

# Keep your English up to date

## Bless

Professor David Crystal



There's quite a range of explanations using 'bless' in English, all originally from the religious use of the word. 'Bless you!' somebody says after a sneeze. 'Ah! Bless my soul!' - a rather older fashioned one. 'Bless you!'

An interesting one is, 'Bless your heart!' used mainly by adults talking down - 'Ah! Bless your heart!' - to a child. And in the 1990s, this remarkable use, the verb by itself, usually preceded by the interjection, 'Ah!' - 'Ah! Bless!' - that sort of use. Notice the tone of voice there.

I heard it when a little child had a cat snuggling up to her and the parent said, 'Ah! Bless!' And then the child hurt her finger, 'Ah! Bless!' People at the zoo, looking at penguins, 'Ah! Bless! Isn't it sweet!'

Of course, when you get a usage like that it can get ironic very quickly. A politician now in parliament complains of harsh treatment and somebody says, 'Ah! Bless! Isn't it sad that he's so upset!' Or somebody's really trying to do something but not succeeding, 'Ah! Bless!' once again.

It's a general expression of indulgent sympathy - 'Isn't that sweet?' - always with that distinctive tone of voice, always a hint of talking down. Never, never, never, use it to your boss, not if you want to keep your job!



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