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Learning rope

The Language Matters team appreciates feedback and questions from readers. Sir Bob Jones wrote concerning an expression he heard from a Laotian family member. This person, who I assume was a learner of English, reported to Sir Bob a conversation she had with one of his then teenage sons.

She said his son wanted to “join company and learn rope”. Sir Bob’s question was why friends and colleagues to whom he reported this conversation found the idea of “learning rope” so funny. As he commented, these acquaintances might not have found “sheeps” amusing in the same way.

A major difference between “learning rope” and “sheeps” is that the latter involves applying the general rule “add -s to make plural” to what looks like a singular “sheep”. We might readily accept this overgeneralisation of a rule, because it seems to make sense.

When young children do this, it is actually evidence that they have internalised a rule of grammar, just as when they say “runned” for “ran” or “goed” for “went”. No-one has told them such rules, which they have cleverly worked out for themselves. They then have to sort out when not to apply “add -s for plural” or “add -ed for past tense”; that is, they have to learn the irregular exceptions to the regular pattern.

On the other hand, idiomatic expressions such as “learning the ropes” tend to be fixed, in the sense that changes to their basic grammatical structure seem generally unacceptable. Deviations from the usual form of idioms therefore appear quite odd and can even be amusing.

So even a passive form such as “the ropes were learned by him” would seem unusual, even though making a passive sentence is a very productive sentence construction process in English. “The vocabulary list was learned by the student” as a passive version of “the student learned the vocabulary list” is not odd in the same way.

In the Bob Jones example, “learn rope” does not have the big sentence structure changes that a passive version would have. The article “the” is missing and the noun “rope” should be plural.

These might be characteristic errors from learners of English whose first language might not use articles or plural endings, as with Lao.

The speaker may also be extending a pattern she detected in other expressions using the verb “learn”, such as “learn English” or “learn programming”. Another fact that might also be relevant to the “learning rope” example is an often-reported misinterpretation of “rote learning” as “rope learning”.

Idioms are also fixed in the sense that they cannot be interpreted as a simple combination of the meanings of the component parts, even though their origins may have come from a more literal meaning. So “to learn the ropes” means to learn how a particular job is done, such as through an apprenticeship, and generally involves no ropes at all.

The expression originates in the nautical world, from pre-steam days when an apprentice sailor had to learn how to manage the ropes used to position the sails to catch the wind. Citations in the Oxford English Dictionary suggest that its extension to mean learning how to do other tasks became more common in the mid-19th century.

When language learners, regardless of whether they are learning their first or a subsequent language, do not quite get the form of an idiom right and say someone is going to “learn rope”, it can seem quaint or amusing, but it is just as explicable as when they say they have “runned” after the “sheeps”.

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Can NZ make its own calls on foreign policy?



Donna Miles

Iranian-Kiwi writer based in Christchurch

New Zealand might be a small, remote country with next to no military power, but we are not without international influence.

In fact, what New Zealand says and the way it reacts to world events, in some ways, can leave more of an imprint on people’s global consciousness than the likes of the United Kingdom and United States, whose moral authority in the world has considerably diminished because of their dysfunctional internal politics and hypocritical approach to foreign policy, such as the inconsistent approach towards the invasion of Iraq versus that of Ukraine, and weapon sales to Saudi Arabia.

Of course, having a globally recognised and respected leader also matters. Our prime minister has twice captured the world’s attention, by her incredibly empathetic response to the Christchurch mosque attacks, and by her competent management of the coronavirus pandemic in New Zealand.

But there are more pressing reasons for the increasing involvement of New Zealand in world affairs.

In June, Nato, for the first time, invited a collection of its Asia-Pacific partners, including New Zealand, to discuss global issues in an era of increasing strategic competition.

The invitation was specifically to address the increasing influence of China in the region.

Nato Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg said: “We see a deepening strategic partnership between Moscow

and Beijing. And China’s growing assertiveness and its coercive policies have consequences for the security of allies and our partners.”

China and Russia are also partnering with Iran, as a result of aggressive US sanctions against Iran, which have left the country economically crippled. Ukraine has said Iran is supplying Russia with a large inventory of lethal Iranian-made drones.

Adding to this complicated picture of strategic partnerships are events in the South China Sea, where the construction of artificial islands and increasing militarisation, together with China-Taiwan tensions, are creating real risks to security and peace in the Asia-Pacific region.

For decades, certainly since the

is, of course, highly subjective.

In 1984, it was the people of New Zealand who ultimately decided that becoming nuclear-free was of more overall benefit to the country than remaining in the Anzus alliance, as a close ally of the US.

In July, when Jacinda Ardern spoke at Chatham House during her visit to the UK, this is what she had to say about navigating international challenges:

“We must build and maintain relationships, understand the priorities of others, but speak out openly on our own. And in times of heated diplomacy, we must act on fact, not assumption. Between us, we must pull, on our own terms, in the same direction.”

Ardern also spoke of the importance of the multilateral approach to foreign policy and rightly called for the reform of organisations such as the World Health Organisation, World Trade Organisation and United Nations so that they are more nimble and able to respond more quickly and effectively to serious global issues such as pandemics, climate change and the outbreak of wars.

Having an independent foreign policy, although hard to maintain, certainly has its benefits.

I am convinced New Zealand’s global reputation as an independent and peaceful country played an important role in the safe return of travel influencers Topher Richwhite and Bridget Thackwray, detained in Iran for four months.

Having an independent foreign policy also allows for dialogue and diplomacy, to prevent regional tensions and maintain peace. I fully agree with our prime minister when, as part of her conversation at Chatham House, she said:

“If there’s one lesson from the war in Ukraine, it’s that wars are devastating and never the answer. Let that be the lesson of Ukraine, and make sure that we try and use every diplomatic channel we have to prevent any such repeat, anywhere else in the world.”

What is best for the country is, of course, highly subjective.

1980s nuclear ships stand-off between New Zealand and the United States, our country has prided itself on having an independent foreign policy.

However, as others have argued, our economic dependence on China and security alliance with the US mean that this claim to independence might not be as solid as we assume it to be.

In 2015, John Key justified NZ’s military contribution to the US-led anti-Isis fight in Iraq by interpreting foreign policy independence as national self-interest. At the time he said:

“We have an obligation to support stability and the rule of law internationally. We do not shy away from taking our share of the burden when the international rules-based system is threatened.

“We have carved out our own independent foreign policy over decades, and we take pride in it. We do what is in New Zealand’s best interests.” What is best for the country