics. That's a social issue."

[end of recording]

There are many people in the United States who don't like the gun laws, who think that people should not be able to buy certain kinds of guns. We're going to hear a quote from one person from something called the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence. Brady was the name of the man who worked for President Reagan; he was the press secretary, the person who talked to reporters for the president. He was shot when somebody tried to kill President Reagan back in the early 1980s. He and his wife have started an organization to prevent people from buying guns, the kinds of guns that almost killed him.

We're going to listen to a quote not from Brady himself, but from someone from this organization. He's going to talk about why he thinks that buying guns is not a good idea – certain kinds of guns, at least. He's going to talk about why some guns should be banned. Let's listen:

[recording]

"We have no problem with law-abiding citizens selling guns and buying guns for hunting, for self-defense. But no one needs those military features to defend themselves in the home or for any sporting purpose."

[end of recording]

The man begins by saying that his group, the Brady Campaign to Prevent Gun Violence, has no problem with law-abiding citizens selling guns and buying guns. To "abide" (abide) means to follow something. "To abide by the law" means to follow the law, to do what the law says, not to break or violate the rule or the law. So the group doesn't care about law-abiding citizens, citizens who follow the law,



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in terms of selling and buying guns. He knows that law-abiding citizens might want guns for “hunting,” which means killing wild animals, either for sport or entertainment, or for their meat and their skins. He also knows that some law-abiding citizens want to buy guns for self-defense, so they can defend or protect themselves from other people who might want to hurt or kill them.

He says, however, that no one needs military features to defend themselves in their home or for any sporting purpose. He’s talking about the way some of the guns that are legally for sale in the United States have many special characteristics that were created for the military or army so that soldiers could kill people more quickly and efficiently. In his opinion, those types of “features,” those types of things that are part of the gun, simply aren’t necessary for law-abiding citizens who need guns only for hunting and sporting purposes. So, a lot of these bigger guns or guns that have higher capacity (are able to do more), these aren’t really necessary for people who just want a gun to protect themselves or who want a gun to go hunting. These are the problems he sees with the current laws that allow people to buy these military style guns.

Let’s listen one more time.

[recording]

“We have no problem with law-abiding citizens selling guns and buying guns for hunting, for self-defense. But no one needs those military features to defend themselves in the home or for any sporting purpose.”

[end of recording]

Not everyone agrees with the arguments that were made by the gentleman from the Brady Campaign. There are, however, people who believe that Americans should be able to buy any gun whenever they want, for whatever need they have. We’ll listen to one such gun “advocate,” someone who is in favor of something, who tries to get something done, usually in the world of politics. This gentleman is going to talk about why he doesn’t like it when people try to restrict the kinds of guns that he can buy. “To restrict” means to put rules and regulations to not allow certain things. Let’s listen:

[recording]

“I just don’t understand why someone else gets to determine what I need or don’t need. I don’t need a car that goes 150 miles an hour, but I’ve got one. You don’t



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need high heels, but if you like them, you can get them. Where did ‘need’ become part of the equation?”

[end of recording]

The man begins by saying that he doesn’t understand why someone else gets to determine or decide what he does or doesn’t need. He’s saying that people who are against gun ownership, or who want to restrict it, are telling him what he needs – what kind of gun he needs. He’s saying that the law shouldn’t decide what he needs for gun ownership; he should be able to buy any gun he wants. He starts giving some examples. He says that he doesn’t need a car that goes 150 miles an hour, because that’s faster than people are allowed to drive legally in the United States. But the car that he has can go 150 miles an hour.

He also says that women don’t need high heels. High-heeled shoes are women’s shoes that have a long, narrow part underneath the “heel,” or the back part of the shoe. High-heeled shoes make a woman seem taller – or a man, men could wear high-heeled shoes as well! He says that women don’t need high heels, but if they like wearing them, they can go to the store and buy them. He’s saying that the government shouldn’t tell us what we need, and is given examples of cases where even when people don’t need something they are allowed to buy it.

Using these two examples then, he asks, “Where did ‘need’ become part of the equation?” The phrase “part of the equation” is used to talk about things that are relevant or important or influential in a particular situation. He thinks that “need” isn’t relevant – isn’t important when we’re talking about guns. In his examples, he doesn’t need a fast car, he doesn’t need high-heeled shoes (Although he might look better in them!), but he can get them if he wants to. In the same way, he might not need a semiautomatic handgun that can shoot 10 bullets very quickly, but he should be able to get one if he wants to. That’s why he thinks that “need” shouldn’t be part of the equation; it shouldn’t be something that we’re talking about in relation to gun laws. Whether he actually needs a semiautomatic handgun shouldn’t affect whether or not he can buy one.

Let’s listen to his quote one more time.

[recording]

“I just don’t understand why someone else gets to determine what I need or don’t need. I don’t need a car that goes 150 miles an hour, but I’ve got one. You don’t



need high heels, but if you like them, you can get them. Where did ‘need’ become part of the equation?”

[end of recording]

Americans have been arguing about guns for many, many years, especially in the last hundred years or so. People have very strong opinions about whether or not Americans should be able to own guns, especially semiautomatic weapons. We have a constitutional amendment that some people say gives individuals the right to own guns. This has been debated a great deal in the last 50 to 100 years. The majority of Americans, however, do not own guns; about 40% do, which is still a lot of people who have guns in their house. Just in case you’re interested, I don’t have any guns; I’ve never owned a gun. I don’t hunt, and if I need to defend myself, I’ll probably just call the police!

Now let’s answer some of your questions.

Our first question comes from Bo (Bo) in China. I love that name, Bo; it’s a very strong name – my name is Bo! Anyway, Bo from China wants to know the meaning of the expression “its price may be north of \$35,000.” The question has to do with the expression “north of.”

In this sentence, “north of” means more than, it’s an informal way of saying an amount that is higher than something. For example, to buy a house in Los Angeles you would pay something north of \$400,000; it would be more than \$400,000. So in this original sentence, “its price may be north of \$35,000” means it is or may be more than \$35,000. It’s a somewhat informal expression.

“North of” can also mean in the direction, going north. There are, of course, four directions: north, south, east, and west. France is north of Spain. Beijing is north of Hong Kong. Minnesota is north of Iowa, which is north of Missouri, which is north of Arkansas, which is north of Texas, which is north of Mexico. You see? You can do that all day!

This is not that common of an expression, however. People understand it, but it isn’t the most common thing you would hear.

Tom (Tom) from Austria wants to know the meanings of the words “compulsory,” “mandatory,” and “obligatory,” three somewhat similar words.



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Let's start with "compulsory" (compulsory). "Compulsory" means that it is required: "Education in the United States (going to school) is, in most states, compulsory until the age of 16," you must send your child to a school, or the equivalent of a school until the age of 16. In some countries, military service (going into the army) is compulsory for all men at the age of 18.

"Mandatory" means something very similar; it normally refers to things that are required by law or required by rules. The idea is that there is a command, there is an order: "It is mandatory that all students take the test," it is required. We would probably use "mandatory" in that case instead of "compulsory," because it is a rule that could be changed. Of course, "compulsory" could also refer to rules or laws that can be changed. The meanings are very similar, but in this case, as a policy, we would probably use "mandatory." The Olympics has mandatory drug testing for the athletes, for the people who participate. It's something that the International Olympic Committee requires.

"Obligatory" (obligatory) also means required. Usually it's used in places where something is expected. It's not necessarily a law or a rule, but it's very common so that it seems like it's required. Going to your brother's wedding is normally, in most families, obligatory – you have to do it. You may not like the woman that he's going to marry, but you have to go to the wedding; it's obligatory. There's a verb, "to obligate," and a noun, "obligation" that are related to the same idea.

"Compulsory" and "mandatory" are more common in formal official legal documents. "Obligatory" is a little more common in things that are less formal, things that are not necessarily rules or laws.

Finally, Alireza (Alireza) in Canada (Which is north of the United States, by the way!) wants to know the meaning of the expression "mayday." Well, there are actually two meanings depending on how you spell the word or words.

If it's two words "May" (May) and "Day" (Day), well that refers to the first day of May. In many countries, but not in the United States, May Day is a holiday. It's used often to celebrate the working men and women of the country. We have our own Labor Day in the end of the summertime that does the same thing, but in many countries that is done on May Day.

Used as one word (mayday), "mayday" is the international call for help that is used by pilots of ships, planes, or people who are in trouble. If the captain of a airplane gets on his radio and says, "Mayday! Mayday!" he saying that he has an emergency, that something is wrong. This word has nothing to do with the month



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of May; it comes from a French expression, “venez m’aider” (I know my French is terrible!), which means come and help me. It was created back in the 1920s to aid planes that were flying from England to France, so they used a French expression. It’s used in the United States for official calls for help. It is often used in the military as well.

If you have a question that seems like an emergency, you can email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com. We’ll try to answer as many questions as we can – even though it isn’t mandatory!

From Los Angeles, California, I’m Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us next time on the English Café.

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