BBC LEARNING ENGLISH
6 Minute English
Faces and first impressions

This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil
Welcome to 6 Minute English, the programme where we explore an interesting topic and bring you six bits of useful vocabulary. I'm Neil.

Rob
And I'm Rob. Today we're talking about **first impressions** – and how they're often wrong.

Neil
So let's start with the term **first impression** – it's the idea or opinion you have about someone after meeting them for only a short time.

Rob
It's very natural to make a quick judgement about someone based on their appearance or facial expression.

Neil
We're going to be hearing about the research of Professor Alexander Todorov from Princeton University in the US. First, a question: how long does he say it takes to form an impression about someone's face?

    a) Under one second
    b) one second
    c) six seconds

Rob
I'll go for b) one second.

Neil
Well, we'll find out if you're right or not at the end of the programme.

Rob
So – Alexander Todorov has been researching our impressions. His tests asked people to decide whether they thought faces were dominant, competent, **trustworthy** or **extroverted**.

Neil
Let's just look at those words for a second. Dominant means being strongest or most important. Competent means being able to do things.

Rob
While if you're **trustworthy** it means people trust you – you are worth their trust. And being extroverted means you are energetic and enjoy spending time with others.

Neil
So what did he find out? Faces that look happy and feminine – like a woman - were rated as more **trustworthy**.

Rob
While faces that were more masculine – like a man – were seen as more dominant.

Neil
Wider faces with big eyes were seen as more **extroverted**.

Rob
Now the important thing that Todorov says is that these judgements *aren't* accurate. Someone who looks competent isn't necessarily competent!

Neil
So, what does this mean in practice? Here's Professor Todorov:

Professor Alexander Todorov, Princeton University
Trustworthiness, dominance and attractiveness are the three big things that we form impressions of people. But interestingly we have done some work predicting the electoral success of politicians, and the judgement that is most predictive of who is going to win the election is **perceived** competence. And this is not random at all, because if you ask voters what is the most important **attribute** of a politician, competence is the one on the top.

Neil
OK, so this is actually quite significant. People say that the most important **attribute** – or quality – for a politician is competence – the ability to do things.

Rob
That sounds fair enough. But because we make judgements based on appearance – this can actually affect how people vote.

Neil

If voters believe – or **perceive** someone to be competent – they're more likely to vote for him or her.

Rob

He says this applies especially to people who are less educated about politics – they are more likely to be influenced by appearance.

Neil

He says this applies to around 25% of voters – so the number of people who **go with their gut** is large enough to influence the outcomes of elections!

Rob

Wow. **To go with your gut**. That means to make a decision which isn't based on rational thought – it's based on instinct, on a feeling, on your gut.

Neil

Yes – your gut is your stomach and the organs in your belly. So, can we tell nothing from a person's face?

Rob

Todorov says faces carry useful information about things like a person's mental state, and whether they're tired or sick. But they don't tell you about a person's character.

Neil

Indeed. It's not only elections where this counts, we also judge during job interviews and meetings.

Rob

So what can we do to minimise the chances of being affected – should we just close our eyes when we meet people?

Neil

Well, it's not such a bad idea! There's the example of the Boston Symphony Orchestra – back in the 1950s it was entirely made up of male musicians. They then introduced 'blind auditions' in other words they listened to new musicians without looking at them.

Rob

And what happened – I guess many more women were selected?

Neil

Exactly – around 50%. Of course, gender and race are also huge factors in how we perceive faces. Todorov says we tend to react most positively to faces that look like our own.

Rob

Right, well – I guess we just need to take a deep breath and try not to judge too much.

Neil

Easier said than done, I'm afraid. Especially when we judge so quickly! But do we do it in under a second, one second or six seconds?

Rob

I said one second.

Neil

According to Todorov it takes under one second.

Rob

I think it's safe to say it's very fast. So shall we *quickly* go through today's vocabulary?

Neil

Ok – first up: **first impression** – the first judgement you make about something. What was your **first impression** of me, Rob?

Rob

Well I thought you were very **trustworthy** and **extroverted**.

Neil

Well isn't that convenient, (and accurate?!), because those were exactly the two adjectives I wanted to look at next. Being **trustworthy** is important in life – it means people trust you…

Rob

And being **extroverted** is more of a character type – **extroverts** like to be with people, and are often seen as confident – whereas the opposite – introverts, usually need to spend time on their own, and aren't as loud.

Neil

Both of these are interesting **attributes** – or qualities. You could say that mathematical ability is an essential **attribute** for an engineer.

Rob

And competence is the number one attribute for a politician. Although people don't always vote depending on actual competence, they base it on their **perception**.

Neil

What they see, or **perceive**, as competence. '**Perceived** competence' might be different from actual competence!

Rob

Yes, in many situations we tend to **go with our guts**. We make decisions based on deep feelings. Do you do that, Neil?

Neil

Yes, some things you can think about too much. When I left my last job, I really just **went with my gut** – it felt like the right thing to do.

Rob

Of course – because it meant coming to work here with me!

Neil

Naturally. So – that's it for our chat about first impressions – for more do visit our Facebook, Twitter, Instagram and YouTube pages, and of course our website!

Rob

Bye for now.

Both

Bye!