



TOPICS

The Dred Scott Decision; the zodiac; to snag versus to hitch; in the moment versus at the moment; I'll tell you something

GLOSSARY

slave – a person who is owned by another person and forced to do work without receiving payment

* Many large farms in the southern United States relied on slaves to work their fields.

free state – a state where slavery was not allowed; a state where African Americans were legally free

* Some slaves traveled hundreds of miles in secret to reach a free state.

to sue – to take someone to court so that a judge or jury can make a legal decision

* Monroe sued the drug company for selling fake drugs.

trigger – an event or thing that causes something else to happen

* The mayor's controversial statements to newspaper reporters triggered an angry response from the townspeople.

to overrule – for a law or decision to be changed or replaced by another, newer law or decision that is more powerful than the original one; for someone in higher authority to change a decision, rule, or policy

* A higher court overruled the lower court's decision in the murder case.

lighter topic – less serious topic

* My father and Uncle Manuel always fight when they start talking about politics, so the family tries to talk only about lighter topics.

zodiac – a circle that shows the positions of the sun, moon, and stars, and that is divided into 12 equal sections

* - What is your sign of the zodiac?
- I'm a Libra.



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astrology – the study of the position of the sun, moon, stars and other things in the sky and their influence on events on Earth

* Neil spent years studying astrology and believes he can predict anyone's future by studying his astrology charts.

trait – personality characteristic, usually of a person

* Carla has very long legs, a common trait among professional ballet dancers.

horoscope – a short prediction or forecast of what will happen in the future

* Vernon believes in astrology and doesn't make any important decisions without first consulting his horoscope.

broad – not specific; general; without details

* Can you give us a broad outline of the speech you'll give tomorrow?

pick-up line – a question or phrase that people use to start a conversation with someone they're interested in romantically or sexually

* Lorenzo always uses the same old pick-up line: "Do you come here often?"

to snag – to get caught on a sharp object that is sticking out of a surface; to get in the way or prevent something from running smoothly

* Nancy's sweater snagged on a nail on the old door.

to hitch – to tie together; to tie a string between two things

* Carlotta hitched a trailer to the back of her truck with all of her belongings when she moved to Florida.

in the moment – being mentally and/or emotionally involved in or a part of something happening now; thinking about the present, not the past or future

* Rami is tired of worrying about what will happen in the future and wants to live in the moment.

at the moment – in the present; at the present time

* At the moment, we don't have any plans to move when we retire.

I'll tell you something – a phrase used when one is about to make a statement or give one's opinion about something

* I'll tell you something: If that old tree in your yard falls down on someone because you refuse to cut it down, you will get the blame.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Polly and Lucy Berry

Many “slave narratives” (stories usually written by former slaves about their life as a slave) were written in the United States in the 1800s, but there are very few “narratives” (stories) written about “freedom suits,” or “lawsuits” (arguments taken to court) in which slaves or former slaves argued against the government or their owners in order to gain their freedom. Lucy Delany’s book From the Darkness Cometh the Light is one example of a story about a successful freedom suit.

From the Darkness Cometh the Light tells the story of how Lucy’s mother, Polly Berry, fought for her own freedom in court from 1839 to 1843. Polly Berry said that she was being held as a slave “illegally” (against the law) in Illinois, a state which had “abolished” (ended) slavery several years before. “Eventually” (after some time), the judge and the court agreed with her and “awarded” (gave) her her freedom, calling her slavery “false imprisonment” (keeping someone in a particular place illegally, not allowing him or her to leave) because Illinois was a free state.

Polly Berry also sued for the freedom of her daughter Lucy. During the time of slavery, the law was that the “condition” (in this case, status as a free person or as a slave) of the child was the same as the condition of the mother. If the mother were a slave, then her children would be slaves as well. In 1844, the court went against this and awarded Lucy her freedom, based on arguments from her mother Polly and that of some very “influential” (important) white members of the government.

After being awarded her freedom, Lucy and her mother filed as “free blacks” (African Americans who were not slaves) and they became paid “seamstresses” (women whose job is to sew clothing). Lucy later wrote her “memoir” (a book in which one tells one’s own life story) under her married name Lucy Delaney. Although there were 301 freedom suits, Lucy’s book was the only one “published” (printed and sold) on this topic, written by a successful former slave.



COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 353.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 353. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California – home of the stars, home of the Dodgers, home of ESL Podcast.

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On this Café, we're going to talk about a very famous U.S. legal case that most Americans are familiar with, at least those that didn't sleep through history class. That would be the Dred Scott Decision. We're also going to talk about the people who were sleeping in history class, the kind of people who are interested in the zodiac; we'll talk about what the zodiac is. And, as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

We begin our Café with something called the Dred Scott Decision. Well, what is this all about, the Dred Scott Decision?

Dred Scott is the name of a man who was a black or African American "slave," a person owned by another person. We have talked about the Civil War and, I believe, Abraham Lincoln before in previous Cafés, Café number 294 for example.

Scott was born in Virginia in 1795, but his owners moved him to many different states. Scott was a slave; he had white slave owners. Some of the states to which the slave owners moved were what we called "free states." In the early part of the 19th century in the United States some states allowed or permitted slavery, others did not. Generally speaking, the states in the southern part of the U.S. allowed slavery, and those in the northern and northeastern parts did not. The ones that did not were called "free states."

At several points in Dred Scott's life he lived in one of these free states or free territories. There were some parts of the United States that were property of the United States but were not yet states; this included the Wisconsin Territory. For a while, Dred Scott lived in a part of the Wisconsin Territory, which is now the State of Minnesota. When Scott was living in one of these free states with his



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owners he could have tried to free himself legally since slavery was illegal, by definition, in a free state, but he didn't. Instead, he waited until 1846, when he was in the State of Missouri, and tried to buy freedom for himself and his family. This was sometimes possible for slaves to buy their freedom. He tried to pay his owner some money so his owner would make him free. His owner, however, refused, so Dred Scott decided to sue. "To sue" (sue), as a verb, means to take someone to court; that is, to go before a judge and say this person has done something wrong to me and he needs to give me something for the wrong that he did. If somebody hits your car and ruins your car – damages your car, and they won't pay for the damage, you can sue them. You can take them to a judge and say this person did something wrong, he needs to pay me money.

Well, Dred Scott sued his owners for his freedom. Well, without going into all of the specifics, eventually this court case – this suit – went all the way to the United States Supreme Court. That's the highest legal authority when it comes to deciding legal cases in the United States.

In 1857, the case, which was known as *Dred Scott v. Sanford*, was decided by the Supreme Court. The decision took place just a few days after then-President Buchanan had become President of the United States. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled or decided that Dred Scott could not sue for his freedom. In fact, it went much further. It said that African Americans, those who were brought to the United States as slaves, did not have the rights of U.S. citizens and were not protected by the United States Constitution, our most important legal document. The court ruled that he was not protected by the Constitution, and therefore could not sue for his freedom. But the Court did something even more than just declare African Americans were not protected by the U.S. Constitution. They declared – they decided – that something called the "Missouri Compromise" was unconstitutional.

Now, we have to go back a little and explain. You'll remember I said that Dred Scott lived for some time in a free territory – the Wisconsin Territory, specifically in the area which is now the State of Minnesota – and one of his reasons for suing was that he had lived in a free territory and therefore he should be free. When Scott sued, he was in the State of Missouri. Missouri was not a free state. Missouri was a slave state, and the reason Missouri was a slave state is related to something that happened, oh, almost 30 years earlier called the "Missouri Compromise" of 1820-1821. What was the Missouri Compromise? Well, a "compromise" is when two people have different opinions and you decide to sort of do something that one person wants and the other person wants; you, we



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might say, meet in the middle. You want 100 dollars, I only want to give you 50 dollars, so we compromise and I pay you 75 dollars.

The Missouri Compromise was about whether a new state that was going to be added to the United States – and remember, the United States was adding new states quite rapidly during the 19th century. The Missouri Compromise said that if we were going to add the State of Missouri as a slave state – because Missouri wanted to be a slave state – we would add another state – in this case the State of Maine – as a free state. And without going, again, into all of the details and specifics, Congress compromised and decided that Maine would become a new state and it would be a free state, and Missouri could become a slave state if it wanted to. It also decided, in the Missouri Compromise, that the territories of the United States – the parts of the United States that were not yet states but were still property of the U.S., including the Wisconsin Territory – would be free territories; there would be no slaveholding – no slavery allowed in the territories.

In the 1857 Dred Scott Decision, the Supreme Court decided that the Missouri Compromise itself was unconstitutional, meaning it went against the basic laws of the United States Constitution. It said that Congress did not have the right to make territories free territories; it did not have the right to restrict slavery in free territories, only states had the right to restrict slavery within their own state. This was a major change, a quite surprising one that really focused people's attention, especially people who were against slavery, people like Abraham Lincoln and other abolitionists, people who wanted to abolish (abolish) or get rid of slavery. The Dred Scott Decision helped make slavery the most important political topic of the late 1850s and of the presidential election of 1860.

The Decision had many other consequences, as well. It was one of the triggers of something called the Panic of 1857. A “trigger” (trigger) is something that makes something else happen. For example, if you don't speak English very well and you move to the United States you may have difficulty communicating, and that could trigger you to go into an ESL class – or, to listen to ESL Podcast! The Dred Scott Decision, some people say, was a trigger for something called the Panic of 1857. “To panic” means to get excited because something terrible has happened and perhaps to do something that is not very wise, something that isn't very smart. Many banks closed after the Panic of 1857 – the financial panic. People thought this was going to be bad for business, and that might be one reason for that particular panic – that particular financial problem.

After the Civil War – of course, the war was won by the northern states, who then decided to make slavery illegal in all parts of the United States. Not surprisingly,



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the U.S. Supreme Court overruled the Dred Scott Decision less than 10 years later, after the Civil War, in 1868. “To overrule” means to change your mind or decide that what somebody else decided was wrong. So, what we have in the United States is a system where one group of judges could decide something is right, but then you go up to a higher level of judges and they decide that no, this is wrong; the higher level of judges overrule the lower level of judges. The Supreme Court sometimes overrules its own decisions. Usually this takes many, many years, sometimes hundreds of years or a hundred years. But in this case it took only nine years, again because the U.S. Constitution had been changed, and it now made slavery illegal.

As for Dred Scott, they received their freedom because some other person bought Dred Scott and his wife and family and gave them their freedom. He received his freedom in 1857. Unfortunately, he died just 18 months later, before the Civil War began, before the rest of African Americans in the United States were given their freedom and their rights as citizens of the U.S.

So, the Dred Scott Decision is a very important decision, not just because of the issue of Dred Scott’s own freedom, but also it was a constitutional issue. It made it necessary for the U.S. Congress to change the Constitution, which is really the only way that you can overrule the Supreme Court. The United States government, as you may know, has different parts; we call them “branches,” like branches of a tree. When the Supreme Court says something is unconstitutional the only real way to change that decision is to change the Constitution itself, and that’s what happened after the Civil War.

Now let’s turn to a little what we may call “lighter topic,” a less serious topic. We’re going to talk about the zodiac. “Zodiac” (zodiac) is a circle that represents the sun’s path across the sky; that is, the way the sun travels overhead. But zodiac, in most people’s mind, really refers to a part of what is called “astrology” (astrology). “Astrology” represents people’s beliefs about how the movement of the sun and the stars and the moon affect what happens on Earth, the way people act, the things that happen to them; all of this is part of the belief of astrology. People who believe in astrology believe that somehow the movements of the stars and the sun and moon and the Earth somehow have an effect on your decisions and what happens to you in life. Don’t confuse this with astronomy (astronomy). “Astronomy” is the scientific study of stars, planets, the sun, and so forth. Astrology is a completely different thing; it’s related to the sun and the planets, but it’s a system of belief or it’s a system which says that these things that happen outside of the Earth are affecting behaviors and actions here on Earth.



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Well, the zodiac, you probably know, is a circle that has 12 different sections in it, and these sections are known as signs, and the year is divided into these 12 signs. Now, it's not one for each month; that is, it's not January is this and June is that. They don't divide up the calendar in exactly the same way as the months divide up the calendar, but there are 12 signs of the zodiac. These signs in English are Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo, Libra, Scorpio, Sagittarius, Capricorn, Aquarius and Pisces. Each of these signs is associated with a symbol and each represents a particular position of the sun in a particular period of time. For example, I was born on September 24th so you could say, if you believed in astrology, that I was born under the sign of Libra. Libra goes from September, I don't know, 23rd-24th to October 23rd.

What does it all mean? Well, to me it doesn't mean anything, but some people who believe in astrology think that knowing your sign – knowing when you were born somehow affects your personality and your interests. There isn't always agreement, however, about what these characteristics – what these "traits" (traits) are. Some people think Libras think analytically, uh, some people think Libras drink too much coffee – my wife thinks that!

Most newspapers carry or print what are called "horoscopes," and you can find these on the Internet as well, of course. A "horoscope" (horoscope) is a prediction about something that will happen in your future. Most of these horoscopes are very "broad," that is, they're not very specific: "Something bad will happen to you today." Well, that's a very broad prediction; lots of things will happen to you today, probably one of them will not be good. So, the horoscopes are written so that they're probably true for almost anyone in any circumstance. But, people who believe in astrology believe that these horoscopes will somehow tell them what they should do in their life today. Most people, I think, who read these do them for fun – for entertainment. They don't really base any serious decisions on them.

Sometimes people will ask other people what their sign is. This is, or I guess used to be popular here in California. I actually know some people who believe in astrology and they would take this quite seriously; they would ask what your sign is. When you say "What is your sign?" you're asking what their zodiac sign is, what part of the year they were born in. For example, I could say, "Libra," and they'd say, "Oh, I knew you were a Libra! You're very analytical, you like to drink coffee, you must be a Libra." The question "What's your sign?" is sometimes used as a joke for a pick-up line. A "pick-up line" is a question that you use to start a conversation with someone you're perhaps romantically interested in.



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You see a beautiful woman sitting at the bar and you go up to her and you say, “What’s your sign?” It’s used as a joke; you wouldn’t actually, gentlemen, want to use that in the real world. People use it as a joke, but I doubt most beautiful women – or any women – would find it very funny.

Now let’s answer some of the questions that you have sent to us.

Our first question comes from Arturo (Arturo) in Spain. Arturo wants to know the difference between “snag” (snag) and “hitch” (hitch). There are some similarities in meaning between these two words, but let’s start with their differences.

“Snag” (snag), as a verb, is when you get something caught in a sharp object. For example, I’m wearing a sweater and there’s a nail that is coming out of the wall, and I’m walking by the wall with my sweater and my sweater gets snagged in the nail, or I snag my sweater with the nail or in the nail. What happens is the nail catches my sweater in such a way that I suddenly have to stop because I can’t move my arm because the sweater has got caught in the nail. I’ve snagged my sweater. As a noun, we use “snag” refer to the little hole in your shirt or your sweater that was made you snagged it on, say, a nail. You may say, “I have a snag in my sweater.” That means I have a little hole in my sweater caused by something that stuck into the sweater and ripped it.

“Hitch” (hitch), as a verb, means to connect usually some form of transportation, like a car or even a horse, to something else that it pulls. We can talk about hitching a horse to a wagon, something that it pulls with wheels. You can hitch a trailer to your car. You can take the car and connect it to another vehicle, in this case a trailer, and you could hitch the trailer to the car and the car would pull the trailer. You can also hitch your dog with a piece of rope, for example, to a pole so the dog doesn’t roll away or walk away – I guess roll away would be sort of weird! Walk away or run away is probably what would happen with your dog, although I don’t know. I don’t like dogs so, um, I’m not really sure what happens with them. It’s not that I don’t like dogs; I don’t like cats, really. But dogs, they’re okay – as long as they stay away from me!

Anyway, “hitch,” then, is this connecting of something to a mode of transportation typically. As a noun, it usually refers to the thing that you use to connect, say, the car to the trailer. A lot of cars, at least in the old days when I was growing up, and they still have these on trucks I think more commonly, but cars had them, too. You could attach a hitch to the back of your car, and you could then use that hitch to hitch a trailer or something else to your car. So, we would use the noun “hitch” “to hitch,” as a verb, the trailer to your car.



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“Hitch” and “snag” also have one similar meaning, which is an unexpected surprise or obstacle or difficulty that might prevent you from doing what you wanted to do. You could say, “There was a hitch in our plans,” meaning there was a problem. We had a plan to do something, and then unexpectedly – surprisingly – we found a problem. You could also say, “There is a snag in our plan.” “There’s a snag in our plan” means there’s an obstacle, there’s something that has gone wrong. A “hitch” can also be just a general difficulty in a situation: “I will give you my car to use tonight, but there’s a hitch,” meaning there’s something else that you have to do, there’s something unexpected that I haven’t told you yet or you don’t know about yet. That can also be a hitch.

Finally, there’s an expression “to get hitched,” and that means to get married: “When did you two get hitched?” I suppose it’s like connecting two animals together; that’s the idea of “hitch,” meaning to get married: “to get hitched.”

Our next question comes from Mehdi (Mehdi) in Iran. The question has to do with two expressions – two phrases: “in the moment” and “at the moment.”

Well, let’s start with “moment.” “Moment” is usually a short period of time – a brief period of time. “I’ll be with you in a moment” means I will be able to talk to you in a very short amount of time: “Please wait, I’ll be with you in a moment.”

There’s also an expression “to be in the moment” – not “a moment” but “the moment.” “To be in the moment” means to be focused and concentrated on what you’re doing right now, what is happening at this very time. This is kind of an expression, not that common in daily conversation, when you may be talking about performing a piece of music or enjoying some particular experience, some pleasant experience that is happening around you. That’s to be in the moment.

The phrase “at the moment” is used to talk about what is happening right now, what event is happening: “At the moment I am talking into a microphone, recording my podcast.” That’s what’s happening right now. “Hopefully, I am in the moment,” meaning I’m focused on what I’m doing and not thinking about those tortilla chips – those corn chips that I have in my kitchen that I want to eat right now because I’m kind of hungry. They’re kind of like a potato chip, but it’s something you would find with Mexican food, at least Mexican food in America. They’re fried pieces of tortilla, a kind of flat bread – anyway, they’re really good! As you can see, I’m not in the moment. I’m not focusing on the question, I’m instead thinking about the tortilla chips!



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Finally, Roman (Roman), who's not from Italy, instead from Ukraine, wants to know the meaning of a phrase or an expression he's heard: "I'll tell you something." "I'll tell you something" is a phrase we use when we are about to give our opinion about something or make usually some sort of strong statement about a situation. "I'll tell you something, if he is not here by 10:00, he's fired. He can no longer work at this company." "I'll tell you something, if the president loses in next election it's not my fault. It's his own fault." That's how we would use that phrase "I'll tell you something," when you're going to give your opinion about something. You're letting the other person know that you are going to give a very honest and sometimes strong opinion.

There's a very similar expression: "I'll tell you one thing." Not "I'll tell you something," but "I'll tell you one thing." "I'll tell you one thing, if he's not here by 10:00, he's fired." We also have another expression, which is "I'll tell you another thing," which, of course, you would say after you've already expressed one strong opinion. "I'll tell you one thing, if he's not here by Friday, he's fired. I'll tell you another thing, his dog is ugly!" You're giving another usually negative or strong opinion about a situation.

If you're confused about something in English at the moment, email us at eslpod@eslpod.com. We'll do our best to answer your question.

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

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