

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Webcast – politics, language and slang
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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.

Jackie: Hello, welcome to Talk About English, coming to you live from the BBC World Service in London. I'm Jackie Dalton.

Callum: And I'm Callum Robertson.

Jackie: In today's programme: language and politics

Clip

Callum: And slang – when, if ever, is it appropriate?

Clip

Jackie: We'll also have a slang challenge for our guests here in the studio.

Callum: That's all coming in Talk About English.

Jackie: Over the next three weeks, we're focusing on the language of politics and diplomacy. And today, more specifically, the importance of choosing your words carefully. Later on in the programme, we'll include a look at law and international law – a field where language and word choice can be absolutely crucial. To help us with that is

Stephen Fox, an international law specialist. Welcome to the programme.

Callum: And we're also joined this week by an English learner, Juliette Perreard, who's from France. Hello.

Callum: On our website we've been asking you what your favourite English slang expressions are – keep them coming. Write to us at talkaboutenglish@bbc.co.uk

COMPETITION TIME!

Jackie: There is also a competition question for you this week.

Callum: Yes, it's: what are Callum and Jackie's favourite slang words? You'll hear the answer in the programme – though you may also manage to find the answer on the webcast page now if you look closely. And, most importantly - otherwise there's no prize - we want you to write sentences using these words.

Jackie: So send your sentences to talkaboutenglish@bbc.co.uk. What are Callum's and my favourite slang words and put them in a sentence for us. And for those who aren't quite sure what slang is – we've had a few questions in about that - Callum, dude, what is slang?

Callum: The kind of language you hear in the streets, in bars – most often when young people are talking to each other. It's considered to be informal, in some cases rude.

Jackie: We've had this email in from Boris in China, who says he's rather unclear about the whole thing. He has some very good questions relating to slang.

Callum: Yes, Boris asks: How widely are slang words accepted? Is it that just a handful of speakers - just a few speakers - know slang words? Is slang similar to dialect?

Jackie: Well hopefully we'll be answering that question of how widely is slang accepted as we get through the programme. But what about the issue of slang as a kind of dialect, which only a certain group of people know?

All: (discuss)

Jackie: So anyway, we've established the slang is not what we might call 'the Queen's English.' Having said all this, there have recently been a number of cases of very high profile public figures and leaders using expressions which certainly wouldn't be seen as the Queen's English. This one for example:

President Bush

There are some who feel like the conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is 'bring 'em on!' We've got the necessary force to deal with the security situation.

Jackie: That was President George W. Bush talking about Iraq in 2003. Did you catch the slang expression? What was it? What does it mean? Let's listen again:

President Bush

There are some who feel like the conditions are such that they can attack us there. My answer is 'bring 'em on!' We've got the necessary force to deal with the security situation.

Jackie: 'Bring 'em on' – a phrase my twelve year old neighbour loves to use when he's playing computer games and about to kill lots of evil monsters. Used in quite a different context here though. First, Callum, what does this phrase mean?

Callum: (explains)

Jackie: What George Bush meant by this was 'Let them attack us because we have a strong enough army to cope.' But his use of this slang 'bring 'em on' brought him a lot of criticism because for some people it sounded like he didn't take the whole issue very seriously and saw it as a bit of a game.

A more recent incident which attracted a lot of media attention was a conversation between President Bush and the British Prime Minister, Tony Blair. They were speaking privately, but their words were picked up by a microphone that had not been switched off. Let's listen to part of a report on that.

News Report

President Bush meanwhile, has been caught on microphone using an expletive as he discussed Hezbollah's rocket attacks on Israel.

Jackie: President Bush caught using an 'expletive' – what's an expletive Callum?

Callum: (explains)

Jackie: Let's listen to the rest of that report. Just a warning that it does contain language that some people may find offensive.

News Report

President Bush meanwhile, has been caught on microphone using an expletive as he discussed Hezbollah's rocket attacks on Israel. Mr Bush was recorded telling Tony Blair privately that Syria should press Lebanese militants to 'stop doing this shit'.
(recording of part of conversation).

Jackie: The President of the United States swearing – privately, he didn't know he was being recorded. Does it matter?

All: (discuss)

Jackie: The other thing that was recorded during that conversation was the way President Bush greeted Mr Blair – he said 'Yo Blair!' Here in Britain there was almost more fuss in the press about that than there was about the expletive. And shortly after the incident Mr Blair stood up to make a statement in the House of Commons, which is where members of parliament – elected politicians - meet. As he did so members of the opposition shouted out "Yo!"

Callum: Stephen – what about slang in international law courts – do you think lawyers nowadays can get away with using slang?

END OF PART ONE

Jackie: You're listening to Talk About English. I'm Jackie Dalton.

Callum: I'm Callum Robertson, and our guests today are Stephen Fox, international law specialist and language learner Juliette Perreard.

Jackie: Let's hear now another phrase that is traditionally very informal, but was said by John Boulton, the U.S. ambassador to the United Nations in a recent interview. What's the phrase he uses?

John Boulton

Presenter: What do you say to those people who say that if President Bush hadn't spoken of the axis of evil, including North Korea in that list, North Korea may not have felt pushed into wanting to show its might

John Bolton: I'd say 'get a life'

Jackie: 'Get a life!' – has anyone ever told you to get a life Callum?

Callum: (responds)

Jackie: Well that's one bit of slang that we asked one of the world's leading authorities on the English language to explain. Here's Professor David Crystal.

David Crystal - Get A Life

This familiar old noun 'life', now used widely in the phrase 'get a life!', usually in a derogatory tone of voice like that – 'Get a life, why don't you!' Well, it's said to somebody who the speaker feels is leading an unfulfilling existence, your life is empty, dull, there's more to life than what you're doing, start living!

It can be serious, but it's usually jocular. It can be used for instance to a workaholic, or for anybody obsessed with something like a television programme, always watching a particular soap, shall we say. That person might be told to 'get a life'.

The phrase goes back a couple of decades. It was US slang in California, years and years ago, and then it became the name of a US television show. And then it became all sorts of usages around radio, television, novels, short stories – don't take things too seriously! Chill out! Get a life! It happens to the best of us ... people who pity my obsession with linguistics, often tell me to 'get a life'!

Jackie: There was another phrase that Professor Crystal mentioned there. He said 'Chill out!' Juliette, do you know what that means?

Juliette: (responds)

Jackie: Let's hear one more bit of slang that's come from the lips of a high-profile public figure lately and that's the writer, Salman Rushdie.

Callum: Salman Rusdie was talking about comments made by an important government leader, Jack Straw on the veil – worn by some Muslim women.

Jackie: So what's the slang expression Rushdie uses here?

Rushdie

He was expressing an important opinion, which is that veils suck, which they do.

All: (discuss)

Jackie: Well we've been asking the British public what they make of all this slang use. Let's have a listen.

Slang and politicians

Man 1: I would say it's a shame, but I don't think it's very important, to be perfectly honest, so long as they get their sense across – maybe using slang expressions is a way of doing it.

Woman: Personally I prefer good English, but then I'm a bit older!

Man 2: I think it's false. They're trying to appeal to the younger person.... And I don't think it fools anybody, to be honest with you.

William: Do you think in general people use slang too much?

Man 1: Well, part of me says 'yes', and part of me says 'If it's a means of getting a sense of something across in a more **rumbustious** way, then perhaps it's alright'.

Man 3: (It) completely depends on the context in which you use the language.... er... but it seems to be generally yeah, a lot of slang around. But that's better than too much *formality*.

Man 2: (It) depends what level you work at – if you're a politician, no I think you should keep a certain level of speaking. Why speak slang? Probably a lot of the older generation don't understand slang, because it's changed as well now.

Man 4: At certain times, yeah it's alright, yeah – normal conversation, that's fine. But for a politician to be on a main platform to use slang? – I think that's not right.

All: (discuss)

Gons, Spain

Politicians from the point of view that they are talking to public in general, including children, should be careful with the language they use. They are, in some way, educators. They are making laws and have the power, so they have to be respectful. It is very annoying to hear politicians talking slang.

Jose Chu, China

Slang can make the conversations become more interesting and accessible. I think it is acceptable that the politicians use slang occasionally but not often. This probably can raise their status because he or she uses slang just like many of us do everyday.

Callum: So we've heard a mix of views there, but I think from that we can reach the general conclusion that many people think it depends very much on the context – the particular situation you're in.

Jackie: But I have to say there are some slang words that I find especially annoying and hate hearing whatever the context. E.g. 'get real' – used to tell someone they're being unreasonable or a bit silly.

All: (Discuss)

Hee-seong, South Korea

I watch the famous "Jamie Oliver's Kitchen" programme on our food/cooking channel, which is a lot of fun. He sometimes says, "Gordon Bennett!" or "Bob's your uncle."

mate!" while he is cooking or when everything is perfectly done. Those expressions bring me a big smile. Similarly, "Jolly good!" seems to be quite uniquely British. I sometimes use it for fun when talking with British people here in Korea.

Eunjung, South Korea

My favourite slang in English is '**blimey**'.

END OF PART TWO

Jackie: This is Talk About English, coming to you from the BBC World Service in London. I'm Jackie Dalton, with me is Callum Robertson and our two guests today, Juliette Perreard, an English learner and Stephen Fox, international law specialist.

Callum: We've been talking about politics and slang. And we'll be back on the subject of slang soon, but first Stephen Fox, we've brought you here to talk about an area of politics and diplomacy where language use and interpretation of language is very important and that's international law.

All: (discuss)

Jackie: Now it's time for a little challenge for Juliette. We have a number of slang expressions which we'd like you to explain if you can. Here's the first one:

Bloke - Man.

Oooh, look at that bloke over there, he's rather nice!

Loo - Toilet.

Ooop! Excuse me! I must pop to the loo

Knackered - Tired

I hardly slept last night, I'm absolutely knackered!

Codswallop – Rubbish, as in 'He's talking codswallop!'

That's absolute codswallop – I don't believe a word of it!

Muppet - A foolish or stupid person,

You muppet – you've made a complete mess of this!

Raining cats and dogs – Heavy rain.

It's raining cats and dogs outside. I must remember to take my brolly

Jackie: Now it's time for Callum and Stephen to show off their knowledge of the English language. These questions are a bit tougher and they're all related to politics and slang.

hatchet job – A ruthless effort to destroy something or someone

They did a **hatchet job** on the minister's reputation.

A **champagne socialist** – someone who claims to support socialist, working class values in public, but who leads a very different, comfortable private life.

Jackie: That's all for this week. Thank you to our guests Stephen and Juliette. From all of us for now from the World Service in London, it's 'Goodbye!