



## DECODING BRITISH ENGLISH: WHAT DO THEY REALLY MEAN?

The nuance of British English is a topic that I am very passionate about and the foundation of my business. My interest first developed when I used to work in marketing for both British and American companies in international environments. What I noticed and found surprising is that even though we all appeared to communicate in English as a common language, there were many miscommunications and misunderstandings across the teams, even amongst native speakers of English. This was particularly amplified during meetings, which happened via teleconference, where the usual visual cues were missing to support the communication objective.

Equally, I found had to adapt my communication style quite significantly when I worked with colleagues from other parts of the world, as they found the way I expressed myself sometimes indirect or unclear. This got me thinking that maybe the British way of speaking is different and that there were typical language rituals for British English that could be identified. This research has helped me support clients who are seeking to deepen their English knowledge and gain confidence by understanding the real meaning behind words and the most accepted ways of doing things, whether for business or everyday.

So here I shed light on some common areas of British English miscommunication.

### *Hello...*

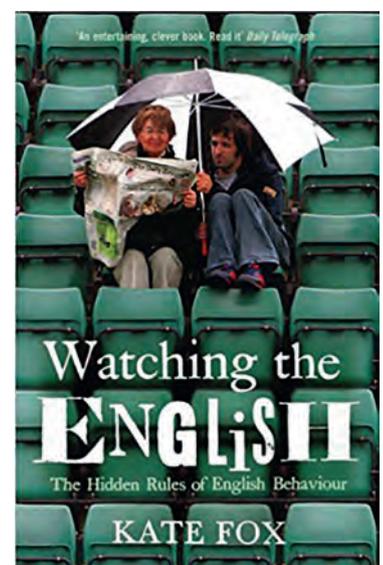
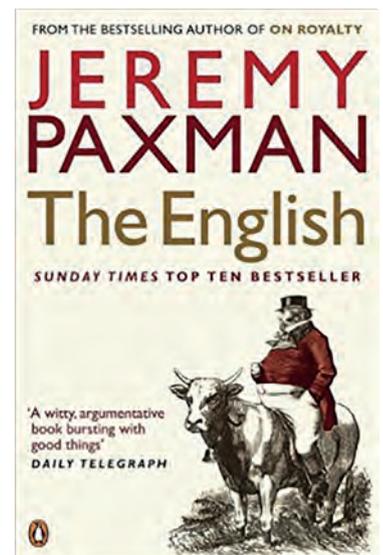
Depending on when and where you learnt English, some people still believe that the British say, “how do you do?” when they meet each other for the first time. This is considered very old-fashioned these days, and usually we say, “nice to meet you” or “pleased to meet you.” Another question often asked is whether to offer a handshake or kisses on the cheek.

Well, the British can be a bit unsure about this one. I advise people in business to shake hands the first time you meet somebody, usually at the start and end of the meeting, however we usually drop the handshake after this. We often have no physical contact in further meetings, but this can depend on the sector.

In everyday life this is more complicated, we sometimes feel a bit awkward doing a handshake, as it feels too formal, however it is acceptable for a first meeting. Kisses on the cheek (one on each side) are usually reserved for friends or people we know well (woman to woman; man to woman; rarely man to man). Hugs are usually reserved for family, and sometimes there is no physical contact at all between friends. If in doubt, follow the lead of what the British person does!

### *How are you?*

This seems like an innocent topic, but it can lead to a surprising reaction. When somebody asks, “how are you?” we have a fairly codified way of replying, which is



“*The British can be quite reserved and private, avoiding personal discussions; especially about our problems with people we do not know well.*”

“fine, how are you?”

This is always true, even if you feel dreadful and have had a terrible day. However, if it is a really good friend asking, then it might be allowable to say, “a bit under the weather” but usually we do not go into any detail, unless your friend asks for it. The British can be quite reserved and private, avoiding personal discussions especially about our problems with people we do not know well.

*A bit chilly, isn't it?*

Where would we be without the weather! It is like a social glue which starts any conversation, fills awkward pauses and a common ground for us to talk about. It is also a codified language ritual with its own sentence structure.

Notice how we offer a weather fact (a bit chilly), modifying the adjective so it is not too extreme (a bit) and then finishing with a question tag to build a connection with the other person (isn't it?). This is a very common way for British people to express themselves and gain agreement or confirmation. What is important in your response is to agree, and then add your own weather fact. For example, “yes, and I have heard it's going to be colder this weekend.”

There is a reason why the weather is often headline news in the UK, even though it's really not that extreme.

Whether it is predicting heavy snow (if you are based in London, you will rarely see this) or an extreme heatwave (it might get to 30°C in London), it is a good topic to discuss and then eventually complain about, especially if it lasts more than 24 hours.

*Sorry!*

It is a cliché, but very much based on truth, that we love the word sorry and it really does cover a huge range of meanings and emotions. For example: getting attention, temporary and sometimes deliberate deafness when we hear something we do not like, passive aggressive responses, trying to get past somebody on the street or public transport, confusion, embarrassment, interrupting, preventing interruptions. It is a universal word, which we use out of politeness (on the surface at least) and sometimes you may even hear several “sorrys” in one sentence, when a British person is feeling particularly embarrassed or awkward.

*What do you think?*

Finally, it can be hard sometimes to get a

direct answer when asking a British person for their opinion, although this does depend on the individual and, if in a business situation, which sector. It is not necessarily that we are being dishonest, but more that we do not want to upset or offend the other person, especially if the opinion is negative about something personal. If we feel awkward or embarrassed, we tend to respond in a few set ways, but the tone of voice will indicate what the real opinion is. For example:

- Interesting (said slowly and thoughtfully)
- Quite good (with the stress on the first word, usually said slowly, notice the modifying “quite”)
- Not bad (with the stress on the second word, usually said slowly, notice the double negative)
- Fine. Really (said in a staccato way means they really do not like it!)

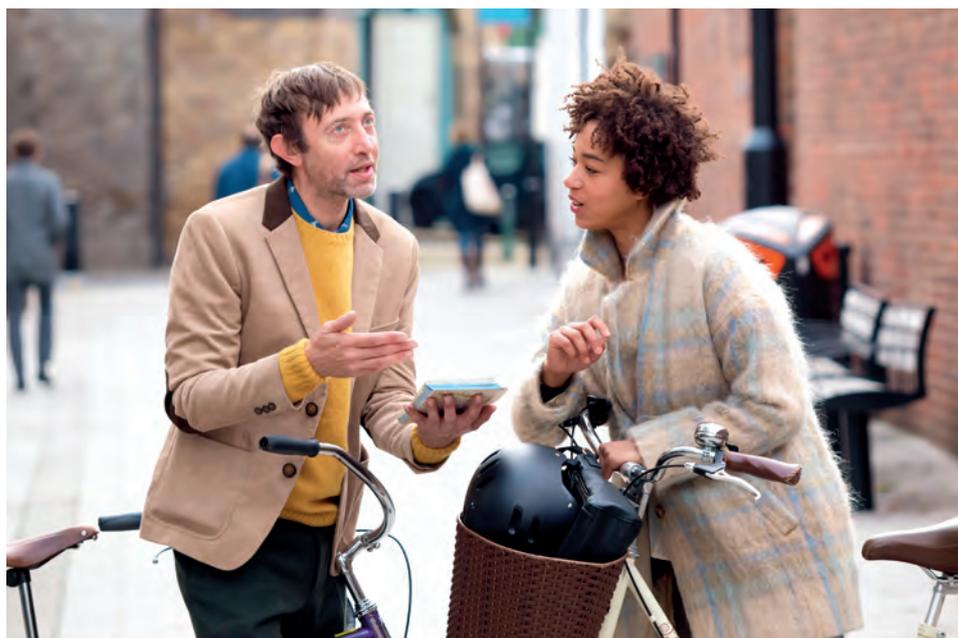
However, please note that all the phrases above can be said in a rising, upbeat way and have completely the opposite meaning, i.e. “we like it!” So, it is really important to listen to the tone of voice.

Usually after all these phrases there will be a pause before you hear the real opinion: “but...” or “however...”

Also watch out for a question back: “can I make a suggestion?” “have you thought about...?”, which tells you they do not like the idea, and have a suggestion that could be better.

Like in all forms of communications there are set language rituals, fortunately they can be easy to pick up and once you've decoded common phrases, miscommunication will be no more!

I hope you have enjoyed this exploration of Decoding British English and it has been helpful in understanding some of those difficult, common areas for communication in business and everyday. I would love to hear if you have other examples you have found while living here, so feel free to share with me via email.



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