



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 105

TOPICS

Why Americans don't use the metric system, how to dress in Los Angeles versus New York, yutz, to go back to square one, what to call your cousin's son, I'm done with you

GLOSSARY

signatory – a person, business, or organization that signs a statement or an agreement

* Most rental agreements have only two signatories: the renter and the apartment owner.

to establish – to start a business, organization, or committee

* The National Science Foundation established national supercomputer centers in the 1980s.

commission – an official group, often related to the government; a group of people who are asked to work together for a specific purpose, often to investigate something

* This commission is supposed to find out what really happened during the country's last natural disaster.

competitive – having a price that allows a product to be sold in the market, because it compares favorably with other products

* Cars from that country are competitive in the U.S. market because they offer high quality and are not very expensive.

dress code – rules about what people may and may not wear in a certain place

* Edith's school has a strict dress code where boys have to wear ties everyday.

to crack the code – to be able to understand something that is difficult, complicated, or presented in a way so that most people cannot understand it

* My twin brothers created a secret language, but our parents finally cracked the code and were able to understand them.



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underdressed – dressed less formally than one should be; dressed more casually than everyone else; dressed inappropriately because one's clothing isn't as formal as it should be

* Paolo went to the party wearing jeans, but he felt very underdressed when he saw that all the other men were wearing suits.

to try too hard – to try to act and dress in a certain way that will impress other people, but to do it insincerely, so that everyone knows what one is trying to do

* Gary brought his girlfriend's mother a huge bouquet of flowers and an expensive bottle of perfume, but I think he's trying too hard. He should relax and be himself.

to look smart – to be dressed very well; to wear clothes that make one look professional, intelligent, and successful

* Yani looked smart in a dark grey suit, white shirt, and red tie.

the industry – the Los Angeles entertainment industry; the group of people and businesses that make movies and music in and around Los Angeles, California

* Therese is having a hard time getting her first job in the Industry, but she is determined to become a movie producer.

financial sector – the part of the economy related to finance, such as banks and investment institutions

* Many of the people who work in the U.S. financial sector live in New York City.

flyover country – an impolite phrase used to refer to all parts of the United States that are not on the coasts, meaning that there is nothing worth seeing or visiting there, so it is best to fly over that part of the country to get to the other coast as quickly as possible

* Jenny grew up on a big farm in flyover country, and when she turned 18, she couldn't wait to move to a big city on one of the coasts.

first cousin – the son or daughter of one's aunt and uncle

* My mother's only sister has three children and my father's only brother has two children, so all together, I have five first cousins.

distant relative – a person who is in the same family but is not very closely related; a person who is related to oneself, but is not a parent, brother, sister, grandparent, grandchild, child, aunt, uncle, or cousin

* Francine is one of my distant relatives. She's my grandmother's brother's daughter.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Fashion Trends of the 1960s, 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s

“Fashion” (the style of clothing that is popular) changes over time. A “trend” is the way that something changes over time, and people sometimes refer to America’s “fashion trends” by “decade” (a 10-year period).

In the 1960s, many young people were considered “hippies,” because they did not think or dress traditionally. “Hippies” often wore “bell bottoms” (pants that are very large at the bottom) and their colorful clothes were often decorated with flowers. Hippies liked to wear “tie-dye” clothing, which was made by tying strings or “rubber bands” (thin, circular pieces of rubber that stretch to hold things) around parts of the clothing and then “dyeing” it (changing a fabric’s color by putting it in a liquid), so that there were colored lines where the strings had been.

The 1970s had a “disco” fashion trend. Women wore “miniskirts” (very short skirts) and men wore “tight” (very close to the skin) “pantsuits” (matching pants and shirt) that were often covered in “sequins” (small pieces of plastic or metal that are sewn onto clothing to make it shine). People wore “platform shoes,” which had extra inches on the bottom to make people seem taller.

The 1980s had a “preppy” fashion trend. The word “preppy” refers to the clothing that people wear in “prep school,” or “preparatory school.” It includes “polo shirts” (a shirt with a collar and a few buttons near the neck) and “plaids” (fabrics with vertical and horizontal lines of different colors). Many people tied sweaters around their necks.

Finally, in the 1990s, “grunge” became popular. “Grunge” clothing is very “sloppy” (untidy or not neat). Shirts are not tucked in, and clothing is usually too big for the wearer. The dark colors are usually “faded” (light-colored because it has been in the sun too much) and the clothes sometimes have holes in them.



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 105.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 105. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in the beautiful City of Los Angeles, in the State of California here on the beautiful west coast of the North American continent.

This Café is going to be about the metric system in the U.S., or why there is no metric system in the United States – why we still use feet, and miles, and pounds, and so forth. We're also going to talk about the way people dress in different parts of the U.S., especially some of the differences between New York and Los Angeles

Remember, for a complete transcript and Learning Guide to this episode, go to our website at eslpod.com. And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

One question that many people have, when they visit or come to the United States, is why the U.S. doesn't use the metric system of kilometers, and deciliters, and meters – the various ways of measuring things. This is an interesting question because, actually, the U.S. tried to convert from its current system of what we might call “weights and measures,” the units that we use to measure things.

Several years ago, back in 1875, the U.S. was one of the original 17 what we would call “signatory nations.” The word “signatory” comes from “signature,” which is when you put your name on an official document or on a letter. So, the U.S., back in the late 19th century, was going to join the rest of the world in this scientific metric system. However, it was very difficult to get people to change. In the late 1960s, the U.S. government established, or appointed, a commission – a group of people to study this issue – and this commission recommended that the U.S. should convert to the metric system in 10 years. The reason was that the U.S. could be more competitive. When we say someone is “competitive economically,” we mean that they will be able to do better in business internationally if they would convert to the metric system.

So the metric system, most Americans recognize, makes a lot of sense – is logical, is a much better system, I think, than the U.S. system. However, most



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Americans are not convinced that they should change their lifelong use of pounds, and inches, and gallons, and so forth.

Going back to history, in 1975 the U.S. government passed a law saying that we were going to convert to the metric system, and the metric system began to appear in many places in the U.S. In schools, they began to teach the metric system. When I was going through school, I was in grade school – elementary school – in 1975, I remember our teachers telling us that very soon, in another 5 or 10 years, every one in the U.S. will be using the metric system. They also said that in 10 years, we would all be living on the moon! Well, neither of those things happened; we didn't live on the moon and we didn't convert to the metric system.

The problem was that although many businesses started to, for example, give the temperature in Celsius and in Fahrenheit, most people didn't pay a lot of attention. So, while most students, today, in school still study the metric system, most people, I would say almost no one in the U.S., actually uses it in their daily life, except people in the sciences – scientists – and some businesses that do international trade. But, the average American knows, for example, that a meter is a little longer than a yard, but can't really tell you how many centimeters are in a foot or what the difference is between a deciliter and a milliliter.

A liter Americans kind of understand, because there are some things you can buy in a liter bottle, Coca-Cola, for example. But, most Americans are not very used to, and don't think they should become used to the metric system, even though it would help the U.S. economy. In fact, although Congress wanted to convert everyone to the metric system – the government wanted to convert everyone to the metric system in the 1970s, by 1982-1983 there was very little official government support for the metric system.

Will we ever convert to the metric system? Well, it makes sense – it's logical – but until people see that they have to do it, that it becomes absolutely necessary, I don't think it's going to happen any day soon. Perhaps we're just too lazy to switch.

Our second topic today has to do with what you might call the “dress code” in L.A. and in New York. A “dress code” (two words) is a set of rules about how you should dress – what you should wear. Now, of course, there's no official dress code for most people, although some companies do have a dress code. Most schools have a dress code – rules about things that students can wear and cannot wear. But, when we talk about a dress code in L.A. versus New York



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City, we're talking about what is common, what people typically wear, and there are real difference between these two cities.

There was an article recently in The Wall Street Journal called "Cracking the Dress Code In L.A and New York." This is sort of a play on words; the expression "to crack the code," or "a code," means to figure out some sort of secret system. For example, two countries that are at war with each other might have their own code for communicating with their military officers. Someone who "cracks the code" figures out what the system is they're using to communicate. Well here, we're talking about figuring out the differences between the way people dress.

The article says that, in general, Los Angeles is much more relaxed, much less conservative, much more informal than New York. You might expect this if you watch American television shows or movies; they will often show people in Los Angeles dressed without a tie, for example, or not wearing a suit. In New York, it's much more common for business people to dress in a suit, for example, than in many businesses in L.A.

I'm sure there are many reasons for this, cultural and otherwise. It becomes a problem if you are going from New York to L.A., or L.A. to New York, and you don't understand that these are differences. If someone in L.A., for example, goes to New York and doesn't wear a suit and a tie, or dress formally, many people will say that that person is "underdressed." To be "underdressed" means you're not formal enough. If you go to a wedding, for example, in shorts and a T-shirt, you will be underdressed – not appropriate.

Similarly, when someone comes from New York to Los Angeles and wears a very formal business suit, in some places they will say this person is "overdressed." There's also an expression we have: "to try too hard." They may say, "Oh, that person is trying too hard." To "try too hard" means to try to be someone that you're not, and it's obvious you're not. The article says, "A man wearing a suit in Manhattan looks smart. In Silicon Valley, or Southern California, the same look suggests he's trying too hard." He's trying to impress other people, and in the Silicon Valley, which a is part of Northern California – San Francisco, San Jose – those are cities that have a lot of computer-related companies, that's why it's called the "Silicon" Valley, since computer parts are often made out of silicon. In the Silicon Valley and in Southern California, the dress code is much more casual. The word "smart" here doesn't mean intelligent, it means good looking. So, someone will look smart in a suit in New York, but that will not be the same impression they give here in Los Angeles.



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L.A. dress style is informal, not in every company, but certainly in many companies – many companies involved in the – what we call here “the Industry,” with a capital “I.” Sometimes you will see the “entertainment industry”; these are the people who make movies, television shows, record records, and so forth. There are many, many people in Los Angeles involved in this – except me. Although, I do have a rock video, so I guess I’m part of the Industry, too!

Now, of course, both Los Angeles and San Francisco have a financial sector. When we say a “financial sector” (sector), we mean businesses that are related to banking and investment, for example. A “sector” is just a part of the economy. There could be the farm sector, the agricultural sector, the financial sector, and so forth. The podcast sector – no, I don’t think there really is a podcast sector! But, that’s the idea of the word “sector.” So, there are people who work in the financial sector who do have to dress more formally, just like they do back in New York.

Now, you might wonder what about everyone in between California and New York. You have to understand that people who live in New York and who live in L.A. and in San Francisco have a tendency – often think of themselves as being the most important people in the United States. They don’t pay attention to – they tend to ignore everyone who lives in between L.A. and New York. There’s an expression that people who live here know very well, it’s called “flyover country.” The states in between California and New York are “flyover country,” meaning those are the states you fly over in an airplane as you’re going from New York to Los Angeles.

Of course, people who live on the West Coast and on the East Coast aren’t the only people in the U.S. The dress code in Midwest, for example – in Chicago, in Minneapolis, in St. Louis perhaps – tends to be more conservative, much more like the way that people dress in Washington, D.C., for example. But, it’s not necessarily more formal than in New York, but definitely more formal than in L.A.

I have to say the most informal city I have been to, in terms of the way people dress in the U.S., is Honolulu, Hawaii. In Hawaii you almost never see anyone with a tie on or a suit. Part of the reason is it is too hot, but part of the reason is that there’s a very informal environment in Hawaii. In fact, even the governor and the senators don’t wear a suit and tie in Honolulu – especially the governor, since it’s a woman!

Now let’s answer a few of your questions.



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Our first question comes from Nicholas (Nicholas) in France. Nicholas wants to know the meaning of the word “yutz” (yutz).

“Yutz” is actually not an English word but a Yiddish word. “Yiddish” (Yiddish) is a Germanic language; it has some similarities to German, but it’s written in the Hebrew style, using Hebrew characters. Yiddish is associated with many people in the Jewish communities around the world, including in the U.S. Both Los Angeles and New York have large Jewish communities, so you will often hear certain Yiddish words that are part now of the regular vocabulary of people. “Yutz” is an example of a Yiddish word that many people use in English as well.

Basically a “yutz” is somebody who is not very good at relating to other people. We would say they have “poor social skills,” they’re not very good talking and listening to other people, or that they’re something of a “jerk” (jerk). A “jerk” is someone who’s not a very nice person; that’s a “yutz.” There are actually many different Yiddish words that you will hear in the U.S., and we’ll talk about that a different day in the Café.

Simkin (Simkin) from Russia wants to know the meaning of the expression “to go back to square one.”

The expression “to go back to square one” means to begin again something that you have started but failed to complete. So, you try something – you attempt something and you don’t succeed – you fail. Someone may say, “Well, it’s back to square one,” meaning that idea or that approach didn’t work, now we have to start again, often using a different approach or a different strategy. For example: “The cake I was making” – and this is just an example since I don’t make cakes – “The cake I was making burned in the oven, so I have to go back to square one” – I need to start all over again and make my cake.

Jorge (Jorge), in Mexico, has a good question about what we call people who are members of our family, different members of the family. His question is: “What do I call (what name do I give) someone who is the son of my cousin?”

Let’s start with the word “cousin.” A “cousin” is the son or daughter of your aunt or uncle. So, you and your cousins have the same grandparents, either the parents of your mother or your father. Well, in English we don’t really have, like many languages have, specific words for something like this. In normal conversation you would call your cousin’s son your “cousin’s son,” or just your “cousin.” The word “cousin” is used very, you might say, liberally; we use it for



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lots of different relationships that are not brother, sister, son, daughter, and so forth.

Now, in genealogy, which is the study of who your ancestors are, there is a more technical vocabulary, which I'll explain to you. However, this is not a vocabulary that most Americans know, so if you use this with an American – the typical American – they won't know what you're talking about, usually, for many of these expressions that I'm going to give you. I know only because my father was interested in genealogy, and found out who all of our ancestors – or many of our ancestors were.

Now, someone who is the son and daughter of your aunt or uncle is called your "cousin." You could also call them your "first cousin." Your first cousins, remember, all have the same grandparents on either your mother's side or your father's side; your second cousins have the same great-grandparents, so they're a little more distant. In fact, that's another expression you'll hear: "He's a distant cousin of mine" – he's not a first cousin, he's not a cousin of my – or rather, a son or daughter of my aunt and uncle, but he is more distantly related. So, you can have first cousins, second cousins, third cousins, fourth cousins, and so forth.

When you talk about son and daughter of your cousin, or grandsons and granddaughters of your cousin's, we use a slightly different vocabulary; we use the word "removed." "Removed" means a different generation. So, my first cousins, many of them have children; they are my first cousins once removed. That means that they are still first cousins, but they're one generation younger than me. Your mother's first cousin would be your first cousin once removed. It doesn't matter if it's going down in generation or up in generation; we use this expression "once removed," "twice removed," and so forth.

Again, this vocabulary about "removed" is not used in daily conversation. People do know, however, the difference between a first cousin and a distant cousin, but most people don't use the expression "second cousin" or "third cousin."

Mia (Mia) in Japan has a question about the expression "I'm done with you." For example, when a girlfriend tells a boyfriend – her boyfriend, "I'm done with you." What does she mean?

Well, she means that she's very angry, she's very upset, and she doesn't want to see the boyfriend again; the relationship is over. This is a very sad day for the boyfriend. Or, maybe a very happy day, it depends!



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We'll, I'm not done with you, but I am done with this episode. If you have a question or comment, email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thanks for listening. We'll see you next time on the English Café.

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