

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Live webcast

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About this script

Please note that this is not a word for word transcript of the programme as broadcast. In the recording process changes may have been made which will not be reflected here.

Callum: Hello, I'm Callum Robertson. And this is the Talk about English webcast coming live from the offices of BBC Learning English in Bush House, London.

In the programme today English language and literature. We hear about a new poetry website and we focus on William Shakespeare, his theatre and his language.

And we'll also be answering some of your questions about English.

Joining me today, our guests are Nuala O'Sullivan, who'll be looking at some of the language you've used to talk about Shakespeare and also answering some questions on the English language, hello Nuala.

Nuala: (Greet)

Callum: And also joining us is actor, David Thorpe

(chat with David about his work)

Callum: If you would like to ask David a question about being an actor, or if you would like to talk to us about your experiences of acting or Shakespeare then send us an email to talkaboutenglish@bbc.co.uk

And David, you have the question for this week's competition.

David: This is a question about Shakespeare and superstition – for actors in the theatre it is said to be bad luck to say the name of this play. It is usually called the Scottish Play instead. What is this play?

Callum: You will hear the answer later in the programme. And when you think you know the answer send it to us at talkaboutenglish@bbc.co.uk – David will pick out the winner at the end of the programme.

We're also running a vote during this webcast. How would you prefer to experience a Shakespeare play – by reading it, by seeing a play, by seeing a film or not at all! Vote now on the website and we'll give you the result also at the end of the programme.

Now we're going to hear from our colleague Amber Barnfather about a new website which you can use to help with your listening and also your knowledge of poetry in English.

Amber: Hello, I'm Amber, and in the programme today we hear about The Poetry Archive - a brilliant new website to stretch your listening skills! The site was launched at the end of last year at the British Library in London. At www.poetryarchive.co.uk you'll find readings by contemporary English-language poets – like Wendy Cope and Seamus Heaney - and poets from the past – like Siegfried Sassoon, who reads one of his haunting poems about the First World War.

Andrew Motion, the UK Poet Laureate, is one of the founders of the project. He'll be explaining why The Poetry Archive is such an exciting and useful on-line library.

So, what's special about listening to a poem read by the poet who wrote it? Andrew Motion makes three points: He says it's fascinating to hear what a poet's voice sounds like. And it can help you to understand a poem. And the third point? See if you can catch one, or both, of the expressions he uses to describe how poems make sense.

He does speak very quickly but we'll repeat the extracts from his interview.

Andrew Motion

“There is a level of fascination about what people's voices are like, there's a level of understanding that becomes available when you hear them aloud, and there is the absolutely fundamental point that the sound-sense and page-sense can't be separated.’

Amber: There is the important point that poems communicate through ‘sound-sense’ (through rhythm and rhyme, for example) – and through what Andrew Motion calls ‘page-sense’ – (the way the words are arranged on the page). Listen again.

Andrew Motion

“There is a level of fascination about what people's voices are like, there's a level of understanding that becomes available when you hear them aloud, and there is the absolutely fundamental point that the sound-sense and page-sense can't be separated.’

Amber: Sound-sense and page-sense - two useful compound words for describing how we absorb the meaning of a poem. Sound-sense and page-sense.
Next, we asked Andrew Motion to talk about what you can do at The Poetry Archive beside listen to poems.

Andrew Motion

“Well, it depends who you are. If you’re a primary school child there is a dimension of the site which is especially for you, there’s a site for teachers, there’s a site for secondary school children with a great deal of supplementary material added to it – lesson plans, and advice about listening, and interviews with the poets (not all the poets, but some of the poets), and so on and so on. There’s a mass of stuff there – I think if you laid it end to end it would be about a sort-of 150 page book – but it’s all good stuff!”

Amber: So The Poetry Archive is really like lots of websites within one big website, and for students and teachers of English as a foreign or second language, there should be plenty of interesting material. What do you think would be useful for you? Listen again.

Andrew Motion

“Well, it depends who you are. If you’re a primary school child there is a dimension of the site which is especially for you, there’s a site for teachers, there’s a site for secondary school children with a great deal of supplementary material added to it – lesson plans, and advice about listening, and interviews with the poets (not all the poets, but some of the poets), and so on and so on. There’s a mass of stuff there – I think if you laid it end to end it would be about a sort-of 150 page book – but it’s all good stuff!”

Amber: To end our glimpse inside The Poetry Archive, Andrew Motion explains his hopes for the project. He says he wants it to work like a magnet, drawing people to listen to poetry, even if they don’t know much about it – yet!

Andrew Motion

‘I hope it gathers together a lot of the important things that anybody interested in poetry - who already knows something about it - would find valuable, and also, of course, I hope it’s a magnet for people who don’t yet know very much about poems, or feel unconfident about poems. I mean, I think it’s an important thing.’

Amber: So dive in to www.poetryarchive.co.uk. Then if you don't know where to start, try searching for a poem by theme – here are a few of the subjects you can choose from: the sea, money, mothers, flowers, childhood, animals, ghosts, dreams ...
Happy listening.

Callum: That was Amber Barnfather.

(quick discussion – are we poetry fans? Move on to Shakespeare – today's topic,)

David:

Shakespeare regarded as perhaps greatest English writer
1564 – 1616

Wrote about 38 plays – comedies, tragedies and histories, also a large number of sonnets.
Popular in his lifetime and after – huge influence on the English language –

Callum: We asked you to write in about Shakespeare, have you seen any of his plays?
What do you think of them – Nuala, I think you've been looking at some of the responses.

Nuala: (Some comments)

Callum: One theatre that famous was particularly associated with was the Globe Theatre. He even referred to it in his plays. In Henry V he called it – This wooden O

The original theatre doesn't exist anymore but there is a reconstruction on the South Bank of the river Thames. I spoke to Patrick Spottiswoode who is the

Director of Globe Education to find out more about the theatre and Shakespeare's connection to it. First I asked him why Shakespeare called it, This Wooden O. Listen out for the answer.

Patrick Spottiswoode

It is a round building. It is in fact a twenty-sided wooden O, a polygonal O. And it is made of oak in the main, and it's an open air O so people gather round in the theatre to hear a play. I mean in English we say 'gather round' we don't say 'gather square'. And you gather round to get close to hear a story. And these were great story-telling venues and thousands of people would want to get close to the actors. So the circle enables you to get close to the actor.

Callum: Shakespeare referred to the Globe as this Wooden O because it was made out of wood and it was round, a circle, like the letter O – although in fact it actually had twenty sides. The audience liked to be able to gather round and get close to the actors – to gather round – a verb which we use when we want people to come close together to listen to something, gather round. The audience like to be close to the actors. David, as an actor, do you like to be close to the audience?

David: (replies)

Callum: We'll be discovering more of the history of the Globe Theatre a little later on, but now it's time to speak to someone on the phone.

CALLER – Adam from Poland

Callum: You're listening to Talk about English, live from London. With me today are Nuala O'Sullivan and actor David Thorpe. We've been talking about William Shakespeare – Nuala, what have people been writing.

Nuala: (Comment – Macbeth)

Callum: Macbeth is one of my favourite plays, David I think as an actor there is quite a big superstition connected to this play isn't there?

David: (About "Scottish Play" and other superstitions)

Callum: In London Shakespeare was closely associated with the Globe Theatre. We're now going to hear a bit more about the history of the theatre from the Director of Globe education, Patrick Spottiswoode. When was it built and what happened to it in 1613.

Patrick Spottiswoode

Well it was built in 1599 and Shakespeare and a group of actors put money together to build the theatre. It was the first time ever in England actors had paid to build a theatre. So that was very special. And it became the number one theatre in London as Shakespeare's company became the number one acting company of London. So it became from 1599 as the number one venue for theatre and certainly the number one venue for Shakespeare's plays until 1613. And in 1613 they put on a play about Henry VIII and they had a cannon effect to announce the arrival of the king on stage. But it was a special effect that went badly wrong because a spark from the cannon flew up and hit the roof which is made of thatch. It caught fire and the theatre burnt to the ground during a performance.

Callum: So the Globe was destroyed by fire in 1613 after a special effect went wrong and set fire to the thatch roof – thatch is a kind of dried grass that was used for roofs in those days – and in fact can still be seen in some parts of the country – David have you ever experienced any special effects going wrong (or other mishaps?)

David: (Responds)

Callum: We've had a question from Sarah and Aimee

I wonder if you could help to clarify the actual meanings of the word Metaphor. My daughter is seven and the word "metaphor" came up in a book she is reading. She asked me to explain it so she could enter it into her vocabulary book, and I did, but when she went to school the next day, her teacher told her I'd incorrectly defined it.

Any help would be much appreciated as I'm truly intrigued now. English is a fabulous but complicated language sometimes, even for native speakers!

Callum: Well this is a very interesting question and one which I think we can use examples from Shakespeare to help. David – what is a metaphor?

David: Well it's a way of comparing one thing to another, to provide an image that helps to explain something or provide a dramatic feeling – Shakespeare's writings are full of metaphors

(Examples of metaphors from Shakespeare with some explanation)

Nuala: But it's not just in Shakespeare, we use metaphors in our everyday speech all the time – (egs) the mouth of a river, a table-leg, eye of a storm, he's an angel!
Raining cats and dogs

Callum: And there's another speech figure that's often used, similar to a metaphor, called a simile.

David: (Explanation and examples from Shakespeare)

Nuala: (Examples from everyday speech) When we were children we used to fight like cats and dogs.

Callum: (Make point that English full of images in the way we talk)

CALLER – George from Romania

Callum: You're listening to Talk about English, live from London. And now it's time to drop in on the latest adventures of the Flatmates in our online soap opera. In today's episode Alice and Tim are arriving back in England after their trip to the world cup.

FLATMATES

Attendant: Ladies and gentlemen, welcome to London.

Please wait until the aircraft has come to a complete standstill before unfastening your seatbelts.

We would like to remind you that mobile phones must remain completely switched off until the seatbelt sign has been turned off.

Please remember that you can only smoke in designated areas once inside the terminal building.

Please take care when opening the overhead lockers as the contents may have moved during the flight and might fall out and injure you or your fellow passengers.

Thank you for flying with us and we look forward to seeing you onboard with us again soon.

(mobile phone ring)

Attendant: Excuse me madam, didn't you just hear the announcement?

Alice: I'm not phoning anyone I just want to see if there are any messages for me.

Callum: Well what kind of trouble will Alice get into? You can decide at bbclearningenglish.com/flatmates

This week we've been looking at Shakespeare and finding out about the Globe Theatre which he founded. The Globe has an iconic status, a very important place in the history of theatre in Britain. I asked Patrick Spottiswoode, director of Globe Education why that was.

Patrick Spottiswoode

It has that status because it was the birthplace of Shakespeare's work and Shakespeare is the one who has the iconic status so we look to the building that he's associated with. I mean Shakespeare's plays have now been translated into over 90 languages. Shakespeare belongs to the world and almost every country in the world, every language in the world has translated probably at least one play by Shakespeare, or fragments of a play, or taken a Shakespeare story and translated it. So I think people are fascinated to know where does this universal genius come from, you know. And they look for palaces and they find this little thatched building on the South Bank of the Thames and that's where it all began.

Callum: Shakespeare belongs to the world! I think Nuala you have a comment that echoes that

Nuala: (comments)

Callum: Each week on the website we answer one question about the English language, but we receive many many more questions. Today we thought we'd try and answer a few questions very quickly – so Nuala, are you ready?

(Nuala and Callum answer questions)

Callum: That's about all we have time for today – before we go though, David can you give us the answer to this week's competition and tell us who the winner is:

David: (Answer and winner)

Callum: Thanks, and Nuala, our vote?

Nuala: (vote result)

Callum: Thank you very much to David Thorpe and Nuala O'Sullivan – join us again next week for more Talk about English. Goodbye

All: (Goodbye)