

BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

What English phrases really mean

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This is not a word-for-word transcript.

Pippa

Hello, this is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Pippa.

Beth

And I'm Beth. In English, what we say and what we mean are sometimes two very different things. We often use exaggeration for emphasis or for humour – something known as hyperbole. For example, people say, "I am so hungry I could eat a horse," but of course no one really could. Here's presenter Michael Rosen and linguist Derek Bousfield discussing one example of hyperbole on BBC Radio 4's Word of Mouth:

Michael Rosen

People do say, "Absolute nightmare!"

Derek Bousfield

Yeah, or as my daughters would say, "I've had a **mare** today." And when they say **mare**, which is obviously shortened from 'nightmare', what it basically means is they've had a mild and potentially slightly humorous occurrence at work.

Pippa

You might call an unpleasant or difficult experience 'a nightmare'. Derek's daughter used the word **mare**, short for 'nightmare', to describe her terrible day at work. But she was exaggerating. Her day wasn't really terrible – more like strange or annoying. Can you remember a time when what you said wasn't really what you meant, Beth?

Beth

Well, sometimes we say, "Hi, y'allright?" which means: "Hi, are you alright?" like, "Are you OK?" But actually, we don't really want to hear the answer. It just means 'hello', doesn't it?

Pippa

Mmm, yeah. I have a friend who actually just says, "Alright?" and they just mean, "Hello." They don't mean, "Are you OK?" They don't want to hear about my day.

Beth

No. If you're having a bad day, they don't want to know. They're just saying hello. In this episode, we'll be finding out more about how the meaning of words changes in English. As usual, we'll be learning some useful new words and phrases. And remember, you'll find all the vocabulary from this episode on our website, bbclearningenglish.com.

Pippa

But first, I have a question for you, Beth. The word hyperbole comes from two ancient Greek words: huper and ballo. But what is their literal meaning? Is it:

- a) to overthrow,
- b) to over speak, or
- c) to overthink?

Beth

I have no idea, Pippa. I'm going to say to over speak.

Pippa

OK. We'll find out the answer at the end of the programme. It's not just hyperbole that changes the meaning of words. Its opposite, something called understatement, has the same effect too. Understatement involves de-emphasising something. For example, imagine you were served an awful meal in a restaurant, but instead of saying how bad the food was, you just said, "It was less than perfect." Here's linguist Derek Bousfield discussing understatement on BBC Radio 4's Word of Mouth.

Dr Derek Bousfield

We love understatement as a way of, kind of, signalling that something much more serious has gone on. And it's a kind of performative, sardonic, not-taking-oneself-too-seriously identity when you do that, because, you know, **taking yourself too seriously** is a **no-no** in British culture.

Michael Rosen

Yes.

Derek Bousfield

And so, linguistically, not **taking yourself too seriously** is really **the done thing**.

Beth

Understatement is valued in British culture, unlike **taking yourself too seriously**. If you **take yourself too seriously**, you think you're more important than you really are. In Britain, this is a **no-no** – a way of behaving that is not socially acceptable. In other words, it's not **the done thing**, meaning it's not what you're expected to do in a particular social situation.

Pippa

Another area where the meaning of words can be easily misunderstood is apologising. Here, Michael Rosen responds to an imaginary situation where his toe gets accidentally stepped on by Derek Bousfield, for BBC Radio 4 programme Word of Mouth:

Derek Bousfield

Imagine I stepped on your toe and I said, "Oh, Michael, I'm really sorry." And you said, "It's all good."

Michael Rosen

Oh, right. That probably means it isn't.

Derek Bousfield

Yeah!

Michael Rosen

Yes, I'm actually a bit **miffed**, a little bit annoyed, but then I don't want to have a **barney** with you. You're a stranger, so I don't want to get into a whole thing, so I say, "Yeah... it's all good."

Derek Bousfield

"It's all good." Exactly. It's a bit like... I mean, that's a British English one – an equivalent American English one would be: "No worries."

Beth

If someone tells you, "It's all good," they could actually be feeling **miffed** – an adjective meaning slightly annoyed or hurt by someone's behaviour.

Pippa

But no matter how annoyed you are, you probably don't want to get into a **barney** – a loud argument or quarrel. So, you say something like, "It's all good," or, "No worries," and move on.

Beth

As an English learner, unclear word meanings are a challenge. A lot depends on the situation and on the relationship between speaker and listener. So, don't be shy! Get talking to others in English and if you make a mistake say, "No worries!" and carry on. OK. Pippa, I think it's time to reveal the answer to your question.

Pippa

Yes, you thought the ancient Greek words huper and ballo meant over speak, but the answer was actually a) to overthrow – huper means beyond, and ballo means I throw.

Beth

Oh well! OK. Let's recap the vocabulary we've learnt, starting with **mare**, short for nightmare, meaning an unpleasant or difficult experience.

Pippa

If you **take yourself too seriously**, you consider yourself and your actions more important than they really are. In Britain, this is a **no-no** – a way of behaving that is not socially acceptable.

Beth

The done thing, on the other hand, is what you are expected to do in a particular social situation.

Pippa

If you're **miffed**, you're slightly annoyed by someone's behaviour.

Beth

And finally, a **barney** is a loud argument or quarrel. Once again, our six minutes are up but if you're keen to practise these new words and phrases, then check out our website, bbclearningenglish.com, where you'll find a worksheet and quiz for this episode. See you again soon. But for now, goodbye!

Pippa

Bye!

VOCABULARY

mare (short for nightmare)

unpleasant or difficult experience

take yourself too seriously

consider yourself and your actions as more important than they really are

no-no

thing or way of behaving that is not socially acceptable

the done thing

what you are expected to do in a particular social situation

miffed

slightly annoyed by someone's behaviour towards you

barney

loud argument or quarrel