

'Sorry'

Many expatriates working in the UK comment that many British people avoid direct statements that may appear sudden or harsh. We say 'no' as often when we *agree* as disagree (typically, after a negative statement).

It's no good waiting for a bus.

No, I agree.

And even when we do say no to disagree we often say 'sorry' as well.

Sorry, no, that's just not true.

The British say **yes but** for **no**. We disagree **with respect**. When we terminate someone's contract, we say **I'm sorry, I'm going to have to let you go** as if the employee was a bird in a cage. And we say sorry a lot.

Sorry means 'excuse me', sorry means 'hey', sorry is even something an aggressive person might say before he starts a fight. We even say sorry if someone else accidentally pushes against us and we are innocently standing still. Sorry is on a par with 'OK' as the most used and most versatile word in the language. It also remains the standard word for an apology.

Put these instructions in more polite language:

- 1) Leave now!
- 2) Don't put hot plates on the table.
- 3) Stop talking so loudly!
- 4) Get me some milk.
- 5) Don't smoke in here.
- 6) Turn off the music.

I'm sorry but

ROLE PLAY

Use 'sorry' at least once in each exercise:

- 1) Your teacher has parked in your space.
- 2) You did not hear what your teacher said.
- 3) You are rejecting your teacher's application to the role of senior manager in your company.
- 4) You need to ring off as you have a meeting. Arrange to call back.

'Yes, but ...'

British people do say what they think, even if they disagree with you. But there is a tendency to soften the negativity, to avoid being confrontational. Here are some of the ways people say no or disagree in the UK:

Yes but ...
I'm not sure about that.
I'm not sure I agree with you.
I'm not sure I go along with that.
It's not quite what I had in mind
I don't see it that way.

**Yes,
but ...**



I think it's better to walk.

Yes, but
it will take an hour to get there. Why don't we take a taxi?

Respond to the following statements in a 'soft' way:

- 1) Employees should work 14 hours a day.
- 2) The best way to improve global communication is to ban all languages except English.

Criticising and being negative

If we want to be more direct in a negative or critical way, we give notice of it: "Let me be straight with you" prepares the way for direct talking. "To be blunt" introduces a negative or controversial remark. "With respect" warns someone that you mean the opposite.

I have to say, I think that's wrong

To be frank, I think he's **not very** suitable

I have to say I think it's a **bit** risky

With respect You **slightly** miss the point

Let me be straight with you: we need a new manager

Criticisms are softened with words like

"a bit...",
"slightly...",
"not very...".

We say 'a bit overcooked' when we mean 'cooked too much'.

Imagine that you are looking around your tutor's flat with a view to renting it. Using the 'softening' phrases, explain that it is

- 1) Too small
- 2) Too far from the centre of the town
- 3) Too expensive
- 4) Very cold
- 5) Next-door to noisy neighbours

Understatement

Expressions like “a bit...”, “slightly...”, “not very...” that tone down criticism are symptomatic of British understatement. It is not only negative things we tend to soften, but positive statements too. Sometimes people express their enthusiasm in a way that seems they are not enthusiastic at all:

How's the new job?

- “Not too bad”
- “Could be worse”
- “Mustn't grumble”
- “I can't complain”

} all mean much the same, i.e. quite good or better than satisfactory

How's the holiday?



In the UK you will come across lots of people who tone down their expressions. We ‘soften’ or qualify descriptions (a bit expensive, slightly overcooked).

With your teacher, use ‘a bit’, ‘fairly’, etc, to describe your ...

These adjectives may help. Add more of your own.

a bit ...	attractive	difficult	kind
fairly ...	big	dodgy	laid back
extremely ...	boring	dull	likeable
a little ...	bossy	easygoing	nice
very ...	bright	efficient	punctual
quite ...	busy	elegant	pushy
pretty ...	calm	exciting	quiet
slightly ...	caring	expensive	shy
not very ...	charming	fashionable	small
rather ...	cold	funny	stressful
a touch ...	comfortable	generous	tasty
really ...	complicated	helpful	thoughtful
	confident	impatient	time-consuming
	cosy	imposing	typical
	dangerous	impressive	understanding
	delicious	inspiring	unreliable
	demanding	irritating	wet

- ... boss
- ... teacher
- ... partner
- ... house
- ... job
- ... office
- ... UK food
- ... UK weather
- ... UK clothes

Criticising and complaining

Stefan Bergsen is Swedish and has recently been appointed IT Manager at a company in the UK. He is a charming man to meet, but his colleagues find his emails abrasive. Rewrite this email in a more acceptable style.

To: All departments
From: Stefan Bergsen
Date: 14 June 2004

It is forbidden for non-IT staff to install the new software.

Strict compliance is necessary in all UK offices.

Stefan Bergsen

All British people are capable of complaining. Within the family or to close friends, they call it 'grumbling' or 'whingeing'. But complaints to other people are generally filtered through the 'soft edge', with statements like **I'm sorry but ...**

Britons don't like to complain in public in case they are perceived to be 'making a fuss'.

Complaining in public is regarded as 'making a scene'. Most children feel awkward if their parents complain to someone in front of them.

I'm
sorry, but...



Write a memo to your colleagues with the instruction not to park their cars in the spaces reserved for the senior directors.

You are an HR officer: write an email to employees in Design & Development asking them not to wear jeans in the office.

What is your experience of people in the UK? Do they avoid 'making a scene'? Are they reluctant to expose their feelings?



How do they compare with other nationalities? The Italians for example?

ROLE PLAY

You are on a train and are just returning to your seat from the buffet. Someone (your teacher) is sitting in your place.

Writing emails

Jean writes English well. However, the style of her emails is not much liked by her colleagues. The problem is her tone. She's not a rude person when you meet her, but her emails have caused offence more than once.

Rewrite these six emails in a softer manner and more acceptable tone.

1.

To: dave.jones@smith.co.uk
Cc:
Subject: Meeting

Dear Dave

I do not want to meet you on Tuesday as we had arranged. I am required elsewhere. We have to arrange another meeting at mutual convenience.

Regards
 Jean Smith
 PA to CEO

2.

To: clare.brown@smith.co.uk
Cc: kevin.watts@smith.co.uk
Subject: Financial reports

Dear Clare

I have not received the financial reports.

Forward them as soon as possible and copy in Kevin.

Regards
 Jean Smith
 PA to CEO

3.

To: all.colleagues@smith.co.uk
Cc:
Subject: Use of meeting-room

Dear All,

It is unacceptable to leave used cups and other waste in the meeting-room, as per staff regulation 9.12.

Regards
 Jean Smith
 PA to CEO

4.

To: james.croft@smith.co.uk
Cc:
Subject: Health & Safety Compliance

Dear James

You are required to sign the Health & Safety Compliance forms.

I have them here.

Regards
 Jean Smith
 PA to CEO

5.

To: all.colleagues@smith.co.uk
Cc:
Subject: Parking reminder

Dear All,

Parking in the company carpark is entirely forbidden except in your designated space.

Regards
 Jean Smith
 PA to CEO

6.

To: mary.norton@smith.co.uk
Cc:
Subject: Supper

Dear Mary

Denis and I much appreciated supper on Thursday. The food was of a high standard, and your husband Tom was pleasant company. It was interesting to meet you in a different environment from the office.

Regards
 Jean Smith
 PA to CEO

Discuss these expressions with your teacher:

If your boss says ...

S/he may mean ...

“Yes but”

No

“It’s not quite what we’re looking for”

The answer is definitely no

“With respect”

Don’t be an idiot

“This is a great opportunity”

You’ll be working through the weekend

“That’s very interesting”

Will you ever finish talking?

“So what you’re saying is”

I don’t have a clue what you’re on about

“What’s the consensus view?”

Does everyone agree with me?

“I really appreciate the hours you have put into this”

I’m looking for someone to rescue this

“I won’t impose an agenda from the MD’s chair”

Step out of line and you’re history

“This has all been very worthwhile”

Thank goodness that’s over

“I don’t want to fall out over this”

Any more trouble and I’ll stick one on you

This may be called a cynical view! The statements could just as easily be genuine and heartfelt. So don’t be put off using these phrases, but just be aware how some people might understand them!

Give two meanings (one literal or face-value, and the other implied):

1. He can be a bit difficult.
2. Don’t call us – we’ll call you.
3. I’ve nothing against him personally.
4. He’s had a few drinks.
5. His performance could be better.
6. Tell him where to go.