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Episode #092
The English of Boris Johnson
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Alastair Budge: [00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:11] The show where you can listen to fascinating stories, and learn weird and wonderful things about the world at the same time as improving your English.

[00:00:21] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about The English of Boris Johnson.

[00:00:29] The episode a few weeks ago on The English of Donald Trump proved to be one of the most popular ones we've done so far, so, **by popular demand**[1], today we are going to be talking about Trump's British **counterpart**[2], the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom, Boris Johnson.

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[1] when a lot of people have asked for something

[2] a person or thing with the same role or purpose as another in a different place

[00:00:48] Before we get right into that though, let me remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus subtitles, transcripts, and key vocabulary, over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:02] This is also where you can check out becoming a member of Leonardo English, and join a community of curious minds from all over the world, doing meetups, exchanging ideas, and generally, improving their English in a more interesting way.

[00:01:18] So if that sounds good to you, and I certainly hope it does, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:27] OK then, let's get started.

[00:01:30] You probably know a bit about Boris Johnson, and today's episode isn't going to be a history lesson about the man, and his rise to power, although we will touch on that.

[00:01:41] We are instead going to focus on how he talks, the language he uses, why he talks this way, why this **appeals**[3] to British people, and we'll also talk about how different this is to Donald Trump.

[00:01:58] But we do need a little background before we get right into his language, because it's first important to understand exactly who Boris Johnson actually is, where

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[3] is attractive

he comes from, and to try to get into the mind of the man, before we talk about his language.

[00:02:18] So, the first thing that we need to clarify is that his first name isn't actually Boris. It's Alexander.

[00:02:29] Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson was born in 1964, in New York. His family, **reportedly**[4], still calls him 'Al', short for Alexander.

[00:02:41] He started using the name 'Boris' when he began Eton, the most **exclusive**[5] **boarding school**[6] in the United Kingdom, and where **countless**[7] previous prime ministers had gone to school.

[00:02:54] Alexander is a relatively common name in the United Kingdom, but Alexander Boris de Pfeffel Johnson wanted to be anything other than common.

[00:03:06] Boris, on the other hand, is not a common name, and so evidently this suited the 13-year old Boris Johnson much better than Alexander.

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[4] according to what people say

[5] limited to a small group of people

[6] a school where students live and study

[7] very many

[00:03:17] So we can clearly see, from a young age that Boris knew the importance of public image - your name matters, and if you want to **stand out**[8], you need to be different.

[00:03:31] Johnson continued his very privileged **upbringing**[9], going from Eton to Oxford, being the president of something called the Oxford Union, the **debating society**[10] that is a sort of **stepping stone**[11] to British politics, and then had a series of jobs as a journalist before becoming an MP, a member of Parliament, then Mayor of London, an MP again and now Prime Minister.

[00:04:00] We have evidently **sped through**[12] his career, we've gone very fast through it, but, the thing to remember is that he had an incredibly good education and seemed to just **cruise through**[13] life from exclusive school to exclusive university through to his current position as the Prime Minister.

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[8] be different from others

[9] the way in which you are brought up (treated and educated as a child)

[10] a society in which debates are held

[11] something that helps you move forward or make progress

[12] gone quickly

[13] pass smoothly through

[00:04:21] While it's easy to **put this down**[14] to wealth and privilege, Johnson won a **scholarship**[15] to Eton and Oxford, which you can't do unless you are very academically talented. Clearly, he was smart, but he was also lazy, and reportedly would wait until the last minute to actually do any work, which seems quite believable if you have seen how his government operates.

[00:04:50] In any case, from a young age, Johnson had a **keen**[16] interest in language.

[00:04:56] He studied Classics at Oxford, Latin and Greek, which to those of you outside the UK might not seem like the route to financial success and power, however it was for a long time considered the only respectable course for the British ruling class - a gentleman should know how to use Latin and Greek, and shouldn't be bothered with more practical studies, of mathematics or business, or anything like that.

[00:05:27] His classical education is still very visible when you hear him speak, and he often uses probably some of the most complicated, **archaic**[17] vocabulary of any English-speaking world leader, the kind of words that even most English speakers would have to look up in a dictionary.

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[14] attribute this (to)

[15] an amount of money that is given to someone to reduce the cost of their education, usually based on need or merit

[16] very interested

[17] old, ancient

[00:05:48] Just have a listen to this clip and see if you can understand what he's saying.

[00:05:54] (...) **Boris Johnson:** [00:05:54] Front row by the way. And why is he, why is Achilles so **cheesed off**[18]? Because somebody has taken away his prize, his gerass, a girl by the name of Briseis of the lovely cheeks and who has done this to him? A man who cannot run as fast as Achilles. A man who is not as good at fighting as Achilles, who's less clever, less **charismatic**[19]. And yet who is able to **expropriate**[20] his girlfriend or slave girl **war booty**[21] to be exact because he, that man, is set in **obscure**[22] and supposedly **God-given authority**[23] because he is a King. And in the **wrath**[24] of Achilles, we find not just the **bruised**[25] ego of a proud man. In that first line of Greek literature we find (...)

[00:06:43] **Alastair Budge:** [00:06:43] if you got that, congratulations.

[00:06:45] This is Boris Johnson taking part in a debate of ancient Rome versus ancient Greece.

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[18] annoyed

[19] having a natural ability to attract

[20] to take away

[21] (informal) stolen goods from war

[22] not known to many

[23] a right given by God

[24] extreme anger

[25] hurt

[00:06:52] With Boris Johnson, there is almost always a reason for everything. He has **cultivated**[26] this image as a **scruffy**[27], lazy, normal person with the same **vices**[28], the same problems as everyone else.

[00:07:09] But this is highly **cultivated**. His hair is always messy, but he messes it up before he goes in front of a TV camera. He makes sure that the photographers are taking pictures of him when he goes out running dressed in ridiculous clothes, and it is all part of a carefully **maintained**[29] image.

[00:07:31] As one of his first bosses said, "He is a **sly**[30] fox, **disguised**[31] as a **teddy bear**[32]."

[00:07:38] So, coming back to the language he uses, we have to think that there is a reason for using this kind of complicated, **archaic** language.

[00:07:48] On one level, it's strange, as Johnson knows the power of communicating clearly.

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[26] created

[27] untidy and dirty

[28] bad habits

[29] kept

[30] someone who is sly is good at deceiving people

[31] hidden, pretending to be something else

[32] a soft toy in the shape of a bear

[00:07:54] Here's him explaining exactly that.

[00:07:57] **Boris Johnson:** [00:07:57] I think one thing that is.

[00:07:59] Incredibly important is to try to speak. I fail totally in this. I catch myself endlessly on the radio. You're waffling and blurbing and using all sorts of endless Latinate words in exactly that way and that what people listen to are short Anglo Saxon words that readily **correspond**³³ to some object in the universe that they can identify.

[00:08:23] So. In other words, talk, talk, simply use plain English and talk about stuff in the real world.

[00:08:31] **Alastair Budge:** [00:08:31] But Johnson can't **resist**³⁴ using this complicated language. He knows that, although it shows his privilege and his **elite**³⁵ education, this actually helps him seem more **genuine**³⁶.

[00:08:45] In Britain, and perhaps this comes from the historically highly class-based society, there is this strange tradition of having a educated, upper-class person in a position of power, and everyone just automatically trusting them it seems. Boris's

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³³ to be similar or equal to

³⁴ stop

³⁵ relating to the richest and most powerful in society

³⁶ real, true

language **screams**[37] **elite** education, as does his accent, and so exactly where he comes from is very clear from the words that come out of his mouth.

[00:09:17] But while other politicians who might have had a similarly privileged **upbringing**, or indeed Prince William or Prince Harry, they would **shy away**[38], they would hide from their elite education by softening their accents, or trying to talk in a more '**man on the street**[39]' way, Johnson does completely the opposite.

[00:09:40] He makes no apologies for his education, and he makes no apologies for his wealth.

[00:09:46] Indeed, when he was Mayor of London he also wrote a weekly newspaper column for the Daily Telegraph, for which he was paid £250,000 a year.

[00:10:00] When he was questioned about having this very well-paying second job, he **dismissed**[40] the money as '**chicken-feed**[41]' - food for chicken. This was in 2009, right after the financial crisis hit, but it didn't really matter as his **persona**[42] that he had created, and the language he used, had already positioned him in people's minds as

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[37] is something 'screams' something else, it means that the 'something else' is very obvious

[38] to avoid showing or dealing with something, normally because you are embarrassed or not confident about it

[39] the average man

[40] said is not important

[41] (figurative) very small in value

[42] the character that you have

this intellectual man who had a **god-given**[43] right to be rich, so what did it matter if he thought that a second job that paid more than 8 times the national average was nothing? He was Boris.

[00:10:40] So, Boris Johnson uses complicated language to impress, to position himself in people's minds as a member of the intellectual **elite**, born to lead the country.

[00:10:53] But the rest of his **persona**[44], from the messy clothes to the **multitude**[45] of **affairs**[46] he has had - he still, interestingly enough, refuses to say exactly how many children he has - all of this '**unpolitically correct**[47]' behaviour has helped create this strange image of a man who is both **elite** but also completely normal.

[00:11:19] He has human **flaws**[48] that people can relate to, and this **humanises**[49] someone who has otherwise lived a life so completely different to 99.99% of people in the UK.

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[43] given by God

[44] the character that you have

[45] a large number of

[46] a secret sexual relationship

[47] offensive to a particular group

[48] weaknesses

[49] makes someone more human

[00:11:35] So, coming back to language again, whatever anyone's political views on Boris Johnson are, it's hard to **contest**[50] the fact that he does have an excellent range of vocabulary, and has the ability to use language to create very memorable images.

[00:11:54] Now, this can be both positive and negative, but in both cases it's very powerful.

[00:12:00] In 2004, for example, when asked about the fact that the prime minister Tony Blair wasn't appearing for press interviews, Johnson compared Blair to "a mixture of Harry Houdini and a greased piglet".

[00:12:17] Harry Houdini was the famous **escape artist**[51], a piglet is a baby pig, and greased means covered in grease, so it's very **slippery**[52].

[00:12:28] When one of Johnson's speeches was criticised by Arnold Schwarzenegger, he said "It was a low moment to have my **rhetorical**[53] skills denounced by a monosyllabic Austrian cyborg."

[00:12:43] Monosyllabic, in case you didn't know that word, means only speaking in monosyllables, short words only consisting of one syllable, and cyborg is a sort of part human, part robot.

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[50] debate, disagree with

[51] someone who escapes from difficult situations

[52] difficult to hold on to

[53] related to using speech in a way to impress

[00:12:56] And when he was asked about whether he wanted to become Prime Minister of the UK, he said that he stood as much chance of being prime minister as he did of "being **reincarnated**[54] as an olive", of being reborn as an olive.

[00:13:13] These are, for the most part, quite funny, very visual and memorable, and not deeply offensive.

[00:13:21] But he has used the same **linguistic**[55] style to **conjure up**[56] images that certainly are **divisive**[57] and offensive.

[00:13:30] He wrote a column in the Daily Telegraph that compared Muslim women who wear the **burqa**[58] to "bank robbers and "**letter boxes**[59]".

[00:13:39] He said that if gay marriage was OK, then he saw no reason in principle why three men shouldn't get married, or two men and a dog.

[00:13:50] And referring to the EU, he said that "Napoleon, Hitler, various people tried this out, and it ends **tragically**[60]. The EU is an attempt to do this by different methods."

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[54] reborn

[55] related to language

[56] to make an image appear in someone's mind

[57] something that is divisive causes disagreement between groups

[58] a piece of clothing worn by Muslim in some countries that covers the head, face and body

[59] the boxes where letters are put

[60] very sad

[00:14:04] Part of the reason that this language is so effective is that it is memorable, it's the complete opposite of the kind of avoiding, **non-committal**[61] language that British politicians used before him.

[00:14:18] Like politicians in many countries, British politicians would often avoid actually saying what was going on, instead preferring to just repeat a point that their communications team had told them to say.

[00:14:33] In some cases this was almost **comic**[62] - just have a listen to this clip of the previous leader of the Labour party, a man called Ed Miliband. Listen to him repeating the same thing over and over.

[00:14:49] **Ed Milliband:** [00:14:49] These strikes are wrong at a time when negotiations are still going on, but parents and the public have been let down by both sides because the government has acted in a **reckless**[63] and provocative manner. After today's disruption, I urge both sides to put aside the **rhetoric**, get around the negotiating table and stop it happening again.

[00:15:09] **Interviewer:** [00:15:09] Um, I listened to your speech in Wrexham, you talked about the Labour party being a movement, a lot of people in that movement. Uh, are people on strike today and they'll be looking at you and thinking, well, you're

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[61] deliberately not expressing your opinions

[62] funny

[63] dangerous, without worrying about the risks

describing these strikes as wrong while aren't you giving us more leadership as a leader of the labour movement.

[00:15:23] **Ed Milliband:** [00:15:23] At a time when negotiations are still going on, I do believe these strikes are wrong.

[00:15:28] And that's why I say both sides should after today's disruption get around the negotiating table, put aside the **rhetoric**[64] and solve the problem out. Because the public and parents have been let down by both sides. The government's acted in a **reckless** and provocative manner.

[00:15:43] **Alastair Budge:** [00:15:43] Ridiculous, right?

[00:15:46] Johnson was a **breath of fresh air**[65]. He didn't seem to have a **filter**[66], he made offensive statements, and didn't **abide by**[67] the **status quo**[68].

[00:15:57] It's probably about now that you are thinking I'm going to make a comparison between another world leader with a strange, blond **hairdo**[69] and Boris Johnson. Don't worry, that's coming in a minute.

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[64] speech that is effective at influencing others

[65] new and different

[66] if someone doesn't have a filter, it means they say whatever is on their mind

[67] accept and obey

[68] the current situation

[69] the way in which someone has their hair arranged

[00:16:10] First though, there's a final point about Boris Johnson that actually puts him in exactly the same category as previous politicians that avoid answering tough questions, like our earlier example of Ed Miliband.

[00:16:25] Instead of avoiding the question or just repeating a previous point, Johnson would use humour to not answer the question or change the subject, often using **archaic**, complicated language.

[00:16:40] For example, he was asked about rumours that he was having an **affair** and had got a woman pregnant, he replied with:

[00:16:49] "I have not had an **affair** with Petronella. It is complete balderdash. It is an inverted pyramid of piffle."

[00:16:58] Now, the 'I have not had an **affair** with Petronella' part you probably understand.

[00:17:03] The next part might be harder. Balderdash is an old, uncommon word meaning something that's completely **made up**[70]. An inverted pyramid means a pyramid that is upside down, and piffle is a word meaning nonsense, not true.

[00:17:21] Don't worry if you didn't understand it, that isn't language that you would find many native speakers using.

[00:17:26] The rumours, by the way, turned out to be completely true.

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[70] invented

[00:17:31] It's time now to make a few comparisons between the current residents of 10 Downing Street and The White House, and to think a little bit about how the language of Boris Johnson compares to the language of Donald Trump.

[00:17:47] On one level, they are **polar opposites**[71]. Johnson uses complicated, intellectual language, thinks of himself as a **scholar**[72], writes history books, and wants to be seen as a public intellectual and member of the ruling class, someone who is destined to rule.

[00:18:08] Trump, on the other hand, has no interest in history, a very basic language, positions himself as an **outsider**[73], and believes that your **bank balance**[74] is a sign of how smart you are.

[00:18:21] Yet here they both are, riding **populist**[75] waves, certainly both '**elite**' in terms of how rich they are, yet positioning themselves as the **saviours**[76] of the **working class**[77].

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[71] complete opposites

[72] someone who studies in great detail

[73] someone who is not included in a particular group

[74] the amount of money you have

[75] relating to ordinary people

[76] someone who saves others

[77] the social group that earns the least money in society

[00:18:34] You can think of this as an example of the difference between the UK and the US.

[00:18:39] In the UK a man who demonstrates his privilege through every word that comes out of his mouth can appeal to the poorest in society, partly because of this idea I mentioned earlier where there's this culture, this tradition, of intellectual upper-class normally men just being accepted as leaders, regardless of any other qualifications they might or rather might not have.

[00:19:06] In the US, on the other hand, Trump's appeal is through this image he has created of a master businessman, so it almost doesn't matter what kind of language he uses or whether he is thought to be a **keen** historian.

[00:19:21] No doubt a Boris Johnson type figure in the US, who used classical, complicated language and positioned himself as an intellectual would never work. Certainly it was one of the common criticisms of Obama, that he was too academic, too **aloof**[78], and **unapproachable**[79], too unlike the **man on the street**.

[00:19:46] And a Donald Trump-type figure, a **brash**[80] businessman who bragged about how much money he had and spoke in short, basic sentences, would never have any success in the UK.

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[78] not friendly or willing to engage with others

[79] difficult to speak to

[80] showing too much confidence

[00:19:58] Brits have this strange relationship with class, education and privilege, and Boris Johnson is the **epitome**[81] of it.

[00:20:08] One final interesting point on Boris Johnson and language is something that he has been **accused**[82] of trying to do, and that is **manipulate**[83] Google search results for particular word combinations that he has used.

[00:20:23] As you know, if you search for something on Google, it will show you the most popular result for what you type in, it will show you results for what Google thinks you are looking for.

[00:20:34] If you can control what Google thinks is popular, then you can push a result further down the search results, and mean it's harder to find.

[00:20:44] For example if you remember the Brexit campaign, Boris Johnson had made a series of claims about how much the UK pays to the EU, and he had **toured**[84] the country in a big red bus.

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[81] the typical example (of something)

[82] if you are accused of something, people say that you have done it

[83] control something to your advantage

[84] visited a particular area

[00:20:58] A few years after this campaign, in 2019, Boris Johnson gave a really strange interview where he was asked what he did to relax, and he said he painted **model buses**[85]. Now, this, in the UK at least, would be a really **unorthodox**[86] **hobby**[87].

[00:21:20] Nobody had ever heard of Johnson saying it, so it was a really strange thing to say.

[00:21:27] The theory goes that he was actually trying to **manipulate** the search results. Before, if you typed in 'Boris Johnson bus', then you'd see things about him going around the country in the Brexit bus.

[00:21:41] But after this interview, if you typed in 'Boris Johnson bus' then you would see articles about this weird interview, pushing the articles about the Brexit bus down the search results.

[00:21:55] Similarly, there were rumours of him having an **affair** with a model, and he then used the term '**model of restraint**[88]' in parliament, so if you searched for 'Boris Johnson model', you would see links about this quote as opposed to articles about him having an **affair**.

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[85] small copies of buses

[86] unusual

[87] an activity you do for fun

[88] if you are a model of restraint, you have shown a lot of self-control

[00:22:14] Evidently, there is no way of proving this, and it's not so easy to fool Google, but it certainly does seem very strange.

[00:22:23] So, that is the English of Boris Johnson.

[00:22:26] It's a strange combination of **unfiltered**[89], classical, complicated, upper class, funny, offensive, but most definitely unique.

[00:22:39] OK then, that is it for today's episode.

[00:22:44] I hope it's been an interesting one, and you've learned something new about this **eccentric**[90] yet powerful man.

[00:22:52] As always I'd love to know what you thought of today's episode. You can jump into the discussion on our forum, which is at community.leonardoenglish.com

[00:23:02] And as a final reminder, if you are looking for access to the transcripts, subtitles, and key vocabulary, and if you're interested in becoming a member of a growing community of curious minds from 37 different countries, exchanging ideas, doing meetups, and generally improving their English in a more interesting way, then you should definitely check out becoming a member of Leonardo English.

[00:23:27] The place to go for that is leonardoenglish.com.

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[89] not changed to suit the expectations of others

[90] strange or unusual

[00:23:32] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo

English.

[00:23:37] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
By popular demand	when a lot of people have asked for something
Counterpart	a person or thing with the same role or purpose as another in a different place
Appeals	is attractive
Reportedly	according to what people say
Exclusive	limited to a small group of people
Boarding school	a school where students live and study
Countless	very many
Stand out	be different from others
Upbringing	the way in which you are brought up (treated and educated as a child)
Debating society	a society in which debates are held
Stepping stone	something that helps you move forward or make progress
Sped through	gone quickly

Cruise through   pass smoothly through

Put this down   attribute this (to)

Scholarship   an amount of money that is given to someone to reduce the cost of their

education, usually based on need or merit

Keen   very interested

Archaic   old, ancient

Cheesed off   annoyed

Charismatic   having a natural ability to attract

Expropriate   to take away

War booty   (informal) stolen goods from war

Obscure   not known to many

God-given authority a right given by God

Wrath   extreme anger

Bruised   hurt

Cultivated   created

Scruffy   untidy and dirty

Vices   bad habits

Maintained   kept

Sly   someone who is sly is good at deceiving people

Disguised   hidden, pretending to be something else

Teddy bear   a soft toy in the shape of a bear

Correspond   to be similar or equal to

Resist   stop

Elite   relating to the richest and most powerful in society

Genuine   real, true

Screams   is something 'screams' something else, it means that the 'something
else' is very obvious

Shy away   to avoid showing or dealing with something, normally because you are
embarrassed or not confident about it

Man on the street   the average man

Dismissed   said is not important

Chicken-feed   (figurative) very small in value

Persona   the character that you have

God-given   given by God

Multitude   a large number of

Affairs   a secret sexual relationship

Unpolitically correct offensive to a particular group

Flaws   weaknesses

Humanises   makes someone more human

Contest   debate, disagree with

Escape artist   someone who escapes from difficult situations

Slippery   difficult to hold on to

Rhetorical   related to using speech in a way to impress

Reincarnated   reborn

Linguistic   related to language

Conjure up   to make an image appear in someone's mind

Divisive   something that is divisive causes disagreement between groups

Burqa   a piece of clothing worn by Muslim in some countries that covers the

head, face and body

Letter boxes   the boxes where letters are put

Tragically   very sad

Non-committal   deliberately not expressing your opinions

Comic   funny

Reckless   dangerous, without worrying about the risks

Rhetoric   speech that is effective at influencing others

Breath of fresh air new and different

Filter   if someone doesn't have a filter, it means they say whatever is on their

mind

Abide by   accept and obey

Status quo   the current situation

Hairdo   the way in which someone has their hair arranged

Made up   invented

Polar opposites   complete opposites

Scholar   someone who studies in great detail

Outsider   someone who is not included in a particular group

Bank balance   the amount of money you have

Populist   relating to ordinary people

Saviours   someone who saves others

Working class   the social group that earns the least money in society

Aloof   not friendly or willing to engage with others

Unapproachable   difficult to speak to

Brash   showing too much confidence

Epitome   the typical example (of something)

Accused   if you are accused of something, people say that you have done it

Manipulate   control something to your advantage

Toured   visited a particular area

Model buses   small copies of buses

Unorthodox   unusual

Hobby   an activity you do for fun

Model of restraint   if you are a model of restraint, you have shown a lot of self-control

Unfiltered   not changed to suit the expectations of others

Eccentric   strange or unusual

We'd love to get your feedback on this podcast.

What did you like? What could we do better?

What did you struggle to understand?

You can email us at hi@leonardoenglish.com.