



English Learning for Curious Minds



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Episode #106

Superstitions

13th Nov, 2020

[00:00:00] Hello, hello hello, and welcome to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:00:10] 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.

[00:00:20] I'm Alastair Budge and today we are going to be talking about Superstitions, the belief that things are lucky or unlucky.

[00:00:31] From the psychological reasons why we believe in superstitions and the religious [implications](#)¹ of believing in superstitions to the origins of 5 different superstitions, I think it's going to be quite a fun one.

[00:00:45] If you're listening to this episode on the day it comes out, you might have noticed that it's Friday the 13th, which is considered unlucky in lots of different

¹ possible future effects



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countries, and don't worry, we'll be talking about that as well, and why it's not really that unlucky at all.

[00:01:02] Before we get right into that though, let me quickly remind you that you can get all of the bonus episodes, plus the subtitles, the transcript, and the key vocabulary for this episode and all of our other ones over on the website, which is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:18] This is also where you can also 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.

[00:01:33] So if that's of interest, and I certainly hope it is, then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com.

[00:01:40] And final point, thank you to Jachym, an awesome member of Leonardo English from the Czech Republic who requested this episode. I hope you enjoy it.

[00:01:51] OK then, let's get started.

[00:01:54] Superstitions are all around us, and no matter what country you're from you've probably been culturally exposed to superstitions all of your life, even if they might not have immediately seemed to you like superstitions.



Superstitions

[00:02:11] If you look in the dictionary, it will [define](#)² superstition as something like:

[00:02:17] “a belief or practice resulting from ignorance, fear of the unknown, trust in magic or chance, or a false [conception](#)³ of [causation](#)⁴”

[00:02:26] Or

[00:02:28] “belief that is not based on human reason or scientific knowledge, but is connected with old ideas about magic”

[00:02:35] Essentially it’s a belief in something that doesn’t make sense and is related to magic.

[00:02:41] Superstitions go back [millennia](#)⁵, they go back thousands of years, yet they are still believed by billions of people.

[00:02:50] Indeed, 50% of Americans say that they’re [superstitious](#)⁶, and three quarters of people in the UK say that they knock on wood, they do this 'knock knock', to avoid bad luck.

² say what the meaning of something is

³ understanding

⁴ what causes something to happen

⁵ thousands of years

⁶ believing in superstition



Superstitions

[00:03:03] So if the dictionary basically says ‘it’s something that people do because they are [ignorant](#)⁷, why is half the world doing it?

[00:03:13] We’ll get to some of the psychological reasons for it in a minute, but before that it’s good to understand a bit about the [origins](#)⁸ of superstitions, because this will help us understand why they are so [embedded](#)⁹ in our culture.

[00:03:29] The word superstition is thought to come from Latin, super-stare, to stand over, or to stand upon. Now, how that actually translates to the meaning of the word that we have now is a little unclear, but it’s thought to have come from the idea of standing over something and being amazed at it.

[00:03:53] Back in Ancient Rome, being superstitious was used to describe people who were too afraid of the Gods, and believed that there were certain things that they could do [over and above](#)¹⁰ the normal things that people were supposed to do that would influence the future.

[00:04:12] The word ‘superstitio’ was to be contrasted with ‘religio’, which was the normal, appropriate fear and belief in Gods.

⁷ not having enough knowledge

⁸ where something comes from

⁹ fixed strongly

¹⁰ above and higher than anything else



Superstitions

[00:04:22] If you think about it from a religious [doctrinal](#)¹¹ point of view, this idea that there are small, [mundane](#)¹² things that people can do to influence their [fate](#)¹³, and control the Gods is quite problematic.

[00:04:39] World religions often have strict behavioural [codes](#)¹⁴, things that people should and shouldn't do, and if there is another set of [seemingly](#)¹⁵ random things that people should and shouldn't do and these can affect their [fate](#), then that doesn't really fit with the religion that that person is following.

[00:05:02] Indeed, the Catholic Church considers superstition to be [sinful](#)¹⁶.

[00:05:08] If you believe that you can change your [fate](#) just by throwing salt over your shoulder or by not seeing a black cat, then logically it's quite hard to [reconcile](#)¹⁷ that with believing that there is an all-powerful God who controls your life.

¹¹ relating to the set of beliefs that form religion

¹² ordinary and not interesting

¹³ what happens to a particular person or thing

¹⁴ systems

¹⁵ appearing to be

¹⁶ against the rules of a religion

¹⁷ find a way where two situations or beliefs can exist at the same time



Superstitions

[00:05:26] Superstition is actually right there in the [Catechism](#)¹⁸ of the Catholic Church, just above [worshiping](#)¹⁹ false gods, and is called a '[perverse](#)²⁰ [excess](#)²¹ of religion'.

[00:05:39] So you can understand, [theologically](#)²² at least, why superstition is problematic.

[00:05:45] It's [at odds](#)²³ with the [scriptures](#)²⁴; logically both can't exist at the same time and be true.

[00:05:52] In terms of where different superstitions come from, this is normally up for debate.

[00:05:59] There are lots of possible explanations about where they come from, with some being more probable than others.

[00:06:07] With all of them, they likely came from a time that something happened just before something good or something bad, and culturally people started associating

¹⁸ a group of questions or answers about a belief

¹⁹ showing love and respect for

²⁰ strange and unreasonable

²¹ too much

²² relating to religion

²³ if something is at odds with something else, they are different

²⁴ religious texts



Superstitions

the thing that happened before to the thing that happened after, believing that the first event impacted the second one.

[00:06:24] Interestingly, most superstitions predict that something bad is going to happen.

[00:06:30] There are of course a few that are linked to good luck, for example finding a four-leaved [clover²⁵](#), a four-leafed little plant, or carrying a rabbit's foot, but most are negative.

[00:06:44] It's interesting to think why this is.

[00:06:48] There's an idea in psychology called Negativity Bias, which is the idea that we are more affected by negative events than positive events.

[00:06:58] If there are two events of equal [intensity²⁶](#), of equal strength, one good and the other bad, then we feel the negative one more strongly than the positive one.

[00:07:11] So bringing this back to superstitions, if something good happens we might just think, well that's good, whereas if something negative happens it might have a greater impact on us, we remember it more strongly, try to put a reason on why it

²⁵ a small plant that normally has three round leaves

²⁶ strength



Superstitions

happened, and start [engaging](#)²⁷ in behaviour that we believe might stop it happening in the future.

[00:07:36] OK, so that's a little explanation about some of the psychological reasons that people believe superstitions exist.

[00:07:44] Let's get into some of the stories behind superstitions.

[00:07:48] We're going to start with one that has a story I quite like, and that's to do with umbrellas.

[00:07:54] Now, you've probably heard that you shouldn't open an umbrella inside. Maybe you've just heard that you shouldn't do it, but it's also considered 'bad luck' in many countries.

[00:08:06] Why, you might ask?

[00:08:08] There is a theory that it was to do with the ancient Egyptians and their [sunshades](#)²⁸, but this isn't really believed by many.

[00:08:17] The real reason is thought to have actually come from much more recently, from Victorian England.

²⁷ doing

²⁸ objects similar to umbrellas, but they protect you from sun, not rain



Superstitions

[00:08:25] England, as those of you who have visited the country will know, is a place where an umbrella comes in pretty [handy](#)²⁹.

[00:08:33] Umbrellas began to be more and more [widespread](#)³⁰ in Victorian England, but they were big, heavy things with dangerous [spikes](#)³¹ that could open quickly and without warning, [injuring](#)³² people around you.

[00:08:49] So [presumably](#)³³, when it was raining outside, people used to open their umbrellas inside, but children, family members and pets got hurt by these things opening quickly and dangerously, and so it became bad luck to open them inside.

[00:09:07] So there you go, the reason why you shouldn't open an umbrella inside seems to actually be quite sensible.

[00:09:15] Our second superstition is to do with salt - when it's unlucky, and when it's lucky.

[00:09:22] Salt, as you may know, was a precious [commodity](#)³⁴ throughout history.

²⁹ useful

³⁰ existing in many places

³¹ something that's long and thin with a sharp point

³² hurting

³³ used when you think something is probably true

³⁴ something that can be bought or sold



Superstitions

[00:09:28] Linguistically its importance has left a mark, with the expression ‘not worth its salt’ meaning ‘not worth its cost’, and the word ‘salary’, the money you get from a job, coming from the term for money Roman soldiers were given to buy salt.

[00:09:45] So, salt was important, and [spilling](#)³⁵ salt, dropping salt on the ground accidentally, was considered very bad luck. You can see why [spilling](#) salt would be bad luck. It was expensive and [precious](#)³⁶, and so damaging it was obviously not something that you wanted to do.

[00:10:05] And going back to the year 3,500 BC it's thought that the Ancient Sumerians decided that throwing [a pinch](#)³⁷ of salt, a small amount of salt over their left shoulders would be a way of [nullifying](#)³⁸, of canceling the bad luck caused by [spilling](#) the salt.

[00:10:26] This superstition has been continued though, and in Judeo-Christian culture it's also good luck to throw salt over your shoulder. The theory goes that Judas, the [disciple](#)³⁹ that betrayed Jesus [spilled](#)⁴⁰ salt, because he is [portrayed](#)⁴¹ doing so in

³⁵ causing to fall on the ground

³⁶ expensive and rare

³⁷ a small amount

³⁸ canceling out

³⁹ someone who believes in the ideas of someone else

⁴⁰ caused to fall on the ground

⁴¹ represented in a painting, film, or book



Superstitions

Leonardo Da Vinci's Last Supper, and so if you want to have good luck you should do the opposite of what someone very bad has done.

[00:10:55] It's not clear whether you need to [sweep](#)⁴² it up after you've thrown it down though. I guess in the Renaissance, or in 3,500 BC [sweeping](#)⁴³ the floors wasn't quite so important.

[00:11:08] Our third superstition is one of the most popular superstitions, and that is something that three quarters of people in the UK say that they do, and that's to [knock](#)⁴⁴ on, our touch, wood, 'knock knock'.

[00:11:22] Now, I guess you know how this one works, you've probably seen people doing it, and you might even do it yourself. After saying something you touch wood either as a way of hoping that something you want to happen will happen, or of preventing something you don't want to happen from happening.

[00:11:41] Where this comes from, though, is debated by historians.

[00:11:45] Some think it comes from when you would need to [swear](#)⁴⁵ over a [crucifix](#)⁴⁶ to promise something was true. If you were a true Christian you would never [tempt](#)

⁴² clean something by using a brush

⁴³ cleaning something by using a brush

⁴⁴ touch in order to make a noise

⁴⁵ promise

⁴⁶ a model representing Jesus Christ



Superstitions

[fate](#)⁴⁷ by lying when touching the cross, and so [tapping](#)⁴⁸ wood was a connection to this idea.

[00:12:04] There's another idea that [peasants](#)⁴⁹ in Europe would knock loudly on their wooden doors to keep away evil spirits, and so the wood is to represent a door.

[00:12:17] There's also the idea that both good and bad [spirits](#)⁵⁰ live in trees, and so by [tapping](#) on a tree you could either get a good [spirit](#)⁵¹ to come out and help you or you could keep a bad [spirit](#) in, to stop something bad happening to you.

[00:12:34] There's another theory that it actually came from a British children's game where children would [chase](#)⁵² each other and could avoid being caught by touching a piece of wood.

[00:12:47] For this one it's pretty unclear where it actually comes from - perhaps that's one of the reasons that it is one of the most popular superstitions, that it just exists in popular culture for no clear reason, or at least, for [disputed](#)⁵³ reasons.

⁴⁷ to do something that involves a lot of risk

⁴⁸ touching briefly

⁴⁹ people who own or rent small pieces of land

⁵⁰ magical creatures

⁵¹ a magical creature

⁵² run after

⁵³ not agreed on



Superstitions

[00:13:03] If there was a superstition and everyone knew for sure where it came from it would do some damage to its [credibility](#)⁵⁴, so perhaps that's a reason that the ones with the most debated [origins tend](#)⁵⁵ to be the ones that are most widely believed.

[00:13:21] Our next superstition, our fourth superstition is a [linguistic](#)⁵⁶ one, and it's the reason that in English we say 'bless you' after someone [sneezes](#)⁵⁷, after they do ah-choo.

[00:13:34] This is thought to date back to the sixth century AD, and to have come from when there was a Great Plague [raging](#)⁵⁸ through Europe.

[00:13:44] One of the ways in which the plague passed from one person to the other was through [coughing](#)⁵⁹ and [sneezing](#)⁶⁰, and so Pope Gregory I declared that when someone [sneezed](#)⁶¹ you should say 'bless you' as a way of protecting them.

⁵⁴ the quality of deserving to be trusted

⁵⁵ likely to be

⁵⁶ relating to language

⁵⁷ when small drops or liquid suddenly come out of your mouth

⁵⁸ moving quickly and uncontrollably

⁵⁹ when you force air out of your lungs with a short sound

⁶⁰ see 'sneeze'

⁶¹ see 'sneeze'



Superstitions

[00:14:01] I was a little surprised to find that this [reportedly](#)⁶² came from the pope, given the Catholic Church's current view on superstition, and it does seem a little strange to think that [doctrinally](#)⁶³ a person's [fate](#) can be influenced by another person saying two words, but this is one of the main theories.

[00:14:23] Another theory is that when you [sneeze](#)⁶⁴ your soul is separated from your body and so by saying 'God bless you' it's a way of stopping the devil from jumping in and stealing your soul.

[00:14:37] In your language I imagine you say a similar thing after someone [sneezes](#) because, well, sneezing normally comes when you have a cold, a flu, or something like that, and you're not in great health.

[00:14:49] So on one level it's just a perfectly nice and reasonable thing to wish someone good health if they have just done something that indicates that they're not in particularly great health right now.

[00:15:02] And our fifth and final superstition is two superstitions [rolled into one](#)⁶⁵, and it's to do with Friday the 13th, or 'today' if you're listening to this episode on the day it's released.

⁶² according to some

⁶³ relating to a set of religious beliefs

⁶⁴ when small drops or liquid suddenly come out of your mouth

⁶⁵ multiple things combined into one



Superstitions

[00:15:16] Before we go into this explanation, I should say that I hope you're having a fantastic day, a better than normal day even, just to [disprove](#)⁶⁶ all of the superstitions about Friday the 13th being an unlucky day.

[00:15:31] Ok then, I've got that out of the way.

[00:15:34] So, there are a few theories about why the number 13 is considered so unlucky.

[00:15:41] The first centres around the idea of 12 being a complete number - there are 12 months of the year, 12 hours on a clock, 12 tribes of Israel, 12 signs of the zodiac, and so on.

[00:15:57] 13 is an [outsider](#)⁶⁷, a number that [detracts](#)⁶⁸ from the completeness of 12.

[00:16:04] There were, of course, also 13 people to sit at the table for the Last Supper, with Judas, the [disciple](#) who [betrayed](#)⁶⁹ Jesus, thought to be number 13.

[00:16:15] And going further back to ancient Norse [mythology](#)⁷⁰ there's a story of 12 gods being invited to dine at Valhalla, a great hall in Viking heaven, and a thirteenth

⁶⁶ prove that something isn't true

⁶⁷ someone or something who isn't involved with a particular group

⁶⁸ make something seem less good

⁶⁹ be disloyal to someone

⁷⁰ a set of classical myths



Superstitions

god [crashing⁷¹](#) the party, causing a huge fight, one of the good gods to die, and the world [plunging⁷²](#) into darkness.

[00:16:39] There's even a word for fear of the number 13, it's "triskaidekaphobia". I guess you probably won't need to use this one very much, but there you go.

[00:16:51] Triskaidekaphobia is a real problem though. Many buildings don't have a thirteenth floor, most aeroplanes don't have a 13th row, and it's estimated that 10% of the US population, so that's 30 million people, are afraid of the number 13.

[00:17:10] But why Friday, you might ask?

[00:17:12] Well, Friday isn't a great day in the Bible. It was thought to be the day on which Eve offered Adam the forbidden fruit, eventually causing man's fall from Eden. It was also the day that Jesus was crucified.

[00:17:28] So when you combine the bad luck of the number 13 with the bad luck of Friday you are really getting into unlucky territory, so the superstition goes.

[00:17:38] But it wasn't really until the horror film Friday 13th, in 1980, that there was this real [widespread](#) idea that Friday 13th was a date where all sorts of terrible things happen.

⁷¹ (of a party) going despite not being invited

⁷² causing (something bad) to happen



Superstitions

[00:17:51] So is it actually that terrible, and should you [keep a lookout](#)⁷³ tonight for all sorts of unlucky things?

[00:18:00] Well, no.

[00:18:01] Indeed, there was a Dutch study from 2008 that suggested that there are fewer car accidents, fewer fires, and fewer bad things that happen on Friday 13 than on a normal day, [presumably](#) because people are careful, or they just avoid activities that could be considered dangerous in any way.

[00:18:24] So, if you are listening to this episode on Friday the 13th, I hope you're having a [marvelous](#)⁷⁴ day, full of good luck and joy.

[00:18:33] And if you're listening to this episode and Friday the 13th has been and gone without you noticing any bad luck, congratulations, you've survived, and at least you now know a little bit more about where this superstition, and superstitions in general, come from.

[00:18:51] OK then, that is it for today's episode on superstitions, how they work, where they come from, and why people believe them.

⁷³ pay attention because something bad might happen

⁷⁴ very good



Superstitions

[00:19:00] I hope it's [shed some light](#)⁷⁵ on a few superstitions that you might believe, might observe, or perhaps you think it's all a load of [rubbish](#)⁷⁶.

[00:19:09] As always, either way I'd love to know what you thought of the episode. You can head right in to our community forum, which is community.leonardoenglish.com and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:19:21] And as a final reminder, if you are looking to improve your English in a more interesting way, to join a community of curious minds from all over the world, and to unlock the transcripts, subtitles, and key vocabulary, and to be a cool cat like Jachym and request episodes then the place to go to is leonardoenglish.com

[00:19:42] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English

[00:19:47] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

⁷⁵ given some information

⁷⁶ not true, silly or wrong



Key vocabulary

Word	Definition
Implications	possible future effects
Define	say what the meaning of something is
Conception	understanding
Causation	what causes something to happen
Millennia	thousands of years
Superstitious	believing in superstition
Ignorant	not having enough knowledge
Origins	where something comes from
Embedded	fixed strongly
Over and above	above and higher than anything else
Doctrinal	relating to the set of beliefs that form religion
Mundane	ordinary and not interesting



Superstitions

Fate	what happens to a particular person or thing
Codes	systems
Seemingly	appearing to be
Sinful	against the rules of a religion
Reconcile	find a way where two situations or beliefs can exist at the same time
Catechism	a group of questions or answers about a belief
Worshipping	showing love and respect for
Perverse	strange and unreasonable
Excess	too much
Theologically	relating to religion
At odds	if something is at odds with something else, they are different
Scriptures	religious texts
Clover	a small plant that normally has three round leaves
Intensity	strength
Engaging	doing



Superstitions

Sunshades	objects similar to umbrellas, but they protect you from sun, not rain
Handy	useful
Widespread	existing in many places
Spikes	something that's long and thin with a sharp point
Injuring	hurting
Presumably	used when you think something is probably true
Commodity	something that can be bought or sold
Spilling	causing to fall on the ground
Precious	expensive and rare
A pinch	a small amount
Nullifying	canceling out
Disciple	someone who believes in the ideas of someone else
Spilled	caused to fall on the ground
Portrayed	represented in a painting, film, or book
Sweep	clean something by using a brush



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Sweeping	cleaning something by using a brush
Knock	touch in order to make a noise
Swear	promise
Crucifix	a model representing Jesus Christ
Tempt fate	to do something that involves a lot of risk
Tapping	touching briefly
Peasants	people who own or rent small pieces of land
Spirits	magical creatures
Spirit	a magical creature
Chase	run after
Disputed	not agreed on
Credibility	the quality of deserving to be trusted
Tend	likely to be
Linguistic	relating to language
Sneezes	when small drops or liquid suddenly come out of your mouth



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Raging	moving quickly and uncontrollably
Coughing	when you force air out of your lungs with a short sound
Sneezing	see 'sneeze'
Sneezed	see 'sneeze'
Reportedly	according to some
Doctrinally	relating to a set of religious beliefs
Sneeze	when small drops or liquid suddenly come out of your mouth
Rolled into one	multiple things combined into one
Disprove	prove that something isn't true
Outsider	someone who isn't involved with a particular group
Detracts	make something seem less good
Betrayed	be disloyal to someone
Mythology	a set of classical myths
Crashing	(of a party) going despite not being invited
Plunging	causing (something bad) to happen



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Keep a lookout pay attention because something bad might happen

Marvelous very good

Shed some light given some information

Rubbish not true, silly or wrong

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

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