



American Expression E1008 Speak of the devil

IOTS Publishing Team
International Online Teachers Society
Since 2011

"Speak of the devil" is a commonly used idiom that originates from a superstition or belief that mentioning the name of the devil out loud could attract his attention or presence. The phrase is used to acknowledge the coincidence of someone being mentioned just as they appear or make their presence known. It's often employed humorously or informally in conversations when someone being discussed suddenly enters the scene.

When someone says "speak of the devil," they are essentially acknowledging the serendipity or irony of the situation – the person being discussed showing up unexpectedly. This idiom is often used to lighten the mood and add a touch of playfulness to a conversation.

The phrase is also sometimes extended to include the phrase "and he shall appear," creating the full expression "speak of the devil and he shall appear." This variation further emphasizes the idea that discussing a person's name could lead to their arrival. It's worth noting that the use of "devil" in this context is more colloquial and figurative, rather than invoking any literal supernatural entity.

"Speak of the devil" can be seen as a form of verbal coincidence, where the mere mention of someone's name seems to summon them into the conversation. It adds an element of surprise and unpredictability to everyday interactions. For example, if two friends are talking about a colleague who rarely participates in group outings and that colleague suddenly walks into the room, one might jokingly say, "Speak of the devil!"

The idiom also reflects the human tendency to find patterns and connections in random events. When someone mentioned in conversation coincidentally appears shortly afterward, it can feel like an intriguing alignment of words and actions.

While the phrase is generally used in a light-hearted and humorous context, it's important to consider the feelings of the person who has just entered the scene. Depending on the situation and relationship, using the idiom might be appropriate or could unintentionally cause discomfort.

In conclusion, "speak of the devil" is an idiom that playfully acknowledges the coincidence of someone being discussed just as they appear. It has its roots in a superstition about mentioning the devil's name attracting his presence. The phrase adds an element of surprise and humor to conversations, highlighting the unpredictability of everyday interactions. While lighthearted, it's important to be sensitive to the context and the feelings of those involved when using this idiom.

Questions for Discussion

1. How frequently do you encounter the idiom "speak of the devil" in conversations or media? Can you share a recent example where this expression was used to highlight the coincidence of someone being mentioned and then appearing?
2. What cultural or historical origins might have contributed to the superstition that mentioning the devil's name could attract his attention? How has this superstition evolved into a lighthearted idiom used in everyday language?
3. In what situations do you find the idiom "speak of the devil" most commonly used? How does it add an element of surprise and playfulness to conversations when the person being discussed unexpectedly enters the scene?
4. How does the idiom "speak of the devil" exemplify the human tendency to find patterns and connections in seemingly random events? Can you think of other idiomatic expressions that similarly capture the coincidences and quirks of daily life?
5. While the phrase is generally meant to be humorous, are there situations where using the idiom "speak of the devil" might be inappropriate or uncomfortable? How can we navigate using this expression sensitively, especially in social or professional settings?