

# The British English Language Podcast



Improve your English language skills with Amy - a podcast with a British accent for intermediate level students

## Episode 9 - Why are British people so polite?!

Hello everyone! My name's Amy, welcome back to The British English Language Podcast! This podcast is a resource for intermediate level students who would like to improve their understanding of the British English language. Each episode's transcription can be accessed for free on my website - [www.britishenglishlanguage.com](http://www.britishenglishlanguage.com). It's definitely a good idea to read the text whilst listening so that you can become more familiar with spelling and grammatical structures too. I'll also try to help you understand more about British people and culture by describing some British stereotypical behaviours. Learning another language is difficult enough but being unaware/unconscious of typical behaviours within a culture can cause even more confusion whilst communicating. During this episode I'm going to talk about one of the qualities that British people are most famous for - how polite we are!

## Episode 9 - Why are British people so polite?!

So, firstly - what do we mean by polite? When we say that someone is polite it means that they behave with a respect and consideration for other people. The most common examples include using the words 'please' and 'thank you'. To be polite would also be to not interrupt someone when they're speaking for example. Or letting someone go in front of you when waiting in a queue. Opening the door for someone or eating with your mouth closed are also examples of being polite. When someone behaves like this we also say that they have good manners, or that this person is a well-mannered person.

I remember, when I was a child, my father taught me to be very well mannered. I was taught to always say 'please' and 'thank you', no matter who I was talking to. And if I didn't say 'please' or 'thank you' then I wouldn't get whatever I was asking for. This influenced me and now it's something that I automatically expect from other people too. I remember a few years ago, before I'd experienced other cultures, if someone didn't say 'please' or 'thank you' to me then I would feel offended and think that they were being rude. By the way - the word 'rude' is essentially the opposite of polite.

There have been moments in my life when this cultural behaviour has caused a lot of misunderstanding whilst I've been travelling or living in other countries. For example, I remember that the first time I heard my boyfriend from Argentina ask for something from the shop assistant I was horrified!!! Actually, he didn't ask the shop assistant for this item, he told the shop assistant to give him the item! No 'please', and no 'thank you'! In English it literally translated to 'give me six bananas'! The shop assistant didn't seem offended at all. But I thought to myself 'oh my God! Who is this man I'm going out with?! He's so rude!' I later learnt that this was normal and completely acceptable and appropriate in that country. In fact, it would probably sound quite excessive to someone from Argentina if I say 'please may I have six bananas?' Instead of 'give me six bananas'! Anyway, it took some time to get used to this but thankfully I realised that my boyfriend wasn't being rude, it was just part of his culture.

Now that I'm living in Spain I've noticed that this culture difference exists here too. However I'm not shocked, horrified or offended now if someone doesn't say 'please' or 'thank you' to me. And I adapt to their way of speaking when I'm speaking Spanish. You can see though how important it is to learn these nuances and distinctions. I think you'll have a better experience when visiting the UK if you can always remember to say 'please' and 'thank you'.

I value this quality in British people. However I think there is a point when it goes too far! By the way - when we use the phrase 'goes too far' we mean that something is too much or over-excessive. Anyway, British people are also famous for saying 'sorry' too much! We say 'sorry' for everything and anything! It's instinctive and automatic! It's funny because sometimes I say 'sorry' when another person bumps into me! Even though it was the other person's fault! It feels so silly! The interesting question is though - why do we do this?!

Well, to be honest, I don't know! So I decided to do some research using Google. I didn't find a definite answer but instead found lots of opinions! There was one particular conversation I found on the popular discussion forum - Reddit - that suggested some theories.

A Hungarian girl who was studying in the UK asked the question -

“Why are British people usually so polite and indirect in social situations?”

She explains that, in Hungary, being direct is seen as a positive quality because people say what's on their mind and they say what they need directly. She was worried that she would seem rude to British people if she's direct with them. She asks people on Reddit to give their opinions of the origins of these social behaviours, why it's so different from the rest of Europe, why it's so important to Brits not to offend anyone, and finally if someone like her has a place in British society if they don't conform to British social etiquette.

Reading the responses from people was incredibly entertaining for me. Of course most of the responses came from British people and they made me laugh so much. It's dark and ironic British humour at its best! I've included the link to this conversation on Reddit at the end of the transcription so see if you can recognise this wonderful British humour!

Anyway, getting back to the topic, some people suggested that one reason for our exaggerated politeness is an over-populated island culture. This theory suggests that being considerate of other people is necessary to be able to live together harmoniously in such a highly populated and small space. This can be compared to similar polite behaviour on the similarly densely populated island of Japan. To me this theory makes sense but I think the origin of polite behaviour is probably connected to the historical British social class system. According to my research, the higher classes in society were respectful and polite and avoided conflict by being indirect so that they didn't appear as common or of a lower social class.

British people are also famous for not being able to express their emotions well. And a few people commented that sometimes being polite was actually a form of passive aggression. They suggested that underneath the well-mannered façade is a deeply buried angry beast! This made me laugh because I think there is some truth in this too! I think we've learnt these behaviours from our parents, who learnt them from their parents etc. but it's not necessarily the best way for us to express ourselves. It's especially not a good form of expression if it's false. When we over-use the word 'sorry' then it isn't always genuine. How can it be genuine when I'm saying sorry for something that I haven't done?! So really it's habit and doesn't actually reflect our true feelings at all.

I admire and respect people who are direct with me. I would also like to be more direct and assertive. I think it's better to be honest with others and say what we're thinking but at the same time be sensitive to how the other person might feel. So I think a balance would be ideal. And I like to feel I'm respecting others by expressing gratitude as well as using the word 'please', but I want this to come from a genuine place. I think it's important to be conscious of what we're saying, instead of using words automatically, so that we can be more authentic with ourselves and with others.

I'm interested to know about your cultures and how much being polite is valued in your societies? What kind of behaviour would be considered rude? Also let me know if there are any other British stereotypes you'd like me to discuss with you. I would love to hear from you so please send me a message via the contact form on my website - [www.britishenglishlanguage.com](http://www.britishenglishlanguage.com).

Finally, if you'd like to support me in making this podcast then you can do that by clicking the 'Donate to Amy' button on my website. You can also subscribe to become a Patreon where you'll receive exclusive weekly episodes as well as one-on-one online English

conversation classes! I'm so grateful for your support as it allows me to continue making this podcast and doing something that I really love!

Thank you so much for joining me for this episode of The British English Language Podcast! I hope you found it interesting and I look forward to seeing you next time!

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