

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #060

The British Sense of Humour

05 June, 2020

[00:00:04] Hello hello, hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English, the show where you can listen to interesting stories and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:22] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about the British sense of humour.

[00:00:30] As you probably know, the British sense of humour is a bit, well different.

[00:00:38] Today we are going to discuss what makes it different, the things that make up British humour, and of course you'll hear a few jokes along the way.

[00:00:50] It's going to be quite a fun one, and [dare I say it¹](#), it could even be funny too.

[00:00:57] Before we get right into that though, I just want to remind those of you listening to the podcast on your favourite podcast app that you can get all of the bonus member-only episodes plus transcripts, key vocabulary, access to live Q and A sessions, and much more over on the website, which is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:19] If you are listening to these podcasts with the objective of improving your English, then I definitely recommend checking out the website, not just because we have all of that great extra content and learning materials on it, but also because there are all sorts of guides and articles on how to improve your English using podcasts.

[00:01:43] So if that sounds like something you'd be interested in and it certainly sounds good to me, then the link to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:54] Okay then, let's get started.

[00:01:57] If you are a new listener and you can't tell from my accent, I'm British.

[00:02:04] I've lived in lots of different countries and have friends from all over the world.

[00:02:10] And this has led me to the conclusion that the British sense of humour is firstly an [acquired taste²](#), but secondly is indeed superior.

¹ used to say that you agree or think that something is true

² something that you may not like at first, but begin to like after you have tried it

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[00:02:22] Okay, I'm joking, but not really.

[00:02:26] The British sense of humour is peculiar.

[00:02:29] It's strange.

[00:02:30] And if you haven't really lived in the UK or you don't have British friends, then it can be quite difficult to understand, or at least you probably will just find British people weird if you don't know that they are joking.

[00:02:50] So what we will do in today's episode is talk about what makes up British humour.

[00:02:57] We'll go over the different types of humour that you might [encounter](#)³ in Britain, and afterwards you can decide whether you think it's actually funny.

[00:03:08] To begin with in Britain, we laugh at pretty much everything.

[00:03:13] There is not really much that is [off-limits](#)⁴ and even the things that are [off-limits](#), things that are considered too bad or sensitive to joke about, we joke about the fact that they are [off-limits](#).

[00:03:30] Laughing about a tragic set of circumstances is a [quintessentially](#)⁵ British thing to do.

³ a meeting, especially one that happens by chance

⁴ If an area of land is off-limits, you are not allowed to enter it

⁵ in a way that is the most typical example or most important part of something

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[00:03:38] And while in some other cultures this would be completely [taboo⁶](#), completely forbidden, as long as it's clear that it's a joke there are few things that are actually properly [off-limits](#).

[00:03:54] I'll talk about some of the different types of humour that you'll be likely to [encounter](#) in a minute.

[00:04:00] But let's just first touch on two of the [key⁷](#) themes that exist in almost all British humour.

[00:04:09] First, sarcasm.

[00:04:12] Now sarcasm, if you don't know what this word means, is defined as the use of [irony⁸](#) to [mock⁹](#) or [convey¹⁰ contempt¹¹](#), to make fun.

[00:04:24] It's generally when you say something that is obviously the opposite of what you actually mean.

⁶ a subject, word, or action that is avoided for religious or social reasons

⁷ very important

⁸ a situation in which something which was intended to have a particular result has the opposite or a very different result

⁹ to laugh at someone, often by copying them in a funny but unkind way

¹⁰ to express a thought, feeling, or idea so that it is understood by other people

¹¹ a strong feeling of disliking and having no respect for someone or something

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[00:04:32] An example you might hear would be someone saying, "no shit, Sherlock" if someone else said something very obvious.

[00:04:42] The idea here is that they are calling you Sherlock Holmes, a famous detective, despite you pointing out something that was very obvious.

[00:04:52] So that is sarcasm.

[00:04:54] Brits are famously sarcastic and it's sometimes difficult for foreigners to understand when we are joking or not.

[00:05:05] My wife is Italian, and when we first started dating, she made me a lovely meal.

[00:05:11] I can't remember exactly what it was, but it was some delicious Italian dish, some sort of pasta, I think.

[00:05:18] When she brought out, I asked her whether she minded me putting tomato ketchup on top, which was sarcasm, of course, because it was very tasty and tomato ketchup would definitely have ruined it, at least in her opinion - putting something like tomato ketchup on pasta is almost a [cardinal sin](#)¹² in Italy.

[00:05:42] Anyway, I thought it was pretty funny, she obviously thought it was funny enough to eventually marry me, but it definitely took her awhile to understand.

[00:05:53] So watch out for sarcastic Brits.

¹² a very bad crime

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[00:05:56] If someone says something that seems unbelievable, they may well be joking.

[00:06:03] Secondly, a quality that is very common in British humour is [self-deprecation](#)¹³, of putting yourself down.

[00:06:12] What I mean by this is making fun of yourself.

[00:06:17] In lots of cultures, this really isn't something that is often done as it's seen as a sign of weakness.

[00:06:26] Not in Britain.

[00:06:27] There's nothing that we like doing more than making fun of ourselves, and it's one of the most common forms of humour that you will find in Britain.

[00:06:39] You might hear a Brit saying, "God, I'm good at this", if they mess something up or do badly, or just talking about something embarrassing that they have done.

[00:06:51] Again, this might seem strange in lots of cultures, but it is a [crucial](#)¹⁴ part of British humour.

[00:07:00] Another important [aspect](#)¹⁵ of British humour is the delivery of the joke itself.

¹³ the quality of trying to make yourself, your abilities, or your achievements seem less important

¹⁴ extremely important or necessary

¹⁵ one part of a situation, problem, subject, etc.

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[00:07:07] It's important, [vital](#)¹⁶ even, to deliver it with a [straight face](#)¹⁷, to not laugh.

[00:07:15] If you laugh when you're delivering a joke, you've failed, or you're American.

[00:07:22] It's almost like it's a competition.

[00:07:24] The person hearing the joke first has to laugh and only then are you allowed to laugh.

[00:07:32] Or if you are being very British, nobody laughs, there's just a [mutual understanding](#)¹⁸ that it was a joke, it was funny, but that there's no need to physically express your [amusement](#)¹⁹.

[00:07:47] For people used to American culture, this is a big difference.

[00:07:53] While with lots of American comedy TV shows, for example, there is a [laughter track](#)²⁰, there is the noise of people laughing whenever there is a joke, in the UK, it is pretty rare for TV shows to have a laughter track, especially in the past 20 years or so.

¹⁶ necessary for the success or continued existence of something; extremely important

¹⁷ a serious expression on your face that you use when you do not want someone to know that you think something is funny

¹⁸ common understanding or agreement

¹⁹ the feeling of being entertained or made to laugh

²⁰ a separate soundtrack for a recorded comedy show containing the sound of audience laughter

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[00:08:15] There's normally no sign, no signal, about what is a joke or not.

[00:08:23] This is especially true with some of the most famous comedies from recent decades - almost nobody laughs [on screen](#)²¹ ever.

[00:08:34] Another [component](#)²² of the British sense of humour is laughing about the most [mundane](#)²³, normal things.

[00:08:41] Laughing about people's day to day lives, [poking fun at](#)²⁴ people's day to day lives, about how painfully boring and ordinary they are.

[00:08:54] Some great examples of this in recent years are shows like Peep Show, Gavin and Stacey and The Office.

[00:09:04] Now, if I were to describe to you what happens in these shows, you would probably think they sound incredibly boring and not funny at all.

[00:09:15] Let's just try.

[00:09:17] So Peep Show is about two university friends who are both unhappy in different ways and spend their days either doing jobs they hate or doing nothing.

²¹ used to refer to something or someone seen or appearing on a television or computer screen

²² a part that combines with other parts to form something bigger

²³ very ordinary and therefore not interesting

²⁴ making fun of

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[00:09:30] Gavin and Stacey is about the relationships between a series of characters in South Wales and East England who just travel back and forth between the two places and don't really do very much at all.

[00:09:46] And The Office is about people who work in a paper company, in a town outside London who all hate their jobs.

[00:09:56] I guess that none of these [storylines](#)²⁵ sound particularly exciting, but they are, and not just in my opinion, some of the funniest and most popular comedy series over the past 20 years.

[00:10:10] Why?

[00:10:11] Well, partly because a huge part of British humour is about laughing about the [monotony](#)²⁶ of our lives, and laughing at ourselves.

[00:10:23] You don't need to be telling [elaborate](#)²⁷ jokes or going on huge adventures to be funny in British humour, you just need to be yourself.

²⁵ (in a book, film, play, etc.) the plot (= the series of events that happen in it)

²⁶ a situation in which something stays the same and is therefore boring

²⁷ containing a lot of careful detail or many detailed parts

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[00:10:33] Another big [component](#) of British humour, which is not as unique to British humour as the previous things I've mentioned, but is something we do a lot in Britain, is the use of [innuendo](#)²⁸ and [double-entendre](#)²⁹.

[00:10:50] Innuendo is when you see something that [alludes](#)³⁰ to or hints at something else, often something sexual or unpleasant.

[00:11:00] In fact, there are entire British comedy series that rely completely almost on innuendo, the most famous one is probably a series called the Carry On series, which came out in the late 1950s.

[00:11:17] So if you want to see some classic British innuendo, most of it sexual, actually, then I definitely recommend checking out the Carry On series.

[00:11:30] So we've had sarcasm, [self-deprecation](#), [deadpan delivery](#)³¹ of jokes, laughing about boring, normal life, and innuendo - these are some of the classic things that you will find in almost all British comedy, and you'll see coming out in the British sense of humour.

²⁸ (the making of) a remark or remarks that suggest something sexual or something unpleasant but do not refer to it directly

²⁹ a word or phrase that might be understood in two ways, one of which is usually sexual

³⁰ to mention someone or something in a brief or indirect way

³¹ looking or seeming serious when you are telling a joke

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[00:11:54] One other thing that British people love to joke about is [stereotypes](#)³² about people from different parts of Britain.

[00:12:03] Again, this isn't unique to Britain, of course.

[00:12:07] All countries, no matter how small, tend to have different [stereotypes](#) about people from different areas, but Britain is no exception.

[00:12:17] The difference with Britain, or rather the UK, is that it's formed of four different countries, England, Scotland, Wales, and Northern Ireland.

[00:12:29] And there are [stereotypes](#) about people from all of these areas.

[00:12:35] A classic joke is the [format](#)³³ of having one person from three of these countries with the obvious [stereotypes](#) about characteristics of people from these places.

[00:12:48] So normally there is an Englishman, a Scotsman, and an Irishman or any mixture of people from the four countries.

[00:12:56] They usually enter a bar, the first two say something, then the third one does something that displays some [stereotypical](#) behaviour.

[00:13:07] And obviously these [stereotypes](#) depend on where you come from.

³² a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong

³³ a pattern, plan, or arrangement

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[00:13:12] In England, at least there is the [stereotype](#) that Irish people are not particularly clever, and in fact, there's exactly the same [stereotype](#) with Irish people, that the English are stupid.

[00:13:26] A [stereotype](#) of the Scottish is that they are quite tight with money and like to make money like to do business.

[00:13:35] And there are some quite impolite [stereotypes](#) relating to the Welsh and their love for sheep.

[00:13:43] And for all four nations, there is the [stereotype](#) that they like to drink, which for those of you that have spent time in any British city on a Friday night, you probably think that there is truth behind every [stereotype](#).

[00:14:00] So here's an example of one of these jokes.

[00:14:03] Two Englishman, two Irishman and two Scotsmen are [shipwrecked](#)³⁴ on a desert island.

[00:14:11] Within a month, the Irishmen are whiskey, the Scots are selling it at their pub, and the Englishman are drinking on opposite sides of the bar because they haven't yet been properly introduced.

[00:14:26] Do you get it?

³⁴ an accident in which a ship is destroyed or sunk at sea, especially by hitting rocks, or a ship that has been destroyed or sunk in such an accident

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[00:14:28] Generally a good joke is a joke that you don't have to explain, but I will just explain this one here.

[00:14:33] Obviously it's playing on the [stereotypes](#) that the Irishman like to drink, the Scots are entrepreneurial and like making money and that English people are [shy](#)³⁵ and antisocial.

[00:14:45] I should point out, of course, that British humour isn't all the same.

[00:14:50] There are some big regional differences and you won't find exactly the same kind of jokes in Glasgow as you would in London or Birmingham as you would in Belfast, but these are some of the main [traits](#)³⁶, the main characteristics, that you will see across a lot of British humour.

[00:15:11] I'm [biased](#)³⁷ here, of course, but I'd definitely say it is one of the more sophisticated senses of humour.

[00:15:19] It does take awhile to get used to, and it is very different to the sense of humour that exists in lots of other countries, but I would say that it is worth the time.

[00:15:31] Especially if you want to be able to hold a conversation with a British person in an informal setting, it's important to know a bit about their sense of humour.

³⁵ nervous and uncomfortable with other people

³⁶ a particular characteristic that can produce a particular type of behaviour

³⁷ showing an unreasonable like or dislike for a person based on personal opinions

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[00:15:43] And if they start joking with you or if they start playing jokes on you, well then you know the conversation is going to go well.

[00:15:54] Okay then, that is it for today's episode on the British sense of humour.

[00:16:00] I hope it has been an interesting one and it has helped explain some of the strange [aspects](#) of this weird sense of humour.

[00:16:10] I'm going to leave some links in the show notes with some classic examples of British humour, and I will leave you to enjoy those at your leisure.

[00:16:20] As a word of warning, they do rely on a lot of wordplay and [innuendo](#), but there are a lot of pretty great jokes in there.

[00:16:30] As one final reminder, if you aren't looking for all of the bonus episodes the transcripts, key vocabulary, exclusive live question and answer sessions and more, then the place to go to is Leonardoenglish.com.

[00:16:46] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds by Leonardo English.

[00:16:51] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word

Definition

Dare I say it

used to say that you agree or think that something is true

Acquired taste

something that you may not like at first, but begin to like after you have tried it

Encounter

a meeting, especially one that happens by chance

Off-limits

If an area of land is off-limits, you are not allowed to enter it

Quintessentially

in a way that is the most typical example or most important part of something

Taboo

a subject, word, or action that is avoided for religious or social reasons

Key

very important

Irony

a situation in which something which was intended to have a particular result has the opposite or a very different result

Mock

to laugh at someone, often by copying them in a funny but unkind way

Convey

to express a thought, feeling, or idea so that it is understood by other people

Contempt

a strong feeling of disliking and having no respect for someone or

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something

Cardinal sin

a very bad crime

Self-deprecation

the quality of trying to make yourself, your abilities, or your achievements seem less important

Crucial

extremely important or necessary

Aspect

one part of a situation, problem, subject, etc.

Vital

necessary for the success or continued existence of something; extremely important

Straight face

a serious expression on your face that you use when you do not want someone to know that you think something is funny

Mutual understanding

common understanding or agreement

Amusement

the feeling of being entertained or made to laugh

Laughter track

a separate soundtrack for a recorded comedy show containing the sound of audience laughter

On screen

used to refer to something or someone seen or appearing on a television or computer screen

Component

a part that combines with other parts to form something bigger

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Mundane	very ordinary and therefore not interesting
Poking fun at	making fun of
Storylines	(in a book, film, play, etc.) the plot (= the series of events that happen in it)
Monotony	a situation in which something stays the same and is therefore boring
Elaborate	containing a lot of careful detail or many detailed parts
Innuendo	(the making of) a remark or remarks that suggest something sexual or something unpleasant but do not refer to it directly
Double-entendre	a word or phrase that might be understood in two ways, one of which is usually sexual
Alludes	to mention someone or something in a brief or indirect way
Deadpan delivery	looking or seeming serious when you are telling a joke
Stereotypes	a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong
Format	a pattern, plan, or arrangement
Shipwrecked	an accident in which a ship is destroyed or sunk at sea, especially by hitting rocks, or a ship that has been destroyed or sunk in such an accident

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Shy

nervous and uncomfortable with other people

Traits

a particular characteristic that can produce a particular type of behaviour

Biased

showing an unreasonable like or dislike for a person based on personal opinions

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What did you struggle to understand?

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