Get to the point!

Why do the English find it so excruciatingly difficult to say what they mean? **Deborah Nicholls-Lee** investigates our allegiance to politeness and understatement

IN a 1940 memo to his war cabinet, Churchill made a plea for brevity. Reports, he urged, should contain 'short, crisp paragraphs' and avoid 'woolly phrases' and 'padding'. 'Let us not shrink from using the short expressive phrase,' he decreed, 'even if it is conversational.'

It was a big ask of a nation that had long made an art of circumlocution, tactfully scratching at the surface of meaning rather than piercing its heart. We use an English that is hesitant, excursive and peppered with tentative prefixes: 'Couldn't you perhaps?'; 'I think perhaps it's best if…'—all destined to create, according to Debrett's *A-Z of Modern Manners*, 'an aura of modest reticence'.

To my mind, writer and cultural historian Jenny Chamarette says it best, describing British English as 'one long exercise in equivocation'. 'I have spent my life tuning in to the frequency of the something almost said…,' Dr Chamarette writes on the Substack newsletter *Acts of Listening*. 'Like turning a dial on an AM/FM radio, hoping for the static to clear.'

Research by Trinity College London published in 2025 found that the British utter an average of 14 'polite-isms' per day, perhaps explained by 83% of us admitting we avoid confrontation at all costs. All this poses a problem for language learners, with a quarter of English language teachers reporting that their students found British indirectness confusing.

Yet softening important messages with expressions such as 'with all due respect' (I'm about to criticise you) and 'I beg your pardon' (could you be any ruder?) is a well-established practice. 'We've been using them for thousands of years,' said Dr Ben Beaumont, part of the research team and head of teacher education and pedagogy, adding that 'there are even examples of "polite-isms" in *Beowulf*'.

Jonathan Culpeper, professor of linguistics and English language at Lancaster University and author of *Impoliteness: Using Language to Cause Offence*, notes that patterns of politeness and indirect language have nevertheless altered over time. 'The English used to be much more direct,' he maintains. 'In Shakespeare's time, one in three requests were made directly with the bare imperative verb: "Fetch the water", "Get thee gone", and so on. Now, it's only one in 10.' The biggest gear shift was during the urbanisation and industrialisation of the late 1800s, Prof Culpeper says. 'Lots of people were getting crushed together in cities and they developed new linguistic ways of doing things, including politeness.'

Some are quick to disparage English indirectness, but having lived for a time in the Netherlands, a country renowned for straight talking and vocal social policing, I can report that the alternative can be challenging. I was asked how much rent I paid and I received unsolicited advice on everything from parenting to cycling, which, on one excruciating occasion, when I failed at both at once, was bellowed from a tram tannoy.

> 'We've been using "polite-isms" for thousands of years… even in *Beowulf*'

Mary Poppins (played by Julie Andrews) knows there's only one thing to say when you don't know what to say: Supercalifragilisticexpialidocious

In contrast to the Netherlands' unusually flat hierarchy, the English are conscious of the delicate class system that still shapes British life. In her book *Watching the English*, social anthropologist Kate Fox suggests that it's our 'peculiarly English squeamishness about class' that contributes to the care we take to avoid bumps in social interaction. 'We seem to be congenitally incapable of being frank, clear or assertive,' she observes. 'We are always oblique, always playing some complex, convoluted game.' The understatement is a case in point: an endemic feature of English due to 'strict prohibitions on earnestness, gushing, emoting and boasting,' says Dr Fox. 'A debilitating and painful chronic illness', she notes, is 'a bit of a nuisance', whereas the Antarctic is 'rather chilly' (shades of the 1948 John Mills epic *Scott of the Antarctic*, in which a man suffering from soon-to-be-fatal gangrene is described as 'a bit run down').

A fondness for euphemisms naturally follows. With bodily functions included in the English list of unmentionables, my grandmother would ask me if I needed to 'spend a penny', whereas 'the birds and the bees' (often attributed to a line in Coleridge's *Work Without Hope*) supplies a nebulous reference to reproduction.

Like Churchill, Dickens seemingly had little time for those who refused to get to the point, describing in *Little Dorrit* a frustratingly inefficient fictional governmental department titled 'The Circumlocution Office'. 'If another Gunpowder Plot had been discovered half an hour before the lighting of the match,' he despairs, 'nobody would have been justified in saving the parliament until there had been half a score of boards, half a bushel of minutes, several sacks of official memoranda, and a family-vault full of ungrammatical correspondence.'

Jane Austen also derided circumlocution when she wrote Mr Collins's rambling marriage proposal for *Pride and Prejudice*, which digresses about the duty of a clergyman and the urging of his patron Lady Catherine before explaining its purpose. Elizabeth Bennet's declination, by contrast, is gratifyingly direct. Two hundred years later, Janice Hadlow's spin-off

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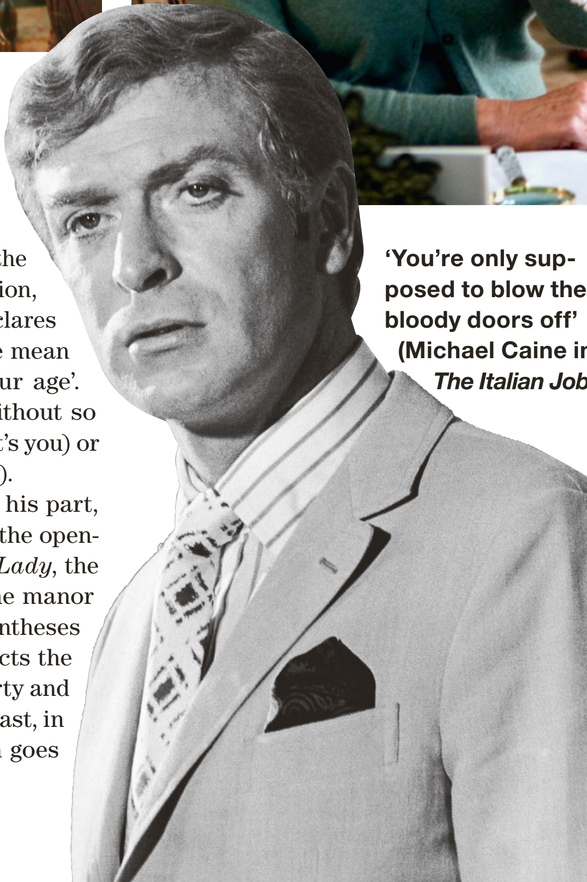
'Please look after this bear. Thank you' (notice around the neck of the eternally polite Paddington)

'Vulgarity is no substitute for wit' (the Dowager Countess of Grantham in *Downton Abbey*)

'You must give me leave to flatter myself... that your refusal of my addresses is merely words of course' (Mr Collins in *Pride and Prejudice*)

'Recollections may vary' (The Queen, played by Helen Mirren)



'You're only supposed to blow the bloody doors off' (Michael Caine in *The Italian Job*)

The Other Bennet Sister picks up the thread. In the recent BBC adaptation, Mary Bennet's suitor Mr Ryder declares that 'our inability to say what we mean is one of the great curses of our age'. However, he, too, is refused, without so much as an 'It's not you, it's me' (it's you) or 'I'll bear it in mind' (definitely not).

The novelist Henry James, for his part, famously embraced verbosity. In the opening chapter of *The Portrait of a Lady*, the 200-word sentence describing the manor house Gardencourt, with its parentheses and piling up of adjectives, reflects the meandering interior of the property and its long complex history. By contrast, in *This Be The Verse*, Philip Larkin goes straight for the jugular, using famously unfiltered language to blame parents for damaging their children. 'Reading him is like a salutary dose of directness in a world where too often circumlocution, avoidance and outright lies seem to hold sway,' writes American academic Huck Gutman in his essay *Philip Larkin, Three Poems*.

Wordiness, we learn, is the enemy of good communication. *The Times* and *The Sunday Times* editor Sir Harold Evans was another standard bearer for plain English. 'Simply shedding fat does wonders for sentences,' he proclaims in *Do I Make Myself Clear?*. 'Down with bloat.' Or, in President Woodrow Wilson's apocryphal words: 'Be brief, be brilliant, and be gone.'