
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Is chimp politics like ours?



This is not a word-for-word transcript

Neil

Hello. This is 6 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Neil.

Sam

And I'm Sam.

Neil

In English, there are many expressions which use an adjective to compare humans with animals. For example, you might say, 'She's as busy as a bee'.

Sam

As hungry as a horse. But you probably *won't* hear someone say...

Neil

'She's as clever as a chimpanzee'.

Sam

...which is strange, because of all the animals it's our close cousins, chimpanzees, or chimps for short, who are most like us.

Neil

Just like humans, chimps are highly intelligent. They live in social groups and just like humans these groups have leaders.

Sam

Also, like humans, chimps have a desire for power. In fact, chimpanzees have their own politics, which is surprisingly similar to human politics, as we'll be discovering in this programme.

Neil

Research shows that the reason chimpanzee behaviour so closely resembles human politics is because biologically we are almost identical. Did you know that a chimp is more like a human than like a gorilla? So, Sam, my quiz question is this: biologically, how close are chimpanzees to humans? Is it:

- a) 79 %?
- b) 89 %?, or
- c) 99 %?

Sam

Well, Neil, if chimps and humans are almost identical, I'll guess c) 99 %.

Neil

OK, Sam, we'll find out the correct answer at the end of the programme. In human societies of course, not everyone gets to be a political leader. It's usually the most powerful or ambitious person who becomes president.

Sam

In chimpanzee society this is called the **alpha male** – the most successful and powerful male who leads the group.

Neil

Professor Frans de Waal is an expert on chimpanzee behaviour. Here he is on BBC World Service programme, The Why Factor, telling presenter, James Tilley, about one example of chimp behaviour which closely mirrors human politics.

Prof Frans de Waal

Older males who are **over the hill** and cannot be **alpha males** any more, they start grooming a certain young male who they think has a future, and they may end up making that young male the alpha male with their help, meaning that they are essential to the power of that young male...

Prof James Tilley

They're **the power behind the throne**, really...

Prof Frans de Waal

Yeah – these older males... and you see that in human politics all the time, these older males who have a lot of influence still...

Sam

Professor de Waal calls chimps who are too old to be alpha males, **over the hill** – a phrase describing someone who is old and no longer useful or attractive.

Neil

Older chimps try to control younger males in order to maintain their own power and influence. In other words, they are **the power behind the throne** – an expression meaning someone with no official power but who secretly controls things in the background.

Sam

Another example of chimp politics is when several weaker males gang up and overthrow a stronger alpha male. By working together weaker chimps can increase their power and the benefits, like food, which power brings.

Neil

According to Simon Hicks, professor of political science at the London School of Economics, human alliances work in exactly the same way.

Sam

Here is Professor Hicks speaking with BBC World Service programme, The Why Factor:

Prof Simon Hicks

So, for example if you imagine three parties in a parliament, one big one and two small ones, you might think that naturally the most likely **coalition** is the big party with either one of the two small ones, whereas, in fact, minimum winning coalition prediction would suggest the two smaller ones should **get together**, if together they can reach more than 50 percent of the seats, because they can divide up the **spoils** between the two of them. Whereas, if either one of them form a coalition with a big party, the big party would dominate, and they wouldn't get many of the spoils for themselves.

Neil

Professor Hicks recommends that smaller political parties **get together** – join together in a group to combine their power.

Sam

These smaller parties could form a **coalition** – a collection of different political groups who unite for a limited time to form a government.

Neil

In human politics making coalitions improves your chances of winning an election.

Sam

And in chimpanzee politics coalitions are a good way for young male chimps to defeat the alpha male and divide up the **spoils** between themselves. Here, the word **spoils** means the benefits obtained by winning a war or being in a strong position.

Neil

For ambitious alpha chimps the spoils might include getting first choice of food and female partners.

Sam

While for human politicians' power can bring wealth and fame as well.

Neil

And there's something else alpha chimpanzees and human politicians have in common – they like to show their softer side by kissing babies!

Sam

It looks like chimps and humans share many similar behaviours after all – which reminds me of your quiz question, Neil.

Neil

Yes, in my quiz question I asked Sam how similar we are to chimps. What did you say, Sam?

Sam

I said that, biologically speaking, we're c) 99 % the same.

Neil

Which is... the correct answer! Well done, Sam – you're as clever as a chimp!

Sam

Ah, thanks, Neil! And you're definitely not over the hill! Let's recap the vocabulary from today's programme about chimp politics, starting with **alpha male** - the most successful and powerful male in any group.

Neil

Over the hill is used to describe someone who is old and no longer useful or attractive.

Sam

Someone who is **the power behind the throne** secretly controls things but has no official power.

Neil

Get together means join together as a group.

Sam

A **coalition** is when different political groups temporarily unite to form a government.

Neil

And finally, the **spoils** are benefits or advantages gained by winning a war.

Sam

That's all for this programme. Bye for now!

Neil

Goodbye!

VOCABULARY

alpha male

the most successful and powerful male in any group

over the hill

used to describe someone who is old and no longer useful or attractive

the power behind the throne

someone who does not have official power but who secretly controls things

coalition

different political groups who join together for a limited time to form a government

get together

join together as a group; combine

spoils

benefits, advantages or profits obtained by winning a war or being in a position of power