

Oxford English Dictionary | The definitive record of the English language

embarrassment, *n.*

Pronunciation: Brit. /ɪmˈbærəsm(ə)nt/, /ɛmˈbærəsm(ə)nt/,

U.S. /əmˈberəsmənt/, /ɛmˈberəsmənt/

Forms:

α. 16 **embarrasement**, 16 **embarrassment**, 16 **embarrasment**, 16 **embarrassement**, 16–17 **embarasment**, 16– **embarrassment**, 19– **embarrishment** (*U.S. regional (south.)*).

β. 16 **imbarasment**.

Frequency (in current use):

Origin: Formed within English, by derivation; modelled on a French lexical item. **Etymons:** EMBARRASS *v.*, -MENT *suffix*.

Etymology: < EMBARRASS *v.* + -MENT *suffix*, perhaps originally after French (now regional: Walloon) *embarrasement* (late 16th cent. or earlier in Middle French).

Compare Spanish (rare) †*embarazamiento* pain, discomfort (first half of the 17th cent.; apparently only in medical contexts).

Compare earlier EMBARRAS *n.*, and also earlier EMBARRASS *v.*

In sense 1a after Italian †*imbarazzamento* (a1527 in Machiavelli, in the passage translated in quot. 1680; rare).

In sense 1d after French *embarras de richesse* EMBARRAS DE RICHESSE *n.*

1.

a. Something (material or immaterial) which is a hindrance or encumbrance; an impediment, obstruction, or obstacle; a difficulty, a problem. Now *rare*.

1676 E. COLES *Eng. Dict.* *Embarasment*, a perplexing, intangling, hindering.

1680 H. NEVILLE tr. Machiavelli *Hist. Florence* v. in tr. Machiavelli *Wks.* (new ed.) The trenches, and *embarrasments* [It. *imbarazzamenti*] were not finished.

1694 E. CALAMY *Funeral Serm. Samuel Stephens* 20 We have no need therefore to be in love with Clogs, Impediments, and *Embarrasments*, as too too many seem to be.

1726 BP. J. BUTLER *15 Serm.* iii. 50 *Embarrasments*,..hindering us from going the nearest Way to our own Good.

1751 JOHNSON *Rambler* No. 159. ¶6 Diffidence..compensates its *embarrasments* by more important advantages.

1810 DUKE OF WELLINGTON *Dispatches* (1838) V. 515 The baggage of the British army is always an *embarrassment*.

1845 *Defiance (Ohio) Democrat* 10 July 2/2 This is the pioneer rail road in Indiana, and..hampered

with unusual difficulties and embarrassments.

- 1873 M. ARNOLD *Lit. & Dogma* vi. 152 The futility of such demonstrations..begins..to be felt by them [sc. readers] as an embarrassment to the cause of Jesus, not a support.
- 1915 *Virginia Law Rev.* 2 279 The embarrassments and entanglements of compulsory statutory procedure.

b. The fact or condition of being hindered; encumbrance; difficulty, trouble. Now *rare*.

- 1689 *Full & True Rel. Death K. James 2* He made many demurrs and delays; occasion'd..from the Embarrasment and Encumbrance of his own Affairs at home.
- 1757 *Gentleman's Mag.* May 238/1 The letters from Westphalia take notice of the great embarrassment of the French army there for want of provisions and forage.
- 1798 G. VANCOUVER *Voy. Discov. N. Pacific Ocean* II. IV. v. 359 To add to our embarrassment, the launch was yet too far distant to afford us any immediate succour.
- 1817 W. KIRBY & W. SPENCE *Introd. Entomol.* II. xxvii. 521 [The wasp] deliberately sawed off first one wing [of a fly] and then the other; and having thus removed the cause of its embarrassment, flew off with its booty.
- 1905 *Spectator* 7 Oct. 512/2 She [sc. Russia] replied to us by threatening India, and causing us the maximum of embarrassment on our North-West Frontier.

c. A state of financial difficulty; shortage of money. Frequently in *pl*.
Now chiefly with modifying adjective, as *financial*, *monetary*.

- 1727 N. BAILEY *Universal Etymol. Eng. Dict.* II *Lurching*, leaving a Person under some embarrassment.
- 1760 C. JOHNSTONE *Chrysal* II. xii. 106 Your finances are in the lowest state of embarrassment.
- 1777 R. WATSON *Hist. Reign Philip II (index)* His expedient to free himself from his pecuniary embarrassments.
- 1800 W. SHORT *Let.* 18 Sept. in T. Jefferson *Papers* (2005) XXXII. 149 The embarassment of the Spanish finances will..oblige them to fiscalize on every article that commands money.
- 1849 MACAULAY *Hist. Eng.* II. 65 In the hope of extricating himself from his embarrassments.
- c1850 *Arabian Nights* (Rtldg.) 354 The embarrassment of Nouredin's affairs.
- 1880 L. STEPHEN *Alexander Pope* vi. 139 He managed to run through a splendid fortune and die in embarrassment.
- 1922 *Writer* Jan. 13/1 Be careful about reporting business failures or embarrassments.
- 1956 *Clearing House* 31 100/2 Such problems as personal illness, monetary embarrassment, and homesickness.
- 1970 *Life* 27 Mar. 58/2 The credit card is inflationary... It is expensive... It can still lead to hideous embarrassments if lost.
- 2003 R. SERVICE *Hist. Mod. Russia* (2005) ii. 31 There were bankruptcies and other financial embarrassments among industrialists.

d. The state of having an (overwhelming or encumbering) excess or abundance of wealth, resources, options, etc.; such an excess or abundance. Esp. in **embarrassment of riches** and **an embarrassment of choice**. Cf. EMBARRAS DE RICHESSE *n.* and EMBARRAS DE CHOIX *n.*

- 1815 in D. Defoe *Robinson Crusoe* (new ed.) 240 (*note*) A very familiar acquaintance with this portion of the coast..is productive of such a redundancy of local information, as to render a choice what is sometimes expressed by the phrase, 'embarrassment of riches'.
- 1840 *Naut. Standard & Steam Navigation Gaz.* 12 June. 355/1 The only difficulty is the embarrassment of choice, and the wish of selecting objects which may combine utility with embellishment.
- 1860 *Chambers's Edinb. Jrnl.* 7 Apr. 220/2 (*title*) An embarrassment of suitors.
- 1902 *Rev. of Reviews* Nov. 467 The task of selecting cartoons for reproduction grows more difficult every year from the embarrassment of riches.
- 1932 *Blockton (Iowa) News* 21 Dec. 4/6 If you go into almost any grocery store..you will find that you have an embarrassment of choice.
- 1987 *Times* 20 Oct. 30/5 Perhaps all it needs is for the City's bubble to burst, and the Treasury would find itself with an embarrassment of talent.
- 2008 A. HOUSTON *Benjamin Franklin & Politics of Improvement* iii. 122 If a growing population was the key to prosperity, then by the middle of the eighteenth century the Anglo-American world suffered from an embarrassment of riches.

2.

a. The fact or condition of being perplexed or confused; hesitation in judgement or action; confusion; uncertainty. Now *rare*.

- 1721 S. LOWE (*title*) A new method of learning Latin with extraordinary ease and expedition; and without any perplexity or embarasment.
- 1753 *Hist. Betty Barnes* II. v. x. 114 She both wished and dreaded the return of her lover. While her mind was in this state of embarrassment, she received a Letter from Mrs. Granville.
- 1780 *Compan. for Christian in Field & Garden* 105 Which Distinctions..may possibly release the Mind from much Embarrassment, which the Confusion or Misapplication of the Term [*sc.* 'grace'] has sometimes occasioned.
- 1874 J. MORLEY *On Compromise* 66 Any embarrassment in dealing with it [*sc.* false doctrine]..is a weakness that hinders social progress.
- 1907 *Amer. Law Reg.* 55 389 The reader's embarrassment is reduced to a minimum by the happy choice of broad and unmistakable English equivalent[s] [to German technical terms].

†**b.** Confusion of thought or expression; obscurity. *Obs.*

- 1751 JOHNSON *Rambler* No. 169. ¶13 He seldom suspects his thoughts of embarrassment.

- 1783 H. BLAIR *Lect. Rhetoric* I. x. 186 We are pleased with an author..who carries us through his subject without any embarrassment or confusion.
- 1871 T. R. R. STEBBING *Ess. Darwinism* p. iii Observations and experiments..are brought to bear upon the subject without confusion of thought or embarrassment of style.

3.

a. Intense emotional or social discomfort caused by an awkward situation or by an awareness that one's own or another's words or actions are inappropriate or compromising, or that they reveal inadequacy or foolishness; awkwardness, self-consciousness. (Now the usual sense.)

Frequently associated with particular bodily reactions, and expressed in terms of e.g. blushing (cf. quotes. 1863, 1947), squirming (cf. quot. 1911), or wincing (cf. quot. 2008) *with* embarrassment.

Typically distinguished from *shame* in being caused by something that is socially awkward or inappropriate rather than morally wrong or debasing.

In early use sometimes difficult to distinguish from sense 2a.

- 1751 *London Mag.* Apr. 198/2 She pretended to be with child by him... She brought a man whom she called uncle, to add weight to her threats; and these violent proceedings threw Mr. Baker under great embarrassment. He always was extremely tender of his reputation with the world.
- 1777 E. BURKE *Speech Electors Bristol* in *Polit. Tracts* 347 If my real, unaffected embarrassment prevents me from expressing my gratitude to you as I ought.
- 1828 SCOTT *Fair Maid of Perth* vi, in *Chron. Canongate* 2nd Ser. I. 148 Henry Smith remained with Catharine,..entirely alone. There was embarrassment on the maiden's part, and awkwardness on that of the lover.
- 1852 H. B. STOWE *Uncle Tom's Cabin* I. v. 55 'Is he a negro-trader?' said Mrs. Shelby, noticing a certain embarrassment in her husband's manner.
- 1863 'G. ELIOT' *Romola* I. viii. 152 Ready speech that prevents a blush from looking like embarrassment.
- 1911 W. S. CHURCHILL *Let.* 22 Apr. in W. S. Churchill & C. S. Churchill *Speaking for Themselves* (1999) iii. 43 On Thursday the P.M. was vy bad: & I squirmed with embarrassment.
- 1947 C. MACKENZIE *Whisky Galore* i. 4 The bank agent's complexion grew darker with embarrassment.
- 1949 *Life* 8 Aug. 92/1 (*advt.*) Tampax is only one-ninth the bulk of sanitary napkins. Think what they may save you in embarrassment when it's time for disposal!
- 1980 M. H. HEIM tr. M. Kundera *Bk. Laughter & Forgetting* VII. xii. 219 When they realized the speaker was addressing his tirade right at them, they lowered their eyes in embarrassment.
- 2008 *Daily Tel.* 5 June 23/1 Those..who cringe to recall the tank-tops and loons or wince with embarrassment at old photographs of mullets and sideburns.

b. A person who or thing which causes someone to experience feelings of awkwardness, self-consciousness, or intense emotional or social discomfort.

- 1873 *Once a Week* 17 Aug. 183/1 If my presence is an embarrassment to you, you will write, perhaps?
- 1893 tr. *Human Comedy* I. vi. 318/1 Augustine brought..into this intellectual society a spirit of distrust which escaped no one. She was an embarrassment. Embarrassed artists are merciless; they either fly or scoff.
- 1926 *Davenport (Iowa) Democrat & Leader* 11 Nov. 2/7 (adv.) They're gone! Those unsightly, annoying pimples that were such an embarrassment to you.
- 1966 *Edwardsville (Illinois) Intelligencer* 26 Jan. 5/3 I took her out last night and she is an embarrassment. She is loud, smokes continuously and shuffles lazily along instead of walking.
- 1980 A. TYLER *Morgan's Passing* 281 Uncle Owen was such an embarrassment, they sent him off to America.
- 2004 K. SCHUTT *Florida* 48 Mother was an embarrassment.., a woman in a sweater dress and white bubble wig.

c. With reference to an organization, government, person, etc.: the fact or condition of being made to appear incompetent, inadequate, or less worthy of respect. Also as a count noun: a cause of such humiliation. Frequently with *to* or *for*.

- 1897 W. MCKINLEY *Message President U.S. to Congr.* 7 No solution was proposed to which the slightest idea of humiliation to Spain could attach, and indeed precise proposals were withheld to avoid embarrassment to that Government.
- 1916 *Amer. Year Bk. 1915* i. 74/2 An investigation of charges of incompetency..brought to light an incident touching executive patronage which proved to be a political embarrassment to Mr. Wilson's Administration.
- 1932 *Times* 11 Apr. 5/3 The speed and trickiness of J. Crawford and G. D. McKenzie on the wings was going to be a source of considerable embarrassment to the Corinthian defence before the afternoon was over.
- 1951 *Jrnl. Royal Aeronaut. Soc.* **55** 526/2 To avoid embarrassment to the pilot, the sudden increase of power on the wave-off signal should not be accompanied by violent changes of trim.
- 1984 *Mother Jones* Nov. 9/1 Polling organizations try to protect themselves from possible embarrassment by using a number of statistical safeguards and alibis.
- 1990 *Guardian* 5 Dec. 1/2 Mr. Kruger's visit must have been an embarrassment to the Government.
- 2012 *Huddersfield Daily Examiner* (Nexis) 14 July (Business section) 27 The trading losses are an embarrassment for the bank that came through the 2008 financial crisis in much better health than its peers.

