

Keep your English up to date

Happy-clappy

Professor David Crystal

This is one of those reduplicated words, where the two words are almost the same, but they just change one little part: change the vowel, or change the consonants in this particular case - usually the consonant at the front, like "willy-nilly" - and "Ping-Pong" is one where the vowel changes.

Well 'happy-clappy' came in in the, oh 1980s I suppose, referring to a member of usually a Christian charismatic group, characterised by enthusiastic handclapping and a very extrovert emotion, set of emotions being expressed – but it isn't restricted to that. I've heard it used in all sorts of other contexts as well. It's a mildly mocking word. If somebody says that somebody is 'happy-clappy', there's a sort of feeling of distaste about it.

And the thing is, that the idea has moved beyond the religious circumstance now. It refers to anybody showing some kind of extrovert emotion, some kind of rather superficial feeling very often. You might say of somebody "he's got a very happy-clappy attitude". It means he's just producing his emotions without much thought all the time. So anybody who gets very enthusiastic and suddenly becomes a little over the top... starts to act out something... I'm now getting very happy-clappy about all this... 'cos I'm so happy to be on the radio, and now ... well, this isn't really very appropriate for the BBC, is it?

