



# English Learning for Curious Minds



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## Episode #133

### What Makes Us Laugh

### 16th Feb, 2021

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

[00:00:12] 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 Humour, and What Makes Us Laugh.

[00:00:29] It's a topic that we can all relate to, everyone laughs, it's one of the things that [separates](#)<sup>1</sup> humans from almost every other creature on the planet.

[00:00:39] Yet what actually makes us laugh is complicated, it's not obvious, and we still don't fully understand it.

[00:00:48] So, what we are going to do in today's episode is talk about the science of laughter, of what actually happens when we laugh.

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<sup>1</sup> is different between



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:00:57] We'll then talk about the theories of humour, and laughter, and some of the ideas throughout the years about why people laugh.

[00:01:06] Then we'll end by talking very briefly about the British sense of humour, which is certainly different.

[00:01:12] If you do want to learn more about the British sense of humour then I would recommend checking out episode number 60, which is only on the British sense of humour.

[00:01:22] That's well worth a listen if you haven't done so already.

[00:01:27] OK then, humour and laughter.

[00:01:30] It goes without saying that what we find funny, what makes us laugh, varies by age, culture, personality and thousands of different things. We are all different, and what I find funny might not be funny to you. Worse, it might be **offensive**<sup>2</sup>, hard to understand, or just not funny at all.

[00:01:52] But **regardless**<sup>3</sup> of who we are and where we come from, humans laugh, it's an **instinctive**<sup>4</sup> reaction.

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<sup>2</sup> very rude

<sup>3</sup> not being affected by

<sup>4</sup> not thought about or planned



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:01:59] Babies laugh way before they start making anything [resembling](#)<sup>5</sup> speech, way before they start talking.

[00:02:06] People who are [deaf](#)<sup>6</sup>, people who cannot hear, they laugh, even if they have never heard anyone else laughing.

[00:02:14] And we laugh, normally, because we find something funny. It's not the only occasion that we laugh—indeed laughing in some cultures happens when someone is nervous or embarrassed, or you might see a James Bond [villain](#)<sup>7</sup> laughing because they have just done something [terribly](#)<sup>8</sup> evil.

[00:02:33] But for the most part, and in most Western cultures, we laugh when we find something funny, so that is going to be the focus of our attention today.

[00:02:44] So, we all know what a laugh sounds like. We all laugh in slightly different ways, but generally it's a sound that comes from deep within us, that we don't have full control over.

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<sup>5</sup> being similar to

<sup>6</sup> unable to hear

<sup>7</sup> a bad person

<sup>8</sup> very badly



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:02:56] Indeed, the part of the brain that controls laughter is located deep in an area of the brain called the [subcortex<sup>9</sup>](#), which is the part of the brain responsible for basic, [instinctive](#), [involuntary<sup>10</sup>](#) [reflexes<sup>11</sup>](#).

[00:03:13] This is one of the reasons that controlling laughter is hard.

[00:03:18] Especially for young children, if they find something funny they struggle to control their laughter, even if they know it's [inappropriate<sup>12</sup>](#), that they shouldn't be laughing.

[00:03:29] It's such a basic, [instinctive](#) reaction that it's hard to control if our brain is telling us to laugh, and similarly it's hard to [convincingly<sup>13</sup>](#) [fake<sup>14</sup>](#), it's hard to pretend to laugh, if our brains are telling us that we should be laughing.

[00:03:48] This [instinctive](#) nature of laughter, and of humour, has [puzzled<sup>15</sup>](#) philosophers and psychologists since [the dawn of time<sup>16</sup>](#).

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<sup>9</sup> part of the brain

<sup>10</sup> not done by choice

<sup>11</sup> physical reactions that you cannot control

<sup>12</sup> not suitable

<sup>13</sup> in a way that makes people believe something

<sup>14</sup> make seem to be true (even though it isn't)

<sup>15</sup> had trouble understanding

<sup>16</sup> the start of history



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:03:58] Why is something funny?

[00:04:00] What makes someone laugh?

[00:04:03] For the ancient Greeks, humour and laughter often came from feeling [superior<sup>17</sup>](#), feeling better than other people.

[00:04:13] An example of an Ancient Greek joke was, apparently:

[00:04:18] “An idiot, wanting to go to sleep but not having a pillow, told his slave to set a [jar<sup>18</sup>](#), a container, under his head. The slave said that the [jug<sup>19</sup>](#) was hard. The idiot told him to fill it with feathers.”

[00:04:34] Hahahah.

[00:04:35] So, not so different to the sort of joke that we might tell each other today, right?

[00:04:41] And that’s one of the funny things about humour, it's that there are some [inherently<sup>20</sup>](#) human [consistencies<sup>21</sup>](#) about what makes us laugh.

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<sup>17</sup> better than

<sup>18</sup> a container with a wide opening

<sup>19</sup> a container for holding liquids

<sup>20</sup> in a natural, inseparable way

<sup>21</sup> things that do not change



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:04:51] We might think that we are completely different to someone living in Ancient Rome 2000 years ago, or even someone now living in a completely different culture to us, but a lot of the same things make us laugh.

[00:05:06] A 15 month-old child is probably going to laugh at an adult falling over [unexpectedly](#)<sup>22</sup>, whether that child is my child and is alive in 2021 in Europe, whether it's a child that lived 1000 years ago in the Amazon rainforest, or is a child that lived 5000 years ago in Ancient Egypt.

[00:05:29] As we grow up, our cultural environment might [influence](#)<sup>23</sup> what we find funny, it might change what makes us laugh, but there are some theories about humour, about laughter, that are believed to be [inherently](#) human.

[00:05:45] And when it comes to the theory of humour, of what makes us laugh, there are three main theories.

[00:05:54] The first theory of humour, about what makes us laugh is called the [Incongruity](#)<sup>24</sup> Theory.

[00:06:00] If something is [incongruous](#)<sup>25</sup>, it means that it's not in harmony with everything else, it's in a place you wouldn't expect it.

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<sup>22</sup> in a way that is surprising

<sup>23</sup> have an impact on

<sup>24</sup> the fact that something is strange or unusual

<sup>25</sup> strange or unusual



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:06:10] And the [Incongruity](#) Theory suggests that one reason we find something funny is when something that we expect to happen is replaced by something [unexpected](#).

[00:06:23] If you're listening to someone telling a joke, you are following along with a story. Your own experience tells you what is likely to happen in that story, or at least informs you of a few possible scenarios.

[00:06:39] But if something completely [unexpected](#)<sup>26</sup> happens, it's funny, and you laugh.

[00:06:46] The theory goes that it's these two different thoughts that make us laugh, that we experience this [mismatch](#)<sup>27</sup> between what we thought was going to happen and what actually happens, and that [triggers](#)<sup>28</sup> this laughter reaction, or at least makes us think that something is funny.

[00:07:07] Here's an example of this in action in a joke that I quite like..

[00:07:12] "There was a little boy who had never spoken a word in his entire life. One day, while having dinner, [out of the blue](#)<sup>29</sup> he said, "The pasta is disgusting." When the parents heard what their son had just said, they looked at each other full of surprise,

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<sup>26</sup> surprising

<sup>27</sup> two or more things that do not go well together

<sup>28</sup> causes

<sup>29</sup> in a completely unexpected or surprising way



## What Makes Us Laugh

then turned to the boy and asked, "How come you never said anything before?" Their son replied, "Well, so far the food you've given me has been pretty good."

[00:07:41] So, hahah, maybe you found that funny, maybe you didn't.

[00:07:45] The point is that it's unexpected, and the fact that we're trying to [reconcile](#)<sup>30</sup> our expectations about what we thought would happen with what actually does happen is what makes us laugh.

[00:07:59] Our second theory of humour is called the [Superiority](#)<sup>31</sup> Theory.

[00:08:04] Now, if you feel [superior](#) to someone, you feel like you are above them, you're better than them. And the [Superiority](#) Theory revolves around the idea of laughing at people, often unfortunately using [stereotypes](#)<sup>32</sup> of nationality, where someone is from, age and so on.

[00:08:26] I'm sure this doesn't need much more explanation, but when kids laugh at someone falling over, this is partly that they feel [superior](#) to the adult who has done something silly. When we laugh at someone doing something stupid in a joke, or suffering some kind of [misfortune](#)<sup>33</sup>, it's because we feel [superior](#), so the theory goes at least.

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<sup>30</sup> put together two things in a way that both can be acceptable

<sup>31</sup> the fact that one thing is better than another

<sup>32</sup> set ideas about what someone is

<sup>33</sup> bad luck



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:08:50] An interesting part of the [superiority](#) theory is the extent to which, culturally, our [proximity](#)<sup>34</sup> to the event changes how funny it is considered.

[00:09:02] What I mean by this is depending on the culture you come from, and the type of humour that is considered [acceptable](#)<sup>35</sup>, people are more able to laugh about certain things if they are very [removed](#)<sup>36</sup> from them, either in terms of geography or in terms of time, if they happened a long time ago.

[00:09:22] To give you a practical example, if there was some sort of tragic event, it's very unlikely that it would ever be considered acceptable to laugh about it on the day that it happened, or shortly after.

[00:09:37] But slowly slowly, as time went on, it might become acceptable in some cultures to use humour to talk about it, as a way of [coping](#)<sup>37</sup> with it.

[00:09:48] British humour is especially [guilty](#)<sup>38</sup> of this, and you'll find that people in Britain are likely to laugh about things that people in other countries would find very unacceptable.

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<sup>34</sup> closeness

<sup>35</sup> considered good

<sup>36</sup> to move away from its original place

<sup>37</sup> managing

<sup>38</sup> if you are guilty of something, you do (or have done) it



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:10:02] And the final of the three most prominent theories of humour is called The Relief Theory.

[00:10:10] The Relief Theory dates back to the 18th century, in 1709, and was written by an English Philosopher called Anthony Ashley-Cooper, otherwise known as the 3rd Earl of Shaftesbury. It was later developed by Sigmund Freud in the early 20th century, but it actually comes from around 200 years earlier.

[00:10:34] The idea of The Relief Theory is that laughter allows us to release energy and [pent-up](#)<sup>39</sup> emotions, emotions that we had been [storing up](#)<sup>40</sup> inside us.

[00:10:47] It's been adapted a little bit since it was first proposed, but the general idea is that [tension](#)<sup>41</sup> can be built up [artificially](#)<sup>42</sup> by the story of a joke, or in a film or TV series, then there is a funny ending, where we laugh and release our emotions.

[00:11:06] It's also the idea that we [store up](#)<sup>43</sup> [tension](#) inside us, and if there's a joke, often a [rude](#)<sup>44</sup> joke it allows us to release this [tension](#), and be relieved of this pressure.

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<sup>39</sup> if a feeling is pent-up, it isn't allowed to be expressed

<sup>40</sup> keeping in one place for a period of time

<sup>41</sup> feeling of nervousness

<sup>42</sup> in a way that is unnatural

<sup>43</sup> keep in one place for a period of time

<sup>44</sup> not polite



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:11:21] I should point out that most serious philosophers of humour, and theorists of laughter, tend<sup>45</sup> to ignore The Relief Theory, but it still persists<sup>46</sup>.

[00:11:32] So, these are three of the most common explanations for why we laugh - because we experience something unexpected, something incongruous, because we feel superior to someone else, because we laugh at their misfortune and finally because of some release of built up<sup>47</sup> emotions and energy.

[00:11:54] Before moving on to British humour, it's worth pointing out briefly the difference between humour and laughing, because they are evidently not exactly the same.

[00:12:06] We laugh when we find something funny, but if we find something funny we don't always laugh.

[00:12:12] There's been a huge amount written on this, and the function<sup>48</sup> that laughter plays, why we actually laugh in some humorous situations and why we don't in others.

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<sup>45</sup> if you tend to do something, you normally do it

<sup>46</sup> continues

<sup>47</sup> keep in one place for a period of time

<sup>48</sup> role, job



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:12:23] One theory goes that laughter is a way of [enhancing](#)<sup>49</sup> social connection, of [bonding](#)<sup>50</sup> with others. When you share a joke with someone, and laugh at the same time, it's an [intimate](#)<sup>51</sup> experience that helps bring you both closer together.

[00:12:40] Laughter is of course a social activity, and indeed there was a study from the University of Maryland that suggested that we laugh 30 times more in the company of others.

[00:12:53] No doubt you experience this yourself - if you are watching a film, you are more likely to find yourself laughing out loud if you are with other people than if you are just watching it on your own.

[00:13:05] Meanwhile in a book called [Phantoms](#)<sup>52</sup> in the Brain, which was written by a top neuroscientist and a New York Times science writer it was proposed that laughter is our way of [indicating](#)<sup>53</sup> to people around us that there's nothing to worry about.

[00:13:22] As we heard through the [Incongruity](#) Theory, we laugh because we see something we don't expect, and it's exactly this laughter that signals to the group that this [unexpected](#) thing is nothing to worry about.

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<sup>49</sup> improving, strengthening

<sup>50</sup> the process of developing social relationships

<sup>51</sup> close friendship

<sup>52</sup> ghosts

<sup>53</sup> showing



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:13:37] So, these are some of the main theories about what makes us laugh, about what makes something funny.

[00:13:44] And I said that we would talk a little bit about the British sense of humour, so let's end with that.

[00:13:50] Again, if you want to know all about the British sense of humour, then you should listen to Episode 60, but here is a little [taster](#)<sup>54</sup>.

[00:13:59] For those of you who have spent time in Britain, or who live in Britain, you'll have noticed that British humour is particular, it's very different to the humour in most other countries.

[00:14:11] Firstly, Brits love to laugh at themselves. We [put ourselves down](#)<sup>55</sup>, we talk about how [hopeless](#)<sup>56</sup> we are, we are very happy to laugh at our own [misfortunes](#)<sup>57</sup>. That's certainly a sort of humour that you would rarely find in somewhere like the US, for example.

[00:14:28] If you watch any of the standup comedy of someone like Ricky Gervais, it's full of him [putting himself down](#)<sup>58</sup>.

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<sup>54</sup> a small taste

<sup>55</sup> if you put yourself down, you make fun of yourself

<sup>56</sup> without hope

<sup>57</sup> bad luck

<sup>58</sup> if you put yourself down, you make fun of yourself



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:14:36] Secondly, Brits are masters of a type of joke delivery called [deadpan](#).

[00:14:44] In many other cultures it's acceptable, or even expected for someone telling a joke that they get excited with their audience, and they laugh along with them.

[00:14:55] In British humour, this isn't generally considered funny, and instead the person telling the joke should remain completely calm, and deliver the [punchline](#)<sup>59</sup>, the funny, [incongruous](#) part in exactly the same tone of voice as the rest of the joke.

[00:15:13] If you want to see some [deadpan](#)<sup>60</sup> comedy in action, then you'll see it in Monty Python or Blackadder.

[00:15:21] And our final part of British humour to mention is [satire](#)<sup>61</sup>.

[00:15:25] [Satire](#) revolves around [criticising](#)<sup>62</sup> people or ideas in a clever, funny way, especially people in positions of power.

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<sup>59</sup> the last line of a joke

<sup>60</sup> looking serious when telling a joke

<sup>61</sup> making fun of people in a clever, indirect, way

<sup>62</sup> talking about the faults of someone



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:15:35] Brits love to laugh at people in positions of [authority](#)<sup>63</sup>, and there are entire [genres](#)<sup>64</sup> of British comedy based around laughing at prime ministers, government officials, and so on.

[00:15:47] This type of humour can be explained partly through the [Incongruity](#) Theory and partly through the Superiority Theory - we expect people in positions of [authority](#) to be clever and without the same [flaws](#)<sup>65</sup> as normal people.

[00:16:03] But they aren't.

[00:16:04] So we therefore feel surprised and [superior](#).

[00:16:09] And if you are looking for [satire](#), then you will enjoy things like Yes Minister, or the magazine Private Eye.

[00:16:17] Now, although this episode was meant to be about What Makes Us Laugh, it hasn't been very funny.

[00:16:23] So let's at least try and do something about that, and end with a little joke along the theme of the English language.

[00:16:32] The teacher asks, "Alastair, what is the past participle of the verb to ring?"

[00:16:39] Alastair says, "What do you think it is, Sir?"

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<sup>63</sup> power (because of an official position)

<sup>64</sup> styles

<sup>65</sup> faults, mistakes



## What Makes Us Laugh

[00:16:43] The teacher replies, "I don't think, I KNOW!"

[00:16:47] Alastair replies, "I don't think I know either, Sir!"

[00:16:53] OK then, that is it for today's episode on What Makes Us Laugh.

[00:16:58] If you didn't find it funny [in the slightest<sup>66</sup>](#), that's ok, as long as you learnt something new.

[00:17:04] As always, I would love to know what you thought of this episode.

[00:17:08] What makes you laugh? How is humour in your country and culture different? And of course, what's your favourite joke?

[00:17:16] You can head right in to our community forum, which is at [community.leonardoenglish.com](http://community.leonardoenglish.com) and get chatting away to other curious minds.

[00:17:25] You've been listening to English Learning for Curious Minds, by Leonardo English.

[00:17:30] I'm Alastair Budge, you stay safe, and I'll catch you in the next episode.

[END OF PODCAST]

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<sup>66</sup> at all



**English Learning for Curious Minds | Episode #133**  
**What Makes Us Laugh**



## Key vocabulary

<b>Word</b>	<b>Definition</b>
<b>Separates</b>	is different between
<b>Offensive</b>	very rude
<b>Regardless</b>	not being affected by
<b>Instinctive</b>	not thought about or planned
<b>Resembling</b>	being similar to
<b>Deaf</b>	unable to hear
<b>Villain</b>	a bad person
<b>Terribly</b>	very badly
<b>Subcortex</b>	part of the brain
<b>Involuntary</b>	not done by choice
<b>Reflexes</b>	physical reactions that you cannot control
<b>Inappropriate</b>	not suitable
<b>Convincingly</b>	in a way that makes people believe something



## What Makes Us Laugh

<b>Fake</b>	make seem to be true (even though it isn't)
<b>Puzzled</b>	had trouble understanding
<b>The dawn of time</b>	the start of history
<b>Superior</b>	better than
<b>Jar</b>	a container with a wide opening
<b>Jug</b>	a container for holding liquids
<b>Inherently</b>	in a natural, inseparable way
<b>Consistencies</b>	things that do not change
<b>Unexpectedly</b>	in a way that is surprising
<b>Influence</b>	have an impact on
<b>Incongruity</b>	the fact that something is strange or unusual
<b>Incongruous</b>	strange or unusual
<b>Unexpected</b>	surprising
<b>Mismatch</b>	two or more things that do not go well together
<b>Triggers</b>	causes



## What Makes Us Laugh

<b>Out of the blue</b>	in a completely unexpected or surprising way
<b>Reconcile</b>	put together two things in a way that both can be acceptable
<b>Superiority</b>	the fact that one thing is better than another
<b>Stereotypes</b>	set ideas about what someone is
<b>Misfortune</b>	bad luck
<b>Proximity</b>	closeness
<b>Acceptable</b>	considered good
<b>Removed</b>	to move away from its original place
<b>Coping</b>	managing
<b>Guilty</b>	if you are guilty of something, you do (or have done) it
<b>Pent-up</b>	if a feeling is pent-up, it isn't allowed to be expressed
<b>Storing up</b>	keeping in one place for a period of time
<b>Tension</b>	feeling of nervousness
<b>Artificially</b>	in a way that is unnatural
<b>Store up</b>	keep in one place for a period of time



What Makes Us Laugh

<b>Rude</b>	not polite
<b>Tend</b>	if you tend to do something, you normally do it
<b>Persists</b>	continues
<b>Built up</b>	keep in one place for a period of time
<b>Function</b>	role, job
<b>Enhancing</b>	improving, strengthening
<b>Bonding</b>	the process of developing social relationships
<b>Intimate</b>	close friendship
<b>Phantoms</b>	ghosts
<b>Indicating</b>	showing
<b>Taster</b>	a small taste
<b>Put ourselves down</b>	if you put yourself down, you make fun of yourself
<b>Hopeless</b>	without hope
<b>Misfortunes</b>	bad luck
<b>Putting himself down</b>	if you put yourself down, you make fun of yourself



## What Makes Us Laugh

<b>Deadpan</b>	looking serious when telling a joke
<b>Punchline</b>	the last line of a joke
<b>Satire</b>	making fun of people in a clever, indirect, way
<b>Criticising</b>	talking about the faults of someone
<b>Authority</b>	power (because of an official position)
<b>Genres</b>	styles
<b>Flaws</b>	faults, mistakes
<b>In the slightest</b>	at all

*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?*

*Let us know in the forum [community.leonardoenglish.com](https://community.leonardoenglish.com)*

