

ENGLISH LEARNING FOR CURIOUS MINDS



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Episode #359

The Evolution of "Woke"

18th Apr, 2023

[00:00:00] **Alastair Budge:**

[00:00:05] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:12] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge, and today we are going to be talking about a word.

[00:00:26] I think this is the first time we've ever actually done this, focussed only on a single word, but there are few words in modern English that [arouse](#)¹ such passion and create such division, few words that have been [weaponised](#)² in such a short period of time.

¹ cause

² used for the purpose of attacking a person or group

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[00:00:43] And that word is “woke”.

[00:00:47] To those who [embrace](#)³ the word, it means being aware of social injustice, aware of discrimination, understanding that the world is structured in an unfair way, and being prepared to do something about it.

[00:01:00] But to its [detractors](#)⁴, its critics, it’s an insult, it’s used to describe someone who is [virtue signalling](#)⁵, claiming to be morally better than other people, and is not prepared to listen to any other point of view.

[00:01:16] So, in this episode we are going to explore the evolution of this word, a word that is more than a word, actually, it’s a state of mind, a [shorthand](#)⁶ for a whole set of values and attitudes, which are either [espoused](#)⁷ [vigorously](#)⁸ by the believer or [despised](#)⁹ by its [adversaries](#)¹⁰.

[00:01:36] Ok then, let’s get right into it and look at the evolution of woke.

³ take in, use

⁴ critics

⁵ trying to show that they are good people

⁶ a short or quick way to express them

⁷ supported, adopted

⁸ in a lively or energetic way

⁹ not liked at all

¹⁰ enemies

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[00:01:42] Now, if we are going to spend an entire episode talking about a word, we should first define what that word means, and the first place we should look is the dictionary.

[00:01:55] If you were to [consult](#)¹¹ a dictionary 20 years ago, you would probably only have found one definition. It would say something like “the past tense of wake”, and might

[00:02:07] give

[00:02:07] **Alastair Budge:** you examples like “I woke up this morning”, or even “I woke this morning”.

[00:02:13] And of course, you can still use the word like that, it’s the past tense of “wake”, absolutely nothing has changed since then.

[00:02:22] But you would see another definition today, a definition that in many dictionaries actually now comes above the original definition, meaning it’s the more common usage of the word.

[00:02:35] And in fact, this definition is often split into two separate definitions, which reflects how [polarising](#)¹² the word has become.

[00:02:46] So, let me give you the definition from the Merriam Webster dictionary.

¹¹ get information from

¹² dividing people depending on their opinions

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[00:02:51] The first definition is, and I'm quoting directly, "aware of and actively attentive to important [societal](#)¹³ facts and issues [especially issues of racial and social justice] ”

[00:03:05] And the second definition is, and again this is a direct quote, “politically liberal [as in matters of racial and social justice] especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme”.

[00:03:21] And only after this, coming in at the third definition, do you find the original literal definition of what this word means.

[00:03:31] Now, this third definition, the original literal definition, is easy to understand and less controversial, I mean, it simply refers to not being asleep.

[00:03:42] So we will focus our attention today on the first two, the definitions of “woke” that are more to do with ideology and what you believe rather than simply your physical state.

[00:03:55] Now, in terms of where this word, “woke”, came from in this context, it was originally [slang](#)¹⁴, or [vernacular](#)¹⁵, used by African Americans going as far back as the 1940s.

¹³ relating to social relations

¹⁴ informal language used mostly in speech

¹⁵ informal language used mostly in speech

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[00:04:10] On one level, it was used as an alternative to woken or awake, so “I’m woke, I’m coming”, like “I’m awake, I’m coming”.

[00:04:21] But it also had another meaning, meaning if you were “woke” you were aware of the [societal](#) injustice faced by the African-American community.

[00:04:32] Its first use in print is thought to come from all the way back in 1962, in a New York Times article by an African-American author called William Melvin Kelley.

[00:04:45] The article’s title was “If You’re Woke You [Dig It](#)¹⁶”, and it talked about dialect and language in 1960s America, in particular the language used by African-Americans.

[00:04:58] Importantly, this essay wasn’t about social injustice, police violence, or any kind of ideological point of view.

[00:05:07] He was simply explaining how language is used, and how [slang](#) terms, or idiomatic language would be [discarded](#)¹⁷, not used any more when they become mainstream.

[00:05:21] We’ll come back to this idea in a few minutes, and it will be important when we look at the development of being “woke” in the 21st century.

[00:05:30] Anyway, back to the 1960s.

[00:05:33] The term continued to be used as African-American [Vernacular](#), as a [slang](#).

¹⁶ like or enjoy it

¹⁷ not used any more

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[00:05:39] Its most famous next use case then came a decade later, when a character in a 1971 play about the Jamaican political activist, Marcus Garvey, said ‘I been sleeping all my life. And now that Mr. Garvey done woke me up, I’m gon stay woke. And I’m gon’ help him wake up other black folk’.

[00:06:00] So, the term existed, and it was used, but it wasn’t really until the 21st century that “woke” was brought into the [mainstream](#)¹⁸.

[00:06:12] One of the first people to [publicise](#)¹⁹ this word was the singer Erykah Badu, who used the lyrics, ‘I stay woke’, in her 2008 song Master Teacher.

[00:06:23] And moving into the 2010s, the expression continued to grow in popularity and [mainstream](#) usage, and after the police shooting of an unarmed 18-year-old African American called Michael Brown, and the formation of The Black Lives Matter movement, it [shot](#)²⁰ to [public prominence](#)²¹.

[00:06:43] Black Lives Matter, or BLM, was formed in 2013, and this group really [embraced](#)²² the term “woke”, and “stay woke”, and promoted the use of the hashtag “#staywoke” on social media.

¹⁸ ideas who are considered normal or accepted by most people

¹⁹ make it widely known

²⁰ moved or was directed quickly

²¹ state of being very well known by the public

²² took in, included

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[00:06:59] And what did this mean?

[00:07:01] Well, it meant that you were aware of racial injustice, you were aware of the fact that police violence falls [disproportionately](#)²³ on African Americans, that is, if you are an African American you are over twice as likely to be shot and killed by police than if you are a white American.

[00:07:20] And importantly, “staying woke” meant that you were prepared to do something about it.

[00:07:26] Protesting in the street, entering [grassroots politics](#)²⁴, you were prepared to do something about the injustices in the system.

[00:07:35] You would see people with posters or t-shirts with the “Stay Woke” message written on them, and the term entered the public consciousness, on both sides of the Atlantic, in the United States and in the UK.

[00:07:50] In 2017, in fact, this “new” definition was added to the Oxford English Dictionary, which is always slightly behind with these things, but this gives you an idea of quite how [mainstream](#) it had become.

[00:08:06] But as often happens, when a term that was previously used, created, owned even, by one particular group of people, when this term goes into the [mainstream](#),

²³ in a way that happens too often in relation to other people

²⁴ politics that involve the common or ordinary people

especially when it is a term about an ideological viewpoint, the definition was [twisted](#)²⁵ and used to mean something completely different, it's used against the original creators of the term.

[00:08:33] And if you remember our second definition of “woke”, from the start of the episode, of “politically liberal [as in matters of racial and social justice] especially in a way that is considered unreasonable or extreme”, woke has become an insult when used by certain types of people.

[00:08:53] If you were to watch Fox News, or read a right-wing newspaper, you would find all manner of references to wokeness in a negative [light](#)²⁶.

[00:09:03] Here's one from Fox News at the start of 2020. And by the way, remember that Fox News is the most popular cable news show in the United States.

[00:09:15] So, here's Tucker Carlson, the most popular cable news host in American history, with an average of 3.3 million viewers every single night:

[00:09:26] **Tucker Carlson:** wokeness is a virus. It's [infectious](#)²⁷. It destroys your brain. You're watching it happen to people all around you. Certainly on the left, some running for president, many working at CNN.

²⁵ changed

²⁶ way of viewing things

²⁷ able to be passed from one person to another like a disease

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[00:09:39] **Alastair Budge:** So, to repeat, he says “wokeness is a virus. It’s [infectious](#), it destroys your brain”.

[00:09:48] And here’s another clip from someone whose voice you probably will recognise:

[00:09:53] **Donald Trump:** Because woke means you're, a [loser](#)²⁸. Everybody ultimately loses with woke.

[00:09:59] **Alastair Budge:** And yes, that was the former President, Donald Trump, saying that “woke means you’re a [loser](#)”.

[00:10:07] So, how did one term, one idea, being “woke”, go from being aware of social issues to being an infectious virus that destroys your brain, making you a [loser](#)?

[00:10:20] Well, on one level, we must go back to the original New York Times article from 1962, the one titled “If You’re Woke You [Dig It](#)”.

[00:10:31] If you remember, Kelly, the author, wrote that as soon as a term becomes [mainstream](#), it is no longer used by the group or people who originally used it, it becomes [polluted](#)²⁹ and untouchable.

[00:10:45] And this is, to a certain extent, what happened with the term “woke”.

²⁸ a person who is unsuccessful in life

²⁹ corrupted, not pure

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[00:10:52] In the [aftermath](#)³⁰ of the Black Lives Matter movement, as people and also companies became more publicly aware of social injustice, the term moved further into the [mainstream](#), and took on an altogether different meaning.

[00:11:08] Companies started to publicly [pledge](#)³¹ their support for social movements and racial equality, with some even going as far as describing themselves as “woke”.

[00:11:21] Was this because the leaders of the companies truly believed in what they were saying, or was it because they needed to [appeal](#)³² to a new generation both of social justice aware consumers and employees, and being woke was “just good for business”?

[00:11:38] I'll leave you to be the judge of that, but many companies were criticised for what was [perceived](#)³³ as [piggybacking](#)³⁴, [jumping on the bandwagon](#)³⁵, of a social movement.

³⁰ the period that followed the event

³¹ formally promise that they would do it

³² be attractive

³³ considered

³⁴ taking advantage of

³⁵ taking advantage of

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[00:11:50] And as this happened, the term “woke” became even more politicised, [weaponised](#), and [binary](#)³⁶.

[00:11:58] You were either woke, or you were not, there was no “[middle ground](#)³⁷”.

[00:12:04] To the critics of “woke” ideology, this was seen as [virtue signalling](#), when someone shows off their beliefs so as to display their [moral superiority](#)³⁸, that they are a better human being because they believe something.

[00:12:21] And, given this new [binary](#) nature, of one either being woke or not being woke, to critics of “wokeism”, this word [epitomised](#)³⁹ what they believed as liberal extremism.

[00:12:37] Wokeness meant a refusal to debate issues, being overly sensitive, viewing everything that happens in the world through a lens of social injustice and looking down on anyone with a different ideology.

[00:12:52] And as a result, “woke” took on a completely different, [pejorative](#)⁴⁰, negative meaning, it became an insult.

³⁶ involving two sides

³⁷ position between the two sides

³⁸ the belief that they are better people because of their values or morals

³⁹ was the perfect example of it

⁴⁰ negative

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[00:13:01] Right wing talk show hosts talked about The Woke Mob, The Woke Police, Going Woke, The Woke Warrior Class, The Wokerati, and Woke Capitalism.

[00:13:14] As you heard Tucker Carlson and Donald Trump saying a few minutes ago, it was presented as a virus that infected the mind, something that nothing good could come from.

[00:13:26] Now, clearly, the issue of social injustice, discrimination, and political polarisation are huge issues, far too large to do justice to in a short episode like this, so instead I want to keep the focus on the evolution of the term, rather than [go down the rabbit hole](#)⁴¹ of the rights and wrongs of both sides.

[00:13:48] What is undeniable is that the term, “woke”, is now used far more frequently in a critical sense, by critics of the ideology, rather than its [proponents](#)⁴².

[00:14:01] This isn’t, of course, so unusual. It's simply joining a long list of terms that had one meaning when used by one group of people, then was used by another group either as a positive or negative term by people on the other side of the argument.

[00:14:17] Liberal, is one example, “politically correct” is another one, which have both gone from being simple descriptive terms to [weaponised](#) insults.

⁴¹ enter a confusing situation

⁴² supporters

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[00:14:29] Gay is another - it originally simply meant “happy”, then it was used to mean “homosexual”, and was also used by some groups as an insult to mean “bad” or “undesirable”.

[00:14:43] And another, which is coming from a slightly different angle, is the "N-word", which was originally used as an [ethnic slur](#)⁴³, an insulting term for black people. But, as you may know, it's used by some African Americans as a [colloquial](#)⁴⁴ term, it's been [embraced](#) and has gone from an insult to a term of [camaraderie](#)⁴⁵, of [endearment](#)⁴⁶.

[00:15:09] So, this brings us to today, and to the status of the word “woke” in 2023.

[00:15:17] Will you still see people using it?

[00:15:19] Yes, probably, but more commonly as an insult rather than in its original sense.

[00:15:27] To the original [proponents](#) of the word “woke”, this is pretty depressing news.

[00:15:34] In an interview with the woman who wrote the “I stay woke” lyrics of the Erykah Badu song, the journalist wrote “Like anything created by black people, the

⁴³ an insulting term on the basis of race

⁴⁴ informal, used mostly in speech

⁴⁵ friendship

⁴⁶ love, affection

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phrase “stay woke” was [appropriated](#)⁴⁷ by the masses, transformed into a trend term before ultimately [mutating](#)⁴⁸ into a meme and becoming a form of [irony](#)⁴⁹.”

[00:15:57] Essentially, it was taken, stolen and used as an insult, meaning it can’t be used in its original sense.

[00:16:06] And the result of all of this, to quote the same article is that, “being woke isn’t fucking fun.”

[00:16:14] There are many different conclusions we might [draw](#)⁵⁰ from this, from how the meaning of the word “woke” has changed and evolved in such a short period of time.

[00:16:26] Firstly, I think it’s yet another example of the power of a single word, of how a word can come to stand for much more than it means.

[00:16:36] Secondly, it might be to ask ourselves whether one group should have ownership over a particular word or phrase? And what happens if that ownership, that [agency](#)⁵¹, is lost?

⁴⁷ taken for their own use

⁴⁸ changing

⁴⁹ the expression of its meaning by using language that normally means the opposite

⁵⁰ reach, deduct

⁵¹ ownership

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[00:16:50] Thirdly, it's that the greater the number of people who say that they identify with a particular word, the less powerful that word often becomes. Its meaning becomes [diluted](#)⁵², and even if the message might have been powerful to begin with, it's harder to understand what it really means.

[00:17:12] And on a related note, finally, it's that having more supporters doesn't always [yield](#)⁵³ better results.

[00:17:20] In the case of woke, it's clear that the more people and companies [jumped on the bandwagon](#)⁵⁴, or claimed to hold certain socially progressive beliefs when their actions spoke otherwise, this opened up the entire woke movement for criticism and gave people like Tucker Carlson and Donald Trump the [ammunition](#)⁵⁵ to criticise the entire movement, everyone who identified with the word "woke".

[00:17:49] This being said, the past 10 years or so have "woken" many people to the social injustices, not just in America but in pretty much every country in the world.

⁵² weaker in force after being mixed with other things

⁵³ provide, produce

⁵⁴ took advantage of it

⁵⁵ arguments, points

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[00:18:02] And looking to the future, while the word “woke” might be [dead in the water](#)⁵⁶, no matter how much Donald Trump might say it’s for [losers](#)⁵⁷, it’s clear that the ideas behind it are alive and well.

[00:18:17] OK then, that is it for today's episode on the history and evolution of the word “woke”.

[00:18:24] I hope it's been an interesting one, and that you've learnt something new.

[00:18:28] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:18:32] Were you aware of this term before today, and if so, what impact has woke ideology had in your country?

[00:18:40] What do you think is next for “staying woke”, both the term and the idea behind it?

[00:18:46] I would love to know, so let’s get this discussion started.

[00:18:49] You can head right into our community forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:18:57] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

⁵⁶ unlikely to continue successfully

⁵⁷ people who are unsuccessful in life

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[00:19:02] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF EPISODE]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Arouse	cause
Weaponised	used for the purpose of attacking a person or group
Embrace	take in, use
Detractors	critics
Virtue signalling	trying to show that they are good people
Shorthand	a short or quick way to express them
Espoused	supported, adopted
Vigorously	in a lively or energetic way
Despised	not liked at all
Adversaries	enemies
Consult	get information from
Polarising	dividing people depending on their opinions

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Societal	relating to social relations
Slang	informal language used mostly in speech
Vernacular	informal language used mostly in speech
Dig it	like or enjoy it
Discarded	not used any more
Mainstream	ideas who are considered normal or accepted by most people
Publicise	make it widely known
Shot	moved or was directed quickly
Public prominence	state of being very well known by the public
Embraced	took in, included
Disproportionately	in a way that happens too often in relation to other people
Grassroots politics	politics that involve the common or ordinary people
Twisted	changed
Light	way of viewing things
Infectious	able to be passed from one person to another like a disease

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Loser	a person who is unsuccessful in life
Polluted	corrupted, not pure
Aftermath	the period that followed the event
Pledge	formally promise that they would do it
Appeal	be attractive
Perceived	considered
Piggybacking	taking advantage of
Jumping on the bandwagon	taking advantage of
Binary	involving two sides
Middle ground	position between the two sides
Moral superiority	the belief that they are better people because of their values or morals
Epitomised	was the perfect example of it
Pejorative	negative
Go down the rabbit hole	enter a confusing situation

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Proponents	supporters
Ethnic slur	an insulting term on the basis of race
Colloquial	informal, used mostly in speech
Camaraderie	friendship
Endearment	love, affection
Appropriated	taken for their own use
Mutating	changing
Irony	the expression of its meaning by using language that normally means the opposite
Draw	reach, deduct
Agency	ownership
Diluted	weaker in force after being mixed with other things
Yield	provide, produce
Jumped on the bandwagon	took advantage of it
Ammunition	arguments, points

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Dead in the water unlikely to continue successfully

Losers people who are unsuccessful in life

We'd love to get your feedback on this episode.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

Let us know in the forum community.leonardoenglish.com