

Text support for the films

Not My Cup Of Tea



Use of language and behaviour in Britain

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INTRODUCTION

People new to the UK will notice peculiar things that the British do or say, especially in little things like how we say hello, express our opinions, drink tea and run our meetings. Many visitors say that the British are 'reserved', that they suppress their feelings.

They are also perceived to avoid direct statements that may appear sudden or harsh: in other words, they are suppressing their true feelings or opinions. At worst this may seem confusing and hypocritical; but it's all part of the culture, as much as the rain and green fields. The British have a 'softness at the edges'.

Not everyone fits this stereotype, of course. Some British football fans, for instance, are seldom seen to be soft at the edges. But even these people in the privacy of their own home or workplace will be saying 'sorry' when they don't mean it and will ask you how you are while thinking about something else.

Britain today is a mix of many subcultures, some as ancient as Welsh (Welsh was spoken in these lands long before English) and other much more recent arrivals, each intermingling, each with their influence on the other. Our observations will focus on characteristics of British behaviour that have become ingrained in the language over some hundreds of years.

George Sharpley 2008

Nine films

1. A very British hello

These clips show British people meeting each other, some for the first time, others more familiar.

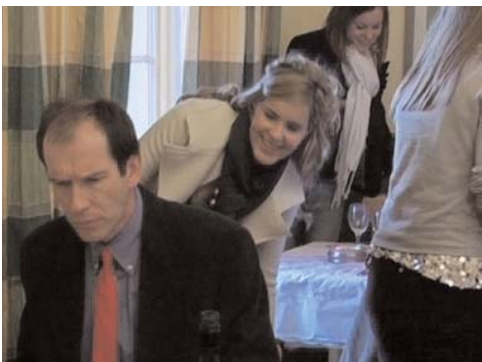
(Answers on page 6)

1. Identify the different expressions that are used to greet someone. Are some more formal than others?
2. Do they shake hands?
3. Two couples arrive for a village meeting in somebody's house. They come to this house twice more over the next few weeks. How does their behaviour change as they get to know each other? (They also meet a fourth time - see no.7)
4. Work colleagues arrive at a pub for an informal meeting or get-together. As they arrive they see a lad who's been injured.
 - a) What do you notice about their manner with him?
 - b) What expressions for 'goodbye' do they use?
5. These colleagues go into the pub. What theme recurs in their conversation as they say hello?
6. In a couple of scenes (the colleagues in the pub and the estate agent arriving at the cottage) they apologise for being a bit late. What do they actually say?
7. The final clip shows the two couples at the house for a fourth time. What is strange or unusual about the way they discuss the weather?



2. "I don't want to make a scene" (British reluctance to complain)

The British are not comfortable when there is a complaint in the air. Maybe this is a part of their tendency to hide or suppress their feelings. But these feelings cannot remain suppressed forever...



Some Britons are more than capable of complaining, and there are plenty of grumblers about. But the rest of us are not comfortable with their whingeing. An embarrassing silence or general awkwardness prevails.

1. How does the couple in the restaurant express their negative views to the staff and other customers?
2. Compare this with what you would expect in France or

Germany, in Italy or Spain?

(Answers start on page 6)

3. “You must be joking” (Humour and irony)

The British sense of humour is sometimes quite subtle and ‘dry’. It’s not always easy to notice that someone is actually being funny (or trying to be). This is called humour with a ‘straight face’, i.e. pretending to be serious.

People have observed that the British use humour to avoid expressing a problem explicitly or to hide embarrassment. Failure or weakness is often disguised in humorous exchanges, in teasing, in sarcasm and irony.

People tend to be ironic when they are disappointed with their own performance, or when they are criticising others, or complaining at their luck, or just to tease and make a joke.

What do ‘Interesting’ and ‘Mind how you go’ usually mean? And what do they mean as they are used here?

4. “Yes, but...” (Agreeing and disagreeing)

The British are famous for having one word for ‘yes’ and two words for ‘no’ (‘yes but’).



Disagreement, criticism and negative views in general tend to be expressed politely. People have noticed that the British do not like to confront issues in meetings if this is likely to lead to personal conflict.

Negative views are often introduced with expressions like ‘with respect’, ‘to be honest’, ‘to be blunt’; people tend to express their annoyance in an understated way: the man who has been shown a house that is obviously not suitable says it is ‘a bit of a waste of time’ when really he means a complete waste of time.

1. Identify the expressions which are used to
 - a) agree or show approval;
 - b) disagree or express a negative feeling.
2. Which person says ‘no’ when he is *agreeing* with the other speaker?
3. In the second part, which person does not fit the British stereotype of disagreement?

(Answers start on page 6)

5. “Sorry” (Probably the most spoken word in the UK)

Sorry means ‘excuse me’, sorry means ‘hey’, sorry is even something an aggressive person might say before he starts a fight. We even say sorry if someone else accidentally pushes against us and we are innocently standing still.

Sorry is still at face value an apology, and the British are instinctively good at apologising. Whether they mean it or not is another matter.

1. What are the many different ways ‘sorry’ is used in English?
2. What is the difference between ‘sorry’ and ‘I do apologise’?

6. “How's it going?” (Managing meetings)

British managers do not like to appear bossy and dictatorial. There is lots of talk of ‘team-work’ and ‘partnership’, with a conscious effort at meetings to reach consensus. All people’s views are ‘valuable’, though some of these valuable views are discarded straightaway (“Thanks, yes, that’s a very good idea. We’ll have to see ...”)

1. a) How is the verb ‘go’ used here?
b) Do you know the meanings of these additional uses of ‘go’?
 - i) What’s Jim going on about?
 - ii) The milk has gone off.
 - iii) Let’s get going.
 - iv) We’re going to have to let you go.
 - v) What’s the going rate?
2. What do you observe about the venues of the two meetings you see here (in Downing Street and in the pub)? How formal are they?
3. What conclusions do the two meetings come to?
4. What does the Prime Minister say to move the discussion from one point to the next?
5. How does the management style in meetings compare with that in your country? Compare hierarchy, decision-making and giving instructions. Is there an agenda? Are minutes taken? How do people join the debate? What are the outcomes of meetings?

7. “How much is the rent?” (The costs of accommodation)

‘Rent’ is the money you pay for your accommodation if you do not own it. You, the ‘tenant’, pay rent to the ‘landlord’, i.e. the owner.

1. What has to be paid in addition to the rent?
2. How much does the estate agent say the rent is - to each of the potential tenants?
3. What are the different expressions here for asking how much?

4. a) What does 'pcm' stand for?
- b) What is a 'telephone landline'?
- c) What is a 'deposit'?
- d) What does 'in advance' mean?
- e) What does 'furnished' or 'unfurnished' mean?

8. "Not quite the thing I had in mind" (Descriptive understatement)

'Rather', 'a little bit' and 'quite' are modifying or understating words that the British use a lot. Criticism is softened by saying 'a bit ...' or 'slightly...'.

E.g. "A bit salty", "Slightly too long". In other words, too salty and too long.

1. How many expressions can you identify in these clips which include rather, a bit or quite?
2. Using rather, a bit and quite, give a brief description of
 - (a) the cottage
 - (b) the estate agent
3. What does TLC stand for?



9. "Makes you proud to be British" (Stereotypes and your experience)

Stereotype: true or false. Now is the time to compare the characters here with people you know and have met in the UK.

1. List as many as you can of the typical British characteristics shown in these clips. Is your personal experience of British people similar or different? In what ways is it different?
2. Other countries are brought to mind too. What are the stereotypes touched upon about these other European countries. From your experience do you agree with these impressions?
3. "Oh I think we should come out of Europe tomorrow. Forget it. That's my opinion. Just forget it. Bleedin regulations, paperwork, red tape, bureaucracy, it's a nightmare. An absolute nightmare."
 - What is the man in the pub objecting to when he says this?
4. List any other stereotypical British characteristics that you know of. Does your experience conform to them?

Answers to the questions above

1. A very British hello

1. Expressions used for greeting someone:

- Alright everyone, how's it going? (informal)
- Alright, how you doing? (informal)
- Chilly chilly chilly (informal)
- Good afternoon (formal)
- Hello (formal or informal)
- Hello, good to see you, do I get a kiss? (informal)
- Here they are! (informal)
- Hi, good to see you (polite informal)
- How are things? / how's things? (informal)
- How the devil are you? (informal)
- Nice to meet you both (formal)
- Sorry I'm late (formal or informal)
- Welcome, come in (formal)

2. British people seem quite awkward when they meet. Some shake hands, others don't, some are uncertain and hesitant. In general, people in the UK shake hands when they meet for the first time, and don't at subsequent.

3. First time they arrive they do not know each other and virtually ignore the other couple's presence. Not all British people are like this it should be said; some are much more chatty. There is though a tendency to say nothing, as if to speak was being too pushy and intrusive.

The second time they meet they are more familiar - though not yet full-on friends. They do that universal British thing which is talk about the weather.

The third time they meet they are more familiar and kiss each other. You can judge for yourself how comfortable they are with this.

4. a) They are friendly, but do not want to talk for long (they have a meeting to get to). Even though George is injured, their interest in his condition never gets beyond a polite mention. Many observers of the British say how warm they find the British to be when they first meet them but this warmth does not seem to last.

- b) Alright, cheers
 Bye
 See you
 See you around
 See you soon
 See you soon

5. They talk about the weather.

6. Amanda in the pub: "We're running a bit on the late side, sorry."
 Estate Agent with two men: "Sorry I'm late, a previous appointment ran over."

7. In whatever they talk about, British people have a reputation for avoiding detail and precise statements. They prefer to keep things vague. They say they will ‘sort things out’ and ‘see what we can do’ rather than pinpoint a specific problem. ‘Problem’ is a word that hurts British ears.

In this clip they give too much detail (“2.75 degrees colder”, “Wind speed at 21 mph”). Chat about the weather is never so precise, and almost always a mild grumble, “a bit wet”, “a bit too hot to be in the office!”

2. “I don’t want to make a scene”

1. The couple avoid complaining to the waitress about the meat, and check their feelings. Then after the arrival of noisy customers the man ‘loses it’ and screams at the neighbouring table. Even then he apologises after his interruption.

2. Send us your views: george.sharpley@lingua.co.uk

3. “You must be joking”

“Interesting” - usually means ‘engaging’, or something worthy of attention.

Here, the tone of voice tells you that it means almost the opposite - the man does not really like what he sees in the cottage.

“Mind how you go” - usually means “take care” and “goodbye”. Here it is more literal, for the person going is heavily bandaged, a little joke that the man in the pub enjoys quietly.

4. “Yes but”

1.a) All sounds good to me
 Couldn’t agree more
 Excellent
 Good point
 I go along with that
 I know exactly what you mean
 I’m entirely with my colleague on this one
 I’m with you there
 No (after a negative statement)
 Well sounds absolutely ideal

1.b) Do you want an honest answer to that?
 I don’t think that’s a bad thing
 I know what you mean, but...
 I’m not convinced
 No
 Not as such
 Not quite the person that I had in mind
 That is a pity
 The only negative thing I can think of

To be blunt
To be honest
What's wrong with that?
With all due respect
With respect
Yes, okay, well...

2. The man in the pub says 'no' when he agrees with his friend. People say 'no' in agreement with a negative statement.
3. The dark haired lady called Antje at the meeting in the pub. She gives a direct 'no' in response to her manager asking if she has had a good day. It may be normal in other countries to say 'no' in this context, but in Britain it would only be said if there is a genuine problem or if the person is a hypochondriac.

5. "Sorry"

1. "Sorry" can mean several things:

to catch somebody's attention
to ask someone to repeat what they said
to say no
if you touch someone or collide with them
if someone touches you or collides with you
to make a complaint or criticism ("Sorry but ...")
to soften any difficult moment or awkward contact
to genuinely apologise

2. 'I do apologise' is more formal than 'sorry'.

6. "How's it going?"

1. a) Mostly to do with greeting and 'catching up' with friends or colleagues, or talking about how things are progressing

How's it going?
It's not going too well
Let's just see how it goes
Tell me how it's going

- b) The meanings of the additional uses of 'go':

- i) What's Jim talking about?
- ii) The milk is sour.
- iii) Time to leave.
- iv) Your job is terminated.
- v) What's the current rate/price?

2. One meeting is in the pub, where the manager encourages a fairly informal approach. The

other meeting is in a comfortable sitting-room, where all are formally dressed, but not sitting around a meeting table.

3. Downing Street - the PM asks Alan to put together a menu. So the issue is partly resolved.

The pub - the discussion about the new candidates is locked in a difference of opinion so the manager ends it by saying he will have a word with someone else and then come to a decision. Thus the issue is partly resolved: a decision was not made in the meeting, although the opinions of the team have been discussed; and finally it emerges that the manager will do what he wanted to do from the start.

4. PM: Well, see how it goes. And keep me posted Right we need to move on. The next item on the agenda is something we really need to get sorted. Alan, please.

5. Please email your views to: george.sharpley@lingua.co.uk

7. “How much is the rent?”

1. The rent does not include the utility bills: the council tax (i.e. local government tax), gas, electricity, water, drainage and telephone landline.

2. To Mrs Bishop : £400 pcm. To Denis and Lorraine : £375 . To Alan and Dave : £350.

3. How much is the rent? How much are you asking?

4. a) Per calendar month

b) The fixed line to your house or office (as opposed to your mobile).

c) A deposit is the downpayment in advance to secure a purchase or as a security against damage. The deposit of three months' rent asked for here is unusually high. Normally a deposit is the equivalent of one month's rent.

d) 'In advance' is a payment at the beginning. Another similar expression - 'up front'.

e) 'Furnished' means with furniture and fittings included; 'unfurnished' is without them.

8. “Not quite the thing I had in mind”

- a bit of a state
a bit of tlc
a bit over-assertive
a bit tight
a bit tough
bit of a whiff
it needs a bit of a clean-up
quite a character
quite dated
rather a lot of junk
rather pokey
really quite nice

2.(a)

The cottage is rather run-down, a bit cramped and really quite untidy. It is not very appealing. The house is rather old fashioned and the facilities not very up-to-date. The outside WC comes as a bit of a shock to those looking around. I don't think I would want to live there.

Oh I don't know. I think it is quite interesting. It may not be modern but it has a bit of character. And it's in quite a nice part of the country. The trouble is the rent is quite high. I may ask if they can lower this a bit.

2.(b)

The estate agent seems a bit unprepared, especially with Mrs Bishop - he has to look up all the answers in the particulars. He's a bit shifty, especially when he is discussing money and rent. He's full of estate agent spiel, and he's a bit dodgy talking about the rent: he brings the rent down with each viewer in the hope of getting a tenant. I'm not sure he's all that honest - is there really a pig next door? Or is the smell from the outside WC? But he is quite professional and courteous as well. The job is rather tedious - obviously he would be happier not having to sell such a run-down property.

3. Tender loving care.

9. "Makes you proud to be British"

1. Some of the stereotypes raised about British people: they cannot cook anything except roast beef; they mix business with pleasure (meeting in a pub); they don't like to be part of Europe; they like to consume alcohol; they want to buy villas in Spain; they can't speak other languages.

2. Some of the stereotypes raised about other Europeans: the Germans are punctual (Antje arrives at the pub, sits down and looks at her watch); Spanish people eat lunch at 3pm; the best restaurants are foreign; the French are disdainful towards UK food.

3. Regulation and paperwork. Many industries feel strangled by it, including farmers, despite the subsidies that are paid.

4. Here are some of the British stereotypes observed in these films:

The British

hold informal meetings in social situations
 drink tea or other drinks at meetings
 talk about the weather
 say yes when they mean no
 say sorry when they aren't sorry
 are not comfortable complaining
 hide their feelings
 understate their opinions
 are slow to learn other languages
 love to go abroad on holiday and even to live abroad
 like a drink or two (of alcohol)