

Talk a Lot

Hotel

Features of Non-Literal English – Part 1

1. NICKNAMES

A nickname is a name for somebody (or something) that is different to the actual name, being usually either a shortened version, or a reference to appearance or character.

Example:

[Your friend Thomas phones you. You say:]

“Hi, Tommo!” [The nickname is based on the person’s given name]

[Your obese friend John phones you. You say:]

“Hi, Big John!” [The nickname is based on the physical characteristics of the person]

[Your friend who is into technology phones you. You say:]

“Hi Brains!” [The nickname is based on a personality trait, or the hobbies or interests of the person]

When:

When you want to emphasise that you are close enough to somebody to be able to adapt their name in an informal way. Also when you want to show that you belong to a particular group because everybody uses the same nicknames, while people outside the group don’t know the nicknames.

2. EXAGGERATION

An exaggeration is a statement that something is better than, worse than, more than, etc. when compared to the truth, which is more mundane.

Example:

“My feet are killing me!” [This is an idiom that means you feel tired and want to sit down. Your feet hurt, perhaps because you have been standing up for a long period of time. Your feet are not *literally* killing you!]

When:

When you want your speech to be more imaginative and interesting than normal speech. Perhaps you want people to notice you or you want to make a point in a strong way, or you are doing it to get a laugh, by making your listener imagine a humorous image.

3. IDIOMS

An idiom is a phrase that has a fixed meaning which cannot usually be understood by studying the literal meaning of each word in the phrase.

Example:

“Does dad really think Paul is having an affair with Mandy?”

“No, of course not. He was only *pulling your leg*.” [He was only *joking*, rather than physically pulling somebody’s leg.]

When:

In everyday speech, and in most sentences – unfortunately for learners of English! English idioms get so ingrained in the consciousness and speech patterns of the average native speaker, from before birth, that to them it feels far more *natural* to use idioms than literal language. Plus, idiomatic phrases are far more expressive, colourful, inventive, creative, and *fun* than their literal counterparts.

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4. DISCOURSE MARKERS

A discourse marker is a short word, phrase, or sound that acts as a slight pause in speech, when the speaker needs time to think of what to say next, but doesn't want to give up their turn to speak.

Example:

"How do you feel about leaving college next week?"

"I think it's, *like*, gonna be, *you know, like, uh...* really good." [The words in italics have no meaning. They act as a form of punctuation in the sentence.]

When:

When you want to pause while talking to think of the next word, or where to go next with the conversation, but not let anybody else start talking. If you do this a lot, it may turn into a habit and you will use speech markers like punctuation in a written sentence, e.g. *like* = a comma [,]. Young people often use discourse markers. They are a sign of the speaker's lack of confidence in the value of what they are saying, because by pausing regularly they are able to closely monitor the reaction of their listener(s) and perhaps amend what they say in light of this feedback.

Also known as: *speech markers*.

5. PHRASAL VERBS

A phrasal verb is a verb phrase that consists of a verb plus preposition or adverb (or both), which has a meaning that may not be obvious from knowing the dictionary meaning of each individual word in the phrase.

Example:

"Thing's are *looking up!*" [My life is generally improving.]

When:

In spoken English phrasal verbs are more common because they are less formal than longer single verbs. Like idioms, we learn phrasal verbs from before birth; the simple one-syllable verbs that are used in phrasal verbs (with a preposition or adverb, or both) are familiar to young children and easy to remember. The prepositions and adverbs (in, out, up, down, on, off, back, etc.) bring a vibrant sense of action and movement to our speech, making it more interesting than if we used only standard verbs. With over 7,000 phrasal verbs in English, phrasal verbs create many shades of meaning, making English a rich and expressive language. It also allows us to quickly invent new verbs (e.g. the recent slang expression "Bog off!" which means "Go away!") without having to find verbs from Latin or other foreign languages, or inventing new verbs from scratch.

6. SAYINGS / PROVERBS

A saying or proverb is a well known phrase or sentence that includes wisdom from literature or folklore, and as such is generally accepted to be trustworthy, having been proved wise time after time by succeeding generations.

Example:

"Do you think it'll rain tomorrow?"

"Look out of the window. *Red sky at night, shepherd's delight.*" [Because there is a red sunset at the moment, according to the saying the weather will be fine tomorrow.]

When:

When you want to add weight to your opinions by citing received opinion that is generally considered, by the majority of people, to be wise and trustworthy.

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7. SIMILES

A simile is a statement with “like” or “as” that compares somebody or something to something else, especially when it cannot be literally true.

Example:

“Why do you want to get a divorce?”

“Because *you are like a weight around my neck*. I can’t stay with you!” [Literally means: “I feel trapped by you; you are putting too much pressure on me...”]

When:

When you want to emphasise something, and make the other person think about the meaning of what you’re saying in a different, non-obvious way. When you want to appear poetic or romantic, e.g. “Your teeth are like stars!” (You can make a classic English joke if you continue with “They come out at night!”)

8. SWEARING

Swearing is an activity that uses swear words – words or phrases that are considered by most people to be impolite or offensive – and which may be taboo (forbidden on grounds of taste or offense) in certain contexts.

Example:

“My revision was a bloody waste of time.” [The swear word “bloody” acts as an intensifier, to emphasise the noun phrase that follows: “waste of time”. The speaker’s aim is to express their displeasure at having wasted their time – more strongly than it would have been expressed without using “bloody”.

When:

When you want to emphasise a noun (e.g. “A bloody car reversed and hit my bike!”) or an adjective (e.g. “That film was bloody brilliant!”). Or, to insult somebody, e.g. “You are a total arse.” (“arse” is slang for “bottom”). Or, to refer to taboo parts of the body (e.g. “knob” = “penis”), and bodily functions (“shit” = “excrement”). Or, when you want to shock somebody. However, if you use swear words a lot, people around you might become immune to them, and their power to shock will be greatly reduced. If everybody used swear words all the time, they wouldn’t be swear words at all, but normal everyday words and nobody would be offended by them. Their infrequency is what keeps them forbidden.

9. UNDERSTATEMENT

Understatement is a technique in spoken English that the speaker uses to deliberately downplay something by saying that it is/was less great or less important than it actually is/was. Understatement is the opposite of exaggeration.

Example:

[At work your boss spends twenty minutes shouting at the whole team, and then storms out of the office, slamming the door behind them. You are all stunned. Somebody says:]

“Well that was nice!”

[Everybody laughs, because the nervous tension that was built up is released.]

When:

When you want to draw attention to the absurdity or over-seriousness of something or somebody, by reducing its or their significance.