Paul Baker asks whether the British still really love the gradable adverb.

KEEP
CALM
AND
USE AN
ADVERB

In Babel No2 I wrote about Polari, a secret language used by gay men that was popularised by Julian and Sandy, two camp characters in the 1960s radio comedy programme Round the Horne. This article is inspired by two other characters from Round the Horne – Fiona and Charles, fictional film characters voiced by fictional actors Dame Celia Molestrangler and Binkie Huckaback, who were played (in real life) by Betty Marsden and Hugh Paddick. If you are now hopelessly lost in a sea of ridiculous names, then all you need to know is that Fiona and Charles were star-crossed lovers who conducted stilted conversations like this:

Charles: I knew. I always knew. And yet, I was uncertain. Lip-bitingly, stomach-turningly, heart-flutteringly, eyebrow-raisingly uncertain. Yet… still… somehow sure. And you Fiona?
Fiona: I was sure too. Cheek-tremblingly, teeth-grittingly, dog-in-the-mangerly, utterly, utterly sure. And yet… somehow uncertain.

The sketches made fun of upper-class British speech and a general British embarrassment when it comes to vocalising strong emotions. One of the notable aspects of the sketches is the use of a set of words called gradable adverbs, which are usually used to modify the impact of an adjective ("*utterly*, *utterly* sure"). Fiona and Charles were parodies of Noel Coward's plays and scripts, and they made particular fun of Dame Celia Johnson and Trevor Howard's characters in the 1945 film Brief Encounter, in which two people fall in love but then decide they cannot be together because they are both married to other people. The characters in Brief Encounter spend a lot of time looking longingly at each other, drinking calming cups of tea and speaking in gradable adverbs.

In fact, statistically speaking, Brief Encounter contains more gradable adverbs that the average British person is likely to use. When I compared all of the different grammatical and semantic categories of the script of Brief Encounter against a 'reference corpus' of 1 million words of general British English, gradable adverbs emerged as the category which Brief Encounter used much more than would be expected.

However, it's not just these characters who like their gradable adverbs, it's British people in general – at least if we compare British and American language together. As part of a book I've been writing on change and differences between British and American English over the past century, I found that in all the time periods I examined, British people used more of these adverbs than Americans. They are a very British form of communication.

In order to consider how and why they are used, we need to make a distinction between 'boosters' and 'compromisers'. Boosters strengthen the impact of a statement, and include words like 'very', 'so', 'really' and 'wonderfully', as well as phrases like 'a hell of a' and 'by far'. Compromisers, on the other hand, are words like 'quite', 'pretty', 'rather', 'reasonably' and 'sufficiently', and phrasal adverbs like 'in some way', 'to a point', 'to an extent' and 'to put it mildly'. The somewhat dampening effect of compromisers is reminiscent of a quote by the American critic Alexander Woollcott (1887-1943), who observed that "The English have an extraordinary ability for flying into a great calm". Thus, compromisers in particular appear to be part of a British politeness toolkit, aimed at presenting oneself as stoically unaffected by adverse circumstances, as well as lessening the impact of potentially face-threatening negative opinions. They involve understatement, which cultural commentator George Mikes referred to as a way of life for the English. More recently, Kate Fox's anthropological study of the English identified an unwritten rule that she calls 'The Understatement Rule':

"The understatement rule means that a debilitating and painful chronic illness must be described as 'a bit of a nuisance'; a truly horrific experience is 'well not exactly what I would have chosen'; a sight of breathtaking beauty is 'quite pretty'... We are not taught the use of the understatement, we learn it by osmosis. The understatement 'comes naturally' because it is deeply engrained in our culture, part of the English psyche."

My analysis of corpus data bears this out. Take, for example, the word 'rather'. In the corpus of British English that I examined, 'rather' appeared directly before 151 adjectives, of which two thirds indicated a negative stance: 'rather unseemly', 'rather unsightly', 'rather disappointing', etc. On the other hand, in the same corpus the strengthening 'very' much more often modified positive adjectives like 'good', 'great', 'useful', 'important', 'strong', 'pleased' and 'happy'. The words to the 1944 song 'Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive' (containing the second line 'Eliminate the negative') may have been written by an American (Johnny Mercer), but they belie a very British way of looking at the world. Similarly, in the last few years the phrase 'Keep Calm and Carry On' has found its way onto numerous bags, T-shirts, Iphone cases and (most tellingly) tea-pots. Designed as a motivational poster in World War II to raise morale during the Blitz, it was hardly ever used (and those who did see it thought it was patronising), until the twenty-first century, when it was rediscovered and embraced with knowing nostalgia.

Stewart and Bennett describe Americans as direct and explicit in their use of language. The phrase 'cut to the chase' aptly summarises this attitude, thought to have originated from early silent films and coined by

Scene from Brief Encounter

Translation Table

What the British say	What the British mean	What foreigners understand
That is a very brave proposal	You are insane	He thinks I have courage
Quite good	A bit disappointing	Quite good
I would suggest	Do it or be prepared to justify yourself	Think about the idea, but do what you like
Very interesting	That is clearly nonsense	They are impressed
You must come for dinner	It's not an invitation, I'm just being polite	I will get an invitation soon
Could we consider some other opinions	I don't like your idea	They have not yet decided

producer Hal Roach Sr. It was initially an edict given to comedy films which were seen as being boring, with too much dialogue before the exciting chase scene. Gradually, 'cut to the chase' started to mean 'get to the point'. Conversely, British politeness is internationally renowned as puzzling to visitors to the UK, and in recent years a number of internet memes have exploited this confusion for comic effect. The table above, for example uses modal verbs and gradable adverbs from a 'Translation Table' reported in The Telegraph (2 September, 2013).

While these translations should be taken with a pinch of salt, and, to my eyes, now depict a certain type of middle-class British person who fits the national stereotype, it is notable how gradable adverbs like 'very' and 'quite' contribute towards these coded messages of disapproval.

However, the British love of gradable adverbs appears to be in the process of being consigned to the linguistic dustbin. While my analysis found a statistically significant difference in gradable adverb usage between British and American English in the 1930s, 1960s and 1990s, by the 2000s the difference was still there, but no longer significant. In addition, it transpires that gradable adverbs are decreasing over time for both nationalities. The 1930s British corpus contained 5,448 compromisers, but the equivalent 2000s corpus only had 3,656. Why would this be the case? Perhaps it is a subtle sign of the Americanisation of British English, or it could be a result of another process called densification, with language use becoming more compacted. In terms of conveying information, gradable adverbs take up space and are generally not as crucial to conveying a general meaning as nouns, verbs or even adjectives – they are the expendables of the grammatical classes.

Perhaps their decline reflects a cultural shift in terms of how British people engage with notions of politeness and identity? Because they are associated with upper or middle class people, it could be that we don't want to use them for fear of coming across as out of touch toffs. However, we need to take care not to over-interpret: it could be that face-saving strategies and downplaying adversity are migrating to new linguistic forms. Although with that said, I didn't find much evidence of this when I looked at grammatical categories that were *increasing* in British English over time. While directness is an admirable quality, so is keeping calm and carrying on, and trying not to hurt people's feelings. Perhaps Brief Encounter should be introduced into the National Curriculum, and newsreaders encouraged to use phrases like 'quite a difficult situation' when reporting bad news. However, I feel it is probably too late – and knowing that gradable adverbs are a 'British thing that is in the process of no longer being a British thing' isn't enough to bring them back, except in a somewhat ironic retro way like the Keep Calm poster. And I'm slightly upset about that. ¶

Find out more

Books

Paul Baker (forthcoming) *American and British English. Divided by a Common Language?*, Cambridge University Press.

Kate Fox (2004) *Watching the English*, Hodder.

George Mikes (1984) *How to Be a Brit*, Penguin.

Edward C. Stewart and Milton J. Bennett (1991) *American Cultural Patterns: A Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Intercultural Press.

Eric Partridge (1986) *A Dictionary of Catch Phrases: British and American, from the Sixteenth Century to the Present Day*, Routledge.