

Ask about English

Interfere / intervene

A question from Eric Soh in Singapore:

Could you kindly explain what is the difference between interfere and intervene?
Thank you.

Amos Paran answers:

Yes Eric, these two words are similar and yet so different. Both start with 'inter-', meaning 'between'. The difference is in the connotations of the two words.

'Interfere' has very strong negative connotations. There's a wonderful short story by Julian Barnes called 'Interference', in his collection *Cross Channel*, and the title refers to two types of interference which happen in the story.

One type of interference that the title refers to is interference with radio signals - you know, when you're listening to a radio programme and there are other signals and reception is not very good.

The other type of interference is the type where people interfere in other people's business, telling them what to do, how to behave, what to eat and so on. If I say to someone, **Stop interfering** I mean that what I am doing is none of their business. And there's some of that happening in the story too.

'Intervene' has got more positive connotations; it has the connotation of wanting to improve a situation, change things for the better. You intervene between two people in order to prevent a quarrel, for example.

Audio available online at:

www.bbclearningenglish.com/radio/specials/1535_questionanswer

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