

The Big Freeze

Posted by Peter on 12 January 2010



Our bus fares are now frozen!

For the last two weeks, our newspapers have been full of stories about "the Big Freeze". Like many other places in Europe, the weather in Britain has been very cold. We have had lots of snow, and the roads are covered with ice. There are [shortages](#) of gas, and of salt to put on the roads. As you know, we English love to talk about the weather, or - rather - we love to complain about the weather. So we have had a lot to talk about, and complain about, recently.

When water gets very cold, it "freezes", that is, it turns into ice. "Freeze" is an irregular verb, and I know how much you love irregular verbs! The past tense is "froze" and the past participle is "frozen". "Freezing" and "frozen" can also mean simply "very cold" - we can say that the weather is freezing, or that my fingers or toes are frozen.

When the weather gets warmer, the snow will melt, that is it will turn into water. Another word that we can use is "thaw", which means a slow, gradual melting of the snow and ice. The weather forecast says that the snow in many parts of England will thaw slowly over the next week. Instead of the "Big Freeze", the newspapers will probably have [headlines](#) about the "Big Thaw".

When you visit a city in a foreign country, you can often learn quite a lot about the language of that country by looking at advertisements, or at notices in shop windows, or at the signs on public transport, and trying to translate them. There is a picture on the website and, I hope, on your iPod screens. It is a picture of a Birmingham bus, and on the front of the bus are the words "Our bus fares now frozen".

What does this mean? Well, the bus company should have written "our bus fares are now frozen", but they probably wanted the words to sound like a newspaper headline, and newspapers often leave out words like "is" and "are" in their headlines. But what does it really mean? The heating in British buses is not good, so many of the passengers are frozen, but how can the fares be "frozen"?

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Well, as you probably guessed, "to freeze" can have a [figurative](#) meaning as well as a [literal](#) meaning. Water can move, but when it freezes to become ice, it cannot move. So if we say that something is "frozen", we often mean that it stays the same, it cannot move or change. So, a shop may say that its prices are frozen, meaning that the prices are unchanged. A company may tell its employees that their pay is frozen, in other words that they will not get a pay increase. And if you are very frightened by something, you may be unable to move, and you can say that you are "frozen with fear".

And Birmingham's bus fares? It is a long tradition that the bus company increases its fares every January. Since I arrived in Birmingham 15 years ago, my bus fare into the centre of town has increased by 150%. Train fares throughout Britain also go up in January, every year. It is not surprising that people in this country use their cars so much. But this year is different. This year the bus company has decided not to increase its fares. Its fares are frozen. This is something to be happy about, when we are not complaining about the weather. Of course, the bus fares will not stay frozen for ever. When they go up again, will there be a notice on the buses saying "Our bus fares now unfrozen"? I don't think so.

There is a quiz about irregular verbs on the website. Have fun!

This is the text of the podcast at <http://www.listen-to-english.com/index.php?id=504>.