

Gyp/gypsy

Gypsy is not an ethnic group but rather a racist slur for people of Romani origin. It originated when white Europeans mistook the Romani people for Egyptians because of their darker colouring. They have been discriminated against for centuries (and still are) and are often unfairly labelled thieves, hence the racist expression “getting gypped” to refer to being cheated.

Hooligan

Now understood to mean “troublemaker” (especially applied to rowdy European football fans), the word hooligan is believed to come from an Irish surname, either Houlihan or O'Hooligan, and was used by the British in the Victorian era as slang for a disreputable Irishman who caused trouble. Characters named Hooligan were stereotypically portrayed in vaudeville shows as drunken, quarreling Irish ruffians.

Sold down the river

People now say this to mean that they feel betrayed or cheated, but it's actually a racist expression stemming from the fact that in the 19th century, American slave owners would often sell “troublesome” or

“misbehaving” slaves to another plantation located further down the Mississippi river, where the living conditions were harsher.

Eskimo

The actual meaning of esquimaux is “one who nets snowshoes,” an accurate way to describe people living in the Arctic region, but many of them consider Eskimo a derogatory term that racist colonizers translated as “eaters of raw meat” (basically, barbarians) or “excommunicati” (the excommunicated, or people who’ve been removed from the Catholic church).

No can do

This short, snappy phrase, often used as a lighthearted negative response to a request, originated as a racist way for people to mock the broken English spoken by Chinese immigrants to America in the early 20th century. So maybe take the extra second and say “I’m sorry, I can’t do that” instead.

Long time no see

Similar to “no can do” and its mocking of Chinese immigrants’ English, the phrase “long time no see” as an alternative to “I haven’t seen you in a long time” began as a racist expression making fun of the pidgin English spoken by native Americans. So classy, right?

Mumbo jumbo

This expression derives from the name of Maamajombo, a character often portrayed by a male dancer in West African Mandinka cultural ceremonies. British explorers in the 1730s got his name wrong and found him terrifying and grotesque and the rituals meaningless, hence the derogatory use of the name to indicate that something is “unintelligible nonsense.”

Off the reservation

Used to imply that someone is out of line or not adhering to the rules of a group to which they belong (like a political party), this expression comes from the fact that Native Americans were confined to reservations (parcels of land allocated to them) and their movements restricted by the U.S. government against their will.

