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# English Revisited: Tips, Tidbits & Tutorials

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## EDITORIAL

### GLOSSARY

*at the helm:*  
in a leadership position

*to prompt s.o. to do sth.:*  
to cause s.o. to do sth.

*albeit:*  
though

*on the fly:*  
while doing sth. else;  
without stopping

*whiz (slang):*  
smart person

*smarts (colloquial):*  
knowledge

After an exciting and rewarding three-year leave of absence working for the DAAD at the German Mongolian Institute for Resources and Technology (GMIT) in Ulaanbaatar, I am now back at the helm of the English Department at the Language Center. Having been “on leave” prompted me to explore in the vocabulary section of this issue of our newsletter the use of the noun “leave” in this context.

Working at an English-language German university in Mongolia meant dealing with students and staff who were not native speakers of English and whose mastery of English varied depending on whether they had spent time in an English-speaking country or had come into contact with native speakers of English before. Accent was a quick, albeit not always reliable, way to assess someone’s language level on the fly. In the intercultural section of our newsletter, we examine the effect that accent has on language level perception.

Lastly, for our grammar whizzes wishing to test their smarts, we have taken a more in-depth look at relative clauses, in particular the reduced structure used in the first part of this sentence. Did you spot it? Read on to find out more about reduced relative clauses.

John Nixon

## CURRENTLY ON OFFER

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## Reduced Relative Clauses

In order to understand how to create reduced relative clauses we need to look at the basics first. In English there are two types of relative clauses: defining and non-defining. Defining relative clauses give us important information about the person or thing the speaker is referring to. Without the relative clause it might be difficult to understand the meaning of the sentence. We do **not** use commas with defining clauses. The relative pronoun *that* can be used, and it can be left out when it is the object. Prepositions normally go at the end of the sentence containing a relative clause.

My sister works for a company *that makes washing machines.*

Who's the guy *you were talking to?*

Non-defining relative clauses give us extra information. Without this type of relative clause the meaning of the main sentence would still be clear. We **do** use a comma before and after a non-defining relative clause. The relative pronoun *that* cannot be used, and you cannot drop the relative pronoun either

My sister works for ABCD, *which also makes washing machines.*

If we want to refer to the information of the whole preceding sentence, we have to use *which* (and **not** *what*).

I couldn't come to your party, *which was a pity.*

By contrast, *what* means *the thing(s) that*.

I went to Harrod's but they didn't have *what I was looking for.*

### Reduced Relative Clauses

Reduced relative clauses are shortened defining relative clauses: instead of a complete relative sentence, a present participle (-ing form) or a past participle (-ed form unless irregular) is used immediately after the noun it modifies. A form of *to be* is part of the defining relative clause verb.

I counted the number of students *waiting outside the classroom.*

( = I counted the number of students who were waiting outside the classroom. )

Our department had to pay for the rooms *used in the exam.* ( = Our department had to pay for the rooms that were used in the exam. )

Instead of a participle an adjective can be placed immediately after the noun at the beginning of a reduced relative sentence.

*Peter White is a manager capable of leading a team well.*

( = Peter White is a manager who is capable of leading a team well. )

*I don't know anybody better at drawing up a questionnaire than him.*

( = I don't know anybody who is better at drawing up a questionnaire than him. )

You often find a reduced relative clause after *there is / are*.

There is a student *waiting* outside your office.

A relative clause can also be reduced when its verb expresses a habitual or a continuous action or when the verb is *to wish, want, hope, or desire* (but not *like*).

Passengers *travelling* on the underground normally buy their tickets online.

( = Passengers who travel on the underground normally buy their tickets online. )

People *wishing* to go on a sightseeing tour around Greenwich must queue this side.

( = People who wish to go on a sightseeing tour around Greenwich must queue this side. )

And here is where we come across one exception: also non-defining relative clauses featuring either a verb expressing a wish or a verb of knowing or thinking can be reduced, i.e. replaced by a present participle. They keep the commas, too.

Susan, *thinking* the trip to Glasgow would take much longer, had rented a car.

( = Susan, who thought the trip to Glasgow would take much longer, had rented a car. )

Practice makes perfect! So over to you with a few exercises.

Sylvia Grade

### Exercises



### GLOSSARY

*preceding:*  
coming before

*to draw up:*  
to create (usually with plans)

*habitual:*  
occurring often

*to queue (UK):*  
to line up (US)

## You Say “To-mah-to”<sup>1</sup>

### GLOSSARY

*to perceive:*  
to realize or understand

*extensive:*  
large, considerable

*prevailing:*  
widespread

*to be apt to do:*  
to have a tendency

*to contend:*  
to state an argument

*exceedingly:*  
excessively

*cognate:*  
a word having the same origin as another foreign word, eg. father and Vater

*to embrace:*  
(here) to accept openly

*pretty (adverb):*  
(here colloquial) very

The majority of people who learn a foreign language will never achieve a native speaker’s level of pronunciation. Nonetheless, speaking without an accent is still widely perceived as the ideal, which is an unreasonable expectation considering the fact that it requires one to have extensive exposure to the foreign language, ideally starting from a young age.

The topic of age is controversial when examining the human capacity to learn foreign languages. The prevailing theory is that children are more apt to master a language. However, some researchers, such as the authors of one study from Harvard University, suggest that age is actually less of a deciding factor than one’s situation. The authors contend that the reason many adults do not become proficient in a language is simply due to a lack of time since they are busy with work, family, and other responsibilities. Children have more time to devote to learning a language, but an adult who is dedicated and motivated may also achieve a very advanced level.

However, age does seem to play an important role when it comes to pronunciation. It is exceedingly rare to encounter someone that began later in life to study a foreign language and is able to speak it without an accent. People who achieve native speaker pronunciation most likely spent several years in the target country, they had parents from that country and were raised bilingually, or they attended a dual language school. Most of us do not meet these criteria. Besides age, there are additional factors that affect our abilities to learn a foreign language. In some countries, like Japan, reading and writing are more strongly emphasized than speaking. In addition, some languages are easier for us to learn because of cognates and a similar pronunciation to our mother tongue (e.g., Spanish and Italian) while other languages are more challenging.

Speaking with a foreign accent has a variety of implications for our social and professional lives. Studies have demonstrated that it could result in one being viewed as having weak political skills, less credibility, less intelligence, and less loyalty. The likelihood of these stereotypes arising varies depending on the context. For example, one would expect them to occur less frequently in an international environment than in a situation where one is the only foreigner. Furthermore, one might expect that the thickness of an accent plays a role, but in an

experiment from the University of Chicago it was shown that statements made by speakers with no accent were rated as being significantly more believable than the same statements made by speakers with mild or heavy accents, which were rated about the same and less believable.

So what does this all mean for you, dear reader, if you have an accent? For most of us, having an accent is luckily a non-issue. However, if you were to have a job interview and are competing against several native speakers, it could help to acknowledge the “elephant in the room” and to talk about the fact that you are not a native speaker. You can focus on the hard work that you invested in learning the language, and therefore what the interviewers might have initially perceived as a weakness could be turned into a strength. If having an accent makes you too self-conscious or shy, you may consider taking a course in accent reduction. Even adults can improve their pronunciation. That being said, the degree to which pronunciation can be improved depends on the person and how much time is invested.

For most of us, our accents are here to stay and we will just have to embrace them. They are what make us like pretty much everyone else when it comes to speaking a foreign language.

Dr. Joseph Michaels

### Footnote

<sup>1</sup>The title is based on a 1937 song by Ira and George Gershwin, “Let’s call the whole thing off,” which is about how words can be pronounced differently depending on one’s class or country of origin.

## On Leave

As I take leave of 2020, I can look back on the end of a wonderful three-year leave of absence working for the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) in Mongolia. It is said that being on leave spares us the leaving and that was certainly true in my case.

Taking a leave is not the same as leaving one's job neither semantically nor etymologically, although the latter might surprise you. The noun "leave" used in the idioms "to take leave" or "leave of absence" actually means permission or period of time away (usually from work) and not departure. It is a cognate of *Urlaub* in German, while the verb "to leave" is related etymologically to the German *bleiben*, believe it or not.<sup>1</sup>

### Different Types of Leave

In general, a leave of absence or sabbatical is the time away from one's job. There are many possible types of leave: maternity and paternity leave, parental leave (*Elternzeit*) or child-care leave, adoption leave, sick or medical leave, bereavement leave, compassionate leave (to care for someone who is dying), educational leave, summer leave (holiday), and paid/unpaid leave.

The expression "on leave" is often associated with the military. A sailor on shore leave is one who has been given some time off to spend on land. Hence, the word shore. AWOL (pronounced ay-wall) stands for absent without leave. If soldiers go AWOL, then they have abandoned their post or quite possibly even deserted. In colloquial English, you might hear "She has gone AWOL.", meaning that she has disappeared and no one has heard from her for a while.

A similar, albeit much less common, expression is "to take French leave", which means to leave a party without saying goodbye to the hosts. According to the Collins English Dictionary, this dates back to an 18th-century custom in France. Not surprisingly, the French see things a bit differently. The equivalent expression in French is *filer à l'anglaise*.

As a result of the corona pandemic, companies around the world have had to furlough (pronounced *fur-lo*) some of their employees. This word means to lay someone off from their job temporarily so that a company can save money. It was originally used in the military, but is now also used for employment. The word "furlough" comes from the Dutch "verlof" and is a cognate of the German *Verlaub* (relating back to the meaning of permission seen at the beginning of this article).

### Collocations and Idioms

The following verbs collocate with the noun "leave".

- request, apply for a leave
- grant a leave
- take a leave
- be on leave (no article!)
- be put on leave (e.g. by management)

Some examples of idioms using the noun "leave" include:

The court has granted leave to appeal.  
(This means that it is possible to challenge the decision the court has made.)

Have you taken leave of your senses?  
(= Have you gone crazy?)

As you can see, the common word leave is more subtle and varied than one might have imagined.

### Source

<sup>1</sup>[www.etymonline.com](http://www.etymonline.com)

John Nixon

### GLOSSARY

*take leave of sth./sb.:*  
say goodbye

*cognate:*  
a word that shares the same origin as another word in a related language

*bereavement leave:*  
a leave of absence due to death in the family, usually for a few days

*to desert:*  
to leave the military without permission (Careful! The second syllable is stressed in this verb.)

*senses.:*  
(here) good judgement