

Speaking of

If you are going to the United States or other English speaking countries, you may discover that even if you speak and write decent English—you may even have done very well in TOEFL or GRE-- you may still feel lost and afraid to speak, and have significant difficulty in trying to mingle with native speakers on schoolyards, in neighborhood streets, and on college campuses. One of the reasons is that native speakers often throw in many slang words and idiomatic phrases in their daily conversations. While being informal, these words and phrases are rarely taught, wherever you are. They could become exclusive if you don't know them, making you feel you are in an English-speaking country, but at the same time you are not. So, to empower yourself and to find yourself a voice, you need to know some of them. Below are three such words.

Being a “Phony”

Let's look at two sentences, all said by a 17-year-old teenager, named Holden Caulfield:

“I stopped on the way, though, and picked up Ackley's hand, and gave him a big *phony* handshake.”

“Holden Caulfield's my name.” I should've given her a *phony* name, but I didn't think of it.

In the first case, Ackley had sinus trouble, pimples, lousy teeth, halitosis, and crumbly fingernails, but Holden still befriended him. Holden had just taken much trouble to find his scissors and allowed Ackley to use them to trim hangnails. He also had invited Ackley to a movie. But Ackley, who shared a dorm with Holden, not only let his fingernails fall on the carpet of Holden's room, but also refused to talk and comfort Holden when Holden was beat up by a school bully Stradlater. Given how rude and ungrateful Ackley was, you will know why the handshake had to be a *phony*, or a fake one—Ackley was not prepared for it and Holden was doing it out of formality.

In the second case Holden was trying to invite Faith Cavendish to have some cocktails and something (maybe *nookie*, one of the many slang words for sex). He got the girl's name from a guy he had met at a summer party. In this case, Holden knew what he did was a little unethical, so it would be natural that he would use a pseudonym instead of his real name. Since he did give out his real name, you understand the possible danger he is getting himself in and why he regretted that he did not use a *phony*, that is, fake, name. Probably deep inside, Holden was still not a very exceptional liar, yet.

In both cases, *phony* means fake and is used as an adjective. In fact, when used as an adjective, phony can also be used in the comparative and superlative degree. For instance,

“The *phonier* it (referring to a movie) got, the more she cried. “

“Then he and Old Sally started talking about a lot of people they knew. It was the *phoniest* conversation you ever heard in your life.”

In the first case, Holden was watching a movie at Radio City alone. The lady who happened to sit next to him had a little kid with her. Instead of accompanying the kid to the bathroom, which he needed badly, she was ordering the kid to “behave himself” as she continued to cry more heartbrokenly over what's shown in the movie. So to Holden, the more the woman cried over the movie, the unkindlier she

was to real people, especially her child. Or, the faker the movie was, the more kind-hearted the woman appeared to be, but the *phonier* a person she was.

In the second case, Holden took Old Sally, a girl whom he had known for years, to a play. After the play, Sally met George, a former acquaintance. The two started to talk with affinity and they recalled places they knew and people they were friends with. As a result, you can understand that Holden was not quite happy--perhaps even a little jealous--and deemed their conversation the *phoniest*, that is, most affected one.

To Becoming “Corny”

Since Holden met so many *phonies* or *phony* people in his life, it is imaginable he is not going to have very high opinion of them, so another word he liked to use is *corny*. You know he went to a play with Sally. Actually before the play, when he met Sally in the hall of Radio City, he had a dialogue with her, in which she declared: “Oh, darling. I love you too.” And then, right in the same damn breath, she said, “Promise me you’ll let your hair grow. Crew cuts are getting *corny*. And your hair’s so lovely.” Holden said nothing, but in his mind, he said, “Lovely my ass.” From Holden’s comment, you know that he thought Sally was not only *phony*, but also stupid. As for stupid, Sally’s use of *corny* also indicates stupid and amusing, in an out-of-date or simplistic fashion. On the one hand, she was saying his hair was lovely but, on the other hand, was asking him to change its style because it was not modern and made him look stupid or rustic. Besides, if his hair was not long, what could she see and how could it be lovely anyway?

Yet, the more sarcastic is yet to come. When talking about how bad his school—Pencey Prep in Pennsylvania-- was, Holden mentioned his headmaster, Mr. Thurmer, who would interrupt an on-going parent conversation and then “crack a lot of *corny* jokes.” The problem in Holden’s view is not only the interruption, but also the jokes. They were, obviously, *corny*, that is stupid. Yet, instead of being displeased, the parents would respond by “chuckling and smiling and all, like as if Thurmer was a goddam prince or something.” Here you have the reason why Holden was not happy to be in the school and he was being ordered to leave soon.

Of course, the fact that Holden was critical towards others does not mean he would not do the same to himself. Indeed, he would use *corny* to admit his own stupidity, too. For instance, after he left Pencey, he took a train to New York. On the train, he met the mother of a schoolmate; Holden did not befriend the schoolmate, but he did like the mother. So when the mother recognized that he also came from Pencey, which he hated to be a part of and was leaving in shame, he admitted, “I did have a goddam Pencey sticker on one of my Gladstones. Very *corny*.” It was indeed stupid for him to have a school sticker on his luggage while he did not want to be recognized.

To Acting “Horny”

The last word to be discussed is *horny*. This word has to do with one’s sexual urges, a supposedly strong one. But as you know, in any oral language and particularly very informal conversation, sexual references can be very popular. English is no exception and American native speakers are no exception in fondly referring to it, either. Since we know Holden was a high school dropout, and he was wandering in the streets of New York, afraid of going home to see his mother’s anger and his father’s punishment, it is expected that he told us,

“After a while I sat down in a chair and smoked a couple of cigarettes. I was feeling pretty *horny*. I have to admit it.”

Holden started to think of women, but he was at least honest about he was thinking about them, and that he was occasionally hormone driven or lust motivated when it comes to women.

One interesting note to make about *horny*, sometimes, guys talk about sex, not necessarily because they want to do it, but because they are mentally obsessed with it. They see it everywhere. For instance, after Holden lent his scissors to Ackley—we discussed that part earlier-- He said:

“I sat down in my chair again, and he [Ackley] started to cut his big *horny*-looking nails.”

Here the nails looked *horny*, must because they were dirty, infamous, just as the guy’s private parts are. Of course, the author is also playing with the concept of *horny*. Ackley’s toenails could be horny like the sturdy, erect horn of a rhinoceros. Since other items can be firm and erect like a rhino’s horn, the horny is intentionally used to mean something that resembles a horn, but also to reflect Holden’s fondness for *horny* thoughts of another kind.

Evidently, Holden is not that clean-mouthed youngster. But how many youngsters are one-hundred percent not foul-mouthed? So to mingle with them or to protect yourself, you need to know what they talk and how they talk. And here is the help. All the examples that are chosen into this article are from that famous, really famous American novel entitled *The Catcher in the Rye* by J. D. Salinger, an almost one-book author. The book has been translated into many Chinese versions, so you know how famous it is. Get a copy, read and you will see more uses of these three words. You will be in America, not just the 1940s one, but also the 21st-century’s one because many native speakers still talk the way Holden does. If you are not a book fan, don’t worry. Just stay with us, we will take you to the next three buzz words--*dope*, *dough*, and *lousy* at another time.

Salinger, J. D. *The Cather in the Rye*. NY: Back Bay Books, 1979.