

BBC Learning English

Talk about English

Webcast - Nonsense



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About this script, William says ...

Sorry, this is not a word for word transcript of the programme as broadcast. This is the script I used when I went into the studio but it isn't always exactly what I said during the programme.

William: Hello and welcome to Talk about English from BBC Learning English dot com. My name is William Kremer and today we're talking about... nonsense.

Why are we talking about nonsense? Well, actually it's a very interesting subject. We'll be talking about everyday nonsense, poetic nonsense and nonsense in language:

Rumsfeld: There are known unknowns – that is to say that there are things that we now know we don't know... but there also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don't know.

William: But we will be taking a break from the nonsense, as we ask a listener in Russia what his favourite saying in English is...

Dmitry: If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition and if you want to know your future life, look into your present action.

William: Don't worry, you'll get to hear those words of wisdom again later on, in Talk about English!

Well, to help me talk about nonsense today, I'm very pleased to be joined by Professor Hugh Haughton from the University of York. Thanks for coming today.

Hugh: (responds)

William: And also with me in the studio is BBC Learning English's very own language expert, Catherine Chapman. Hi Catherine.

Catherine: (responds)

William: Catherine, give us a very basic sort of five word definition of what nonsense is.

Catherine: If something is nonsense, it's silly or ridiculous....

William: Right... but Hugh, you're obviously very clever and you don't seem at all a silly or ridiculous person!... so why are you interested in nonsense?

Hugh: (responds)

William: (Well, we'll come back to nonsense poetry in a few minutes.) But first, let's find out more about the everyday usage of the word 'nonsense'. Now, you might know what this word means, but how do native speakers normally use it? Here are some word facts:

Word Facts

When we use the word *nonsense* in everyday conversation, it's usually in quite a negative way – to show that we think something isn't right. For example, if we disagreed with somebody, we might say:

I think that's nonsense!

This is a very strong word. Another strong word, which the British use in the same way, is the word *rubbish*:

That's rubbish!

We can use the verb *to talk* with these words.

Don't talk rubbish!

These words are very strong and can be quite rude, but we can make them even stronger by using the adjectives *total*, *complete* and *absolute*.

I'm sick of hearing this! It's total rubbish!

What he said at the time was absolute nonsense, as he admitted himself later.

I wouldn't read that article. It's complete nonsense, I think.

We can also say *a load of nonsense*.

I wouldn't watch read that article. It's a load of nonsense, I think.

If we want a formal word to describe something unreasonable, we can use the adjective *nonsensical*.

'When you think about it carefully, it's a nonsensical argument'.

So that's *talking nonsense* or *rubbish*, *absolute nonsense*, *total nonsense*, *complete nonsense*, *a load of nonsense* and *nonsensical*.

William: What a load of nonsense. Catherine, we heard there about some everyday uses of the word 'nonsense' but there's a more technical meaning to the word, isn't there?

Catherine: (responds)

William: Can you give us an example of what you mean?

Catherine: (responds)

William: Hugh, is nonsense poetry poetry which doesn't have a meaning?

Hugh: (responds)

William: OK, so give us an example of nonsense poem...

Hugh: (responds)

William: Well, if you're listening at home, we'd love to receive some nonsense from you. It's not that hard, so please give it a go by clicking on the comments tab on the webcast webpage.

Now let's hear from our caller... and today, I'm talking to Dmitry in Russia:

William: Hello who am I talking to today?

Dmitry: Hello this is Dmitry, I am from Moscow.

William: Oh hello Dmitry, tell me a bit about yourself.

Dmitry: Well I'm originally from Ukraine but now I'm studying in Moscow, and I'm studying at Moscow state university and I am a student of chemistry.

William: But your English is very good, do you need English for your studies?

Dmitry: Yes thank you for your compliment. Well, I do need English for my studying because well, I take part in different conferences and I even happen to be abroad studying chemistry for a while.

William: Oh really? Whereabouts were you?

Dmitry: Well this summer I spent in UK.

William: Oh really! In London or...

Dmitry: No I went to Cambridge.

William: Oh so you were at Cambridge university?

Dmitry: Yes.

William: Oh wow. Very prestigious.

Dmitry: Thank you.

William: What's your favourite expression in English Dmitry?

- Dmitry:** The expression in English I like the most is the following one: If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition and if you want to know your future life, look into your present action.
- William:** Wow so that sounds like a proper quote. Did someone famous say that Dmitry?
- Dmitry:** Mmh no just motto of my life. I just wanted to say hello to everyone who will hear me and to those who are studying English at the moment. I just want to say them that they must be very determined to achieve something worth(while).
- William:** Well thank you very much Dmitry for talking to me today. It's great to speak to you.
- Dmitry:** Thank you.
- William:** Ok, bye bye.
- Dmitry:** Bye bye.
- William:** Dmitry there, with his favourite saying – ‘If you want to know your past life, look into your present condition and if you want to know your future life, look into your present action’. And since speaking to Dmitry, I’ve found out that those words are indeed a quote and they’re from the eighth century Buddhist teacher Padmasambhava.
- But... I think that’s enough wisdom for one programme, especially one that’s supposed to be about nonsense! Hugh Haughton, we were talking before nonsense poetry, but what’s its appeal, do you think??
- Hugh:** (responds)

William: Are we wrong to take these poems seriously?

Hugh: (responds)

William: Are there nonsense poems in other languages? Or is it a particularly English phenomenon?

Hugh: (responds)

William: OK, time now to hear some words related to nonsense; time for more word facts:

Word Facts

There are two words that have a similar meaning to *nonsense*. They are *gibberish* and *gobbledygook*. In the field of linguistics, a nonsense sentence like *Colourless green ideas sleep furiously*, follows grammatical rules but doesn't have a meaning – but *gibberish* and *gobbledygook* don't follow grammatical rules – they aren't examples of language at all.

You were talking in your sleep last night, but I couldn't understand what you were saying. It was just gibberish.

Something's wrong with my phone. All I can hear is gobbledygook.

In conversational English, we can use *gibberish* and *gobbledygook* like we use *nonsense*.

Oh stop talking gibberish!

But more often, we use these words to describe something that is expressed very badly. This might be because it's too technical or because it's written in a poor style.

I can't understand a word of this manual. It's just gobbledygook!

We have another word which describes something that is difficult to understand because it's poorly expressed. This is *mumbo-jumbo*.

Trust me, you won't understand the contract. We'll have to get a lawyer to translate all the legal mumbo-jumbo.

An adjective which describes something that is very clear and easy to understand is *no-nonsense*. We don't use this word much in conversation, but you often see it in the titles of books.

I bought this book the other day, 'The no-nonsense guide to downloading music'. It's really interesting.

So that's *gibberish*, *gobbledygook*, *mumbo-jumbo* and *no-nonsense*.

William: Well, we heard there that the difference between nonsense and gobbledygook or gibberish, is that nonsense doesn't have a meaning but it uses English grammar, whereas gobbledygook doesn't follow grammatical rules... in fact, it might not even be words that are spoken or written. With that in mind, Hugh, is it possible to have a *gibberish* or *gobbledygook* poem?

Hugh: (responds)

William: Gobbledygook. It's a funny word, isn't it? Can you tell us a little bit about where the word comes from, Catherine?

Catherine: (responds)

William: Well, on this topic of English which is difficult to understand, there is actually a group called the Plain English campaign, which has been fighting for years to stop the spread of gobbledygook. And every year they award prizes for the worst examples they can find. Back in 2003, US Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld won an award from the campaign for this famous (or infamous) press briefing:

Rumsfeld: The message is, that there are known knowns – there are things we know that we know. There are known unknowns – that is to say that there are things that we now know we don't know... but there also unknown unknowns – there are things we do not know we don't know. And each year we discover a few more of those unknown unknowns.

William: Now, don't worry if you didn't understand that – it's not because of your English!

Catherine: (responds)

William: Now time for our sixty-second recap! Listen carefully and try to answer these questions.

What word do the British use in a similar way to 'nonsense'?

Catherine: rubbish, we say something is rubbish

William: What adjectives do we often use with the words rubbish and nonsense?

Catherine: total, complete and absolute

William: What adjective is a more formal way of saying something is unreasonable?

Catherine: nonsensical, nonsensical

William: What words describe something which has no meaning and does not follow grammatical rules?

Catherine: gibberish and gobbledygook

William: What's another word for something which is poorly expressed or contains a lot of technical words?

Catherine: mumbo jumbo, mumbo jumbo

William: Well before we go, just to remind you to send in your nonsense poems in the 'comments' section of the webcast webpage... and we want nonsense not gobbledygook, which means you do have to use correct English grammar! That's all for this week so thanks Catherine for all of our no-nonsense contributions

Catherine: (responds)

William: And a big thank you to Professor Hugh Haughton from the University of York for all of your, well I won't say nonsense but...

Hugh: (responds)

William: Goodbye!

All: Goodbye!