



TOPICS

Monster truck shows and races; blue jeans and Levi Strauss, to be up against the wall, liability versus responsibility, pronouncing “either”

GLOSSARY

monster – a not real and scary animal; an imaginary creature that frightens people

* Did you think that the monster in the movie looked real when it stepped on people and buildings?

pickup truck – a vehicle that has a small seating area in front and a large and an open section in the back for carrying things

* We borrowed Dean’s pickup truck to move our sofa to the new house because the sofa was too big to fit into our car.

destructive – destroying things; ruining other things

* The storm was more destructive to the homes in our town than to the business buildings.

to crush – to apply pressure or strength to another object to make it smaller; to break down a larger thing into smaller pieces

* Gina is making some cold drinks. Could you crush some ice to put into them?

track – a route that something must follow; a road that competitors race on

* The race began with six runners on the track, but one dropped out and there are only five remaining.

obstacle – a thing that is in one’s way; something that must be moved for one to continue in a certain direction; something that prevents one from moving ahead

* Freddie wants to become a doctor, but not having enough money to go to medical school is a major obstacle.

freestyle – an activity without rules, usually where an athlete or artist can do whatever he or she wants

* After the main part of the performance, the dancers came back on stage and danced freestyle to entertain the audience.



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 138

to root – to cheer; to make loud noises in support of something or some person winning

* My brother always roots for a different basketball team than I do when we watch games on TV.

blue jeans (or jeans) – casual pants made from heavy cotton fabric; pants that are made with denim and are very hard to damage

* Do we need to dress up for this party, or can I wear jeans and a T-shirt?

denim – a cotton fabric, usually blue, that is used to make jeans and other clothing

* It's going to be very cold tonight so I would suggest wearing your wool coat rather than your denim jacket.

ranch – a large farm with many horses and cows

* Celia grew up working on her parents' ranch and she knows a lot about working with horses.

Gold Rush – a period of time, between 1848-1855, when many men went to California to try to make a lot of money by finding gold

* Many people from the eastern part of the United States went to California to find gold, and stayed there for the rest of their lives.

miner – a person whose job is to take gold or other minerals out of the earth

* Miners often work under stressful and dangerous conditions.

durable – longer lasting; difficult to damage; very strong

* This carpet is more expensive, but it is more durable if you have children.

to be up against the wall – to be in a situation where there appears to be no escape or hope, or failure is likely to occur

* With only an hour left to finish the project, the students were up against the wall and didn't know what to do.

responsibility – an obligation; a duty; being required to do something

* Whose responsibility is it to feed the cat? She is very hungry!

liability – an obligation, financial or otherwise, that is required by the law or a contract

* It's up to the judge to decide whether it is our company's or the government's liability to fix these roads.



WHAT INSIDERS KNOW

Standard Types of Jeans

When you walk into an American clothing store to buy jeans, the different types and the different “fits” (styles) can be confusing. Below are four standard fits for jeans.

The first pair of jeans is in the “boot cut” style. This type of jeans has a “natural waist,” which means that the pants begin at the natural place where your “waist” (the part of the body above the hips) is. The bottom is slightly “flared” (goes out).

The second pair of jeans is called “low-rise,” which means that the pants begin at the hips, rather than at the waist. Notice that the bottom is also flared. When the jeans go out this much at the bottom, they are called “flared.”

The third pair of jeans is called a “classic fit.” These jeans have a natural waist, they are “fitted” (very close to the skin) in the hips and thighs, and they “taper,” or go in slightly, at the bottom.

The last pair of jeans is called “easy fit.” These jeans have a natural waist, and they are a little “loose” (not very close to the skin) at the hips and thighs. The legs are straight and they do not flare or taper.

Knowing a few basic terms for the different types and fits for jeans can make shopping for them much easier.





COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

You're listening to ESL Podcast's English Café number 138.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast's English Café episode 138. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

Visit our website at eslpod.com. While you're there, you can download this episode's Learning Guide that will help you improve your English even faster. You can also take a look at our ESL Podcast Store, with additional courses in English, as well as our ESL Podcast Blog, where we give you even more help on English during the week.

On this Café, we're going to talk about monster truck shows and races, which are very popular in the United States. Then we'll talk a little bit about a traditional piece of American clothing, blue jeans, and Levi Strauss, which was one of the, and is one of the major makers of blue jeans. And as always, we'll answer a few of your questions. Let's get started.

Our first topic is monster trucks. A "monster" is normally an imaginary, or not real, scary animal. If you saw the movie Shrek, Shrek is a monster, something you would read usually in a story for children. However, monster can also mean very large. You could say, for example, that you have a monster headache, meaning a very big and painful headache. So, a monster truck is a very large truck.

Actually, most monster trucks begin as normal pickup trucks. A "pickup truck" is a vehicle that has a relatively small seating area, the place where the passengers sit, and a large, open section in the back. Pickup trucks are often used by people who work on farms or who need to move a lot of equipment. A pickup truck is converted, or changed, into a monster truck by replacing the normal wheels on the car with these extremely large wheels that are almost as tall as a person, sometimes taller than a person. The truck also has what we would call a very high "suspension," meaning that there is a large distance between the truck and the wheels. So, these are huge trucks with very large wheels.

Regular pickup trucks are very practical and are used by many people, but monster trucks are used mostly just for entertainment, for shows and races. A monster truck show involves one or more drivers showing the audience what the monster truck can do. A monster truck race, on the other hand, involves multiple



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 138

drivers competing against each other to show which truck is fastest, or which monster truck can do certain things the best.

Monster truck shows are very “destructive,” which means that they tend to destroy or ruin things. Most monster truck shows are held at a “stadium,” a large building where normally you watch sporting events. You can go to a monster truck show and you will see ramps that parked in front of the monster trucks that are full of cars. A “ramp” is a surface that you place on the ground at an angle, usually to help a vehicle or another object with wheels move up. For example, there are often ramps for wheelchairs in front of public buildings in the United States, since, clearly, wheelchairs can’t go up stairs. In a monster truck show, however, the ramp helps the monster truck move up to the level of the other cars, and often to jump over the cars. Often what happens is the monster truck will go up onto the ramp, over some normal cars, and then fall down on top and basically crush the other cars. To “crush” means that you make something smaller by applying a very heavy pressure. The monster trucks crush the smaller tracks; some people like watching that and it is popular with a certain group of people.

The monster trucks also race around tracks. A “track” is the route that you have to follow, for example in a car race, or if you are running in the Olympics, you run around a track for the track and field events like the 100 meter dash or the 1,500 meter race and so forth. At a monster truck race, the drivers go around a track and go through or by many “obstacles,” or things that are in the way that they have to move around.

If you go to a monster truck show or race, usually they will end with what we would call a “freestyle event.” “Freestyle” (one word) means without rules, where you can do whatever you want. Most people, for example, enjoy watching freestyle ice skating, where the skaters can do many spins and flips, whatever they want. Similarly, in a freestyle monster truck event, the drivers can do whatever they want. Some drivers try to get their truck to move in very small, fast circles. Other drivers make their cars “roll over,” meaning the car goes upside down and then back right side up again.

Obviously this can be dangerous, both for the drivers and for the people watching, but many Americans, at least some Americans, think that monster truck shows and races are very entertaining. Sometime these events are on television; you can watch them. Many people root for their favorite cars. To “root” (root) for something or someone means to cheer and to make loud noises



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 138

in support of that person or team. People who go watch sports almost always root for one team or another, or one person or another.

I would say that in terms of social class – social economic class, monster truck shows are associated with – people think of them as being something popular among people with less money, perhaps less education, who live in the country versus the city. I'm not saying that's necessarily true, but that's the association that monster truck shows have in the U.S.

If you ever come to the U.S., or you live here and want to go to a monster truck show, I'm sure you can find one somewhere near you.

Now let's talk about another, slightly more important part of American culture, and that is blue jeans. Blue jeans are probably the most popular piece of casual, or informal, clothing in the United States. Blue jeans, as you probably know, are pants made from a very heavy, dark blue fabric (material), although they can sometimes be light blue, black, white – nowadays almost any color. We usually refer to the pants as just "jeans." There was a song by Neil Diamond, I believe in the 70s, called "Forever in Blue Jeans." (Jeff sings) Forever in blue jeans, babe...that's all I remember! Anyway, we call these jeans not so commonly anymore blue jeans. They're made from a fabric, or cloth, called "denim" (denim). Originally the fabric was made in France, in a region called Nimes, but Americans aren't very good at French, so it ended up being called "denim."

You've probably heard of Levi jeans; Levi Strauss is one company that makes the jeans. The Levi Strauss Company was founded in San Francisco, here in California, back in 1853 by a man whose name was Levi Strauss. It was the first company to make blue jeans, now they are popular all over the world.

The person who actually started this company, Levi Strauss, as you might guess, was born in Germany, Strauss being a German last name. He was born in 1829, but he spent most of his life here in the United States. His family expected him to work on his uncle's "ranch," or a large farm with lots of horses and cows, but Levi had other ideas; Levi wanted to be a businessman. He spent many years working in Kentucky, which is in the eastern part of the United States. There, he sold cloth and other things that people use to sew, what we would call "sewing notions," things like needles and thread, buttons and zippers.

In 1853, Levi came here to California to sell this cloth to the men who were there for the California Gold Rush. The Gold Rush was a period of time when many men, and women, came west, moved to California to try to find gold, because



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 138

gold was discovered in Northern California, and so everyone wanted to make some easy money and they came to California. It's one of the reasons why California became more "populist," had more people in it in the 19th century, and San Francisco became such an important city. It was because of this Gold Rush.

The people who were looking for the gold were called "miners." A "miner" is somebody who goes into the earth looking for something, usually some sort of metal like gold. Levi Strauss sold clothing to these men. However, the men – the miners began to "complain," to say bad things about his clothing. They said that the material, the fabric he was using, made from cotton, was too easily "ripped," meaning that the pants would get holes in them, and that the pockets were not strong enough.

When Levi heard these complaints, he decided to make his jeans more "durable," or long lasting, stronger. The miners liked these pants very much and soon Levi sold so many pairs that he ran out of the fabric he was using, the material. So he began to use another material, denim, instead. Then, in 1873, Levi Strauss and Company received a "patent," or legal protection for an idea, to use what we would call a "rivet" (rivet). A "rivet," which for Levi Strauss was made from copper, are small, round pieces of metal that you will see in the corners of the pockets on the jeans to make the pockets stronger, so they don't fall off. This was really a combination of things then – the denim, the copper rivets – that produced what we now call blue jeans.

More than 130 years later, blue jeans are, as I say, still popular among people, especially those that have physically active jobs. They're also very popular among people in the cities who like them for practical reasons: they're comfortable. Teenagers, adults, children, almost everyone you can find wearing blue jeans now in the U.S., and in many other parts of the world, but that's where blue jeans come from. They come from San Francisco here in California, originally, and have become popular in many other countries as well.

Now let's answer some of the questions that you sent us.

Our first question comes from Koji (Koji) in Japan. Koji wants to know the meaning of the expression "to be up against the wall."

Well, this is an expression that we use to describe a situation where there appears to be no escape or hope, where it appears that you are going to fail, that you are in a very difficult situation. You are not actually up against the wall; your body isn't necessarily on the wall, but we use the expression to mean to be in a



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 138

very difficult situation. For example, I'm working on a very difficult project, and it has to be finished tomorrow. I'm only a third of the way finished; I'm really up against the wall, I'm in a difficult situation.

Now, don't confuse this expression "up against the wall" with a similar expression, "up the wall." Somebody says, "He's driving me up the wall." "To drive someone up the wall" means to make somebody crazy or frustrated: "My neighbors screaming children drive me up the wall." They really do!

Koji also wants to know the difference between "liability" (liability) and "responsibility."

Both of these words can mean an obligation or a duty to someone or something. "Responsibility" is a more common expression, one that is used for more general situations. For example: "I'm taking responsibility for driving my mother to the hospital," that's my obligation, my duty, what I need to do. Or, "It's the government's responsibility to make sure that we have clean drinking water."

"Liability" is often used in referring to some sort of legal obligation or contract, sometimes involving money. Liability usually means that you've done something wrong and you have to pay someone else for something that you did to hurt them or harm them. If your neighbor's dog bites you, the owner of the dog has a certain liability. You could go to the court and you could "sue" them, try to get money from them. When you have a car, you have what's called "liability insurance," meaning, once again, that if there's an accident or a problem, you have insurance that will help pay for any liability that you have – any responsibility to pay someone else money.

"Liability" is also used to describe something or someone that puts you "at risk," that makes you in danger of being hurt or having problems. You could say, "John is a liability for our company," meaning not only doesn't he work, but he could actually cost us money. We could be sued; we may have to pay other people money because John is such an idiot!

Eugene in Germany wants to know how we pronounce the word "E-I-T-H-E-R." He's heard two pronunciations of this word, some of them here on the podcast I'm sure. One of them is "either"; the other is "eye-ther."

These are both correct pronunciations – both possible. You can say "either," or you can say "eye-ther," they're both possible pronunciations. Some people think that "eye-ther" can sound, oh, a little too formal; we might say a little



ENGLISH CAFÉ – 138

“pretentious,” meaning you’re trying to impress other people with your pronunciation. I don’t think that’s really true; I say it sometimes just without thinking about it.

There’s actually a famous song by George and Ira Gershwin, two great American composers of the 20th century. They point out that English speakers have differences in pronouncing certain words; either/eye-ther is probably the most common, but there also words like “potato,” which some people may pronounce “po-tah-to” or “tomato,” which, I guess, a few people would pronounce “to-mah-to.” The song – and I know you want me to sing it for you – says:

You say either
And I say eye-ther
You say neither
And I say ny-ther
Either, eye-ther, neither, ny-ther
Let’s call the whole thing off

Wait! I’m not done!

You like potato
And I like po-tah-to
You like tomato
And I like to-mah-to
Potato, po-tah-to, tomato, to-mah-to
Let’s call the whole thing off

Thank you! Thank you very much!

Thank you Eugene, for your question. If you have a question – or just want to hear me sing more – email us. Our email address is eslpod@eslpod.com.

From Los Angeles, California, I am Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. We’ll see you next time on the English Café.

ESL Podcast’s English Café is written and produced by Dr. Jeff McQuillan and Dr. Lucy Tse. This podcast is copyright 2008, by the Center for Educational Development.