
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

The benefits of schadenfreude



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English, I'm Neil. This is the programme where in just six minutes we discuss an interesting topic and teach some related English vocabulary. And joining me to do this is Rob.

Rob

Hello.

Neil

In this programme we're discussing **schadenfreude**.

Rob

Hold on, Neil – schadenfreude – that's a German word.

Neil

Schadenfreude is what we can call a **loanword** - a word from one language that is used in another language without being changed.

Rob

So you're right – schadenfreude is used in English and am I right in thinking it describes the satisfying feeling you get when something bad happens to someone else?

Neil

You're right, Rob. Imagine you're in a queue at the supermarket and someone pushes in, but when they got to pay, their credit card doesn't work – think of the feeling you might get just seeing their misfortune – another word for bad luck.

Rob

Yes, that is a very satisfying feeling – but it's quite a mean feeling too.

Neil

It is but we'll be discussing why that feeling could actually be good for us. But first, let's set a question for you, Rob, and our listeners at home, to answer. This is about false cognates – also called false friends - words that look the same in two languages but have different meanings. So in English we have the word 'rat' but what does that mean in German? Is it...

- a) a big mouse

- b) annoyed or
- c) advice

Rob

That's tricky because I don't speak German. So I'll guess and say b) annoyed.

Neil

Well, I'll have the answer later on. Now, let's talk more about *schadenfreude*. Enjoying someone's misfortune can certainly make us feel good.

Rob

And studies have shown this feeling is quite normal – particularly when it happens to someone we envy. If we see a wealthy celebrity suffering on a reality TV show, or are exposed for not paying their taxes, we feel good. We say they've had their **comeuppance**.

Neil

That's a good word – meaning a person's bad luck that is considered to be deserved punishment for something bad that they have done.

Rob

Let's hear from psychologist Wilco Van Dijk from the University of Leiden, who's been talking about this on the BBC Radio 4 programme, *All in the Mind*. What have his studies found about our enjoyment of others' misfortune?

Wilco Van Dijk, psychologist, University of Leiden

People especially feel *schadenfreude* when they think the misfortune is deserved. Then the question is where this joy arises, is this actually joy experienced towards the misfortune of others or is it also at least partly about a **just situation** – that this misfortune of another actually appeals to a sense of **justice**. That's also the reason why we like the misfortune of **hypocrites** because if they fall down that also is a deserved situation.

Neil

OK, so Wilco Van Dijk's studies found we get joy when someone's misfortune is deserved – there is **justice** – in other words, the punishment someone receives is fair.

Rob

And a **just situation** means a fair situation – it is right. So I guess he's saying we're not just being mean.

Neil

Yes. And he also mentioned the type of people whose misfortune is just and deserved, are **hypocrites** – people who claim to have certain moral beliefs but actually behave in a way that shows they are not sincere.

Rob

The *All in the Mind* programme also heard from another expert on the subject – author and historian of emotions, Dr Tiffany Watt-Smith. She talked about how *schadenfreude* is a

subjective thing – based on our feelings – and it's not as simple as deciding what is right or wrong. What word does she use that means to express sympathy to someone about someone's bad luck?

Dr Tiffany Watt-Smith, author and historian of emotions

We don't really experience emotions, you know, as either-or things, it's not black or white. I think it's perfectly reasonable that we could genuinely **commiserate** with someone else's misfortune at the same time as a terrible **sly** smile spreading across our lips because, you know, something we've envied about them has turned out not to work out so well or whatever it is. You know, we have a much deeper ability to hold contradictory emotions in mind, much more so than your average moral philosopher would allow.

Neil

Interesting stuff. She says when something goes wrong for someone, we have the ability to **commiserate** with them – that's the word for expressing sympathy to someone about their bad luck.

Rob

So overall, Tiffany Watt-Smith thinks we have a range of emotions when we experience *schadenfreude* – but these are contradictory emotions – different and opposite emotions. Maybe, Neil, we should just be nicer people?

Neil

No way! I loved seeing Germany getting knocked out of last year's World Cup – not really! Talking of Germany, earlier we mentioned false friends and I asked in English we have the word 'rat' but what does that mean in German? Is it...

- a) a big mouse
- b) annoyed
- c) advice

And, Rob, you said...

Rob

I said b) annoyed.

Neil

And that is the wrong answer, I'm afraid. The right answer is c) advice. Well done if you knew that at home.

Now on to the vocabulary we looked at in this programme.

Rob

So today we've been talking about **schadenfreude** – that describes the satisfying feeling you get when something bad happens to someone else.

Neil

And that's an example of a **loanword** - a word from one language that is used in another language without being changed. In this case German.

Rob

We mentioned **comeuppance** which describes a person's misfortune that is considered to be deserved punishment for something bad that they've done.

Neil

Next we mentioned **justice** – that's the punishment someone receives that is fair for what they've done. And the word **just** describes something that is fair and right.

Rob

Hypocrites are people who claim to have certain moral beliefs but actually behave in a way that shows they are not sincere.

Neil

And finally **commiserate** is a word that means expressing sympathy to someone about their bad luck. That's the verb. The noun form is **commiseration**.

Rob

Well commiserations, Neil, we've run out of time for this programme. See you soon, goodbye.

Neil

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

schadenfreude

the satisfying feeling you get when something bad happens to someone else

loanword

a word from one language that is used in another language without being changed

comeuppance

a person's misfortune that is considered to be deserved punishment for something bad that they have done

justice

punishment someone receives that is fair for what they have done

hypocrites

people who claim to have certain moral beliefs but actually behave in a way that shows they are not sincere

commiserate

expressing sympathy to someone about their bad luck