

Greetings, everyone! My name is Laurence and this is *English in Practice*!

MUSIC

Welcome to the second episode of *English in Practice*. Today, we are going to talk about the actor Benedict Cumberbatch, whom I'm sure many of you have already seen on television. The interview excerpt I have chosen may present quite a challenge, as our protagonist speaks quickly and changes his mind in mid-sentence on a couple of occasions. However, I believe that what he has to say is rather interesting.

There are just a few things to go over before we start with the main part of this programme, which is the interview excerpt. First, a big thank-you to everyone who got in contact after the first episode. Your comments – especially yours, Svenja – pleased me immensely and have encouraged me to carry on with this podcast. As I mentioned two weeks ago, I'm never going to charge money for this podcast, but I really would like to hear from my listeners and build a close-knit community. It would make me very happy if people would write in after this episode and tell me, for example, how they found it, why they are learning English, where they come from, etc.

You can reach me one of two ways. The best is to email me using the following address: englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com. Otherwise, you can contact me through the Facebook page, 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.' A 'like' there would also be greatly appreciated.

For those wishing to download the transcript, simply visit my website: www.jamesfable.com. James Fable is my penname – a pseudonym, a fake name that I use for writing. My real name is Laurence, as mentioned before. I strongly recommend downloading the transcript, especially if you are finding it a little difficult to understand everything I am saying. This is what I do when listening to Felipe Galán's podcast for Spanish learners, *Se Habla Español*. I personally find it a big help. One advantage of reading the transcript at the same time as you listen to the audio, for example, is that you can learn how words are spelt.

Okay, the last announcement for now is that I will be releasing a bonus episode next week. To clarify, I will upload an episode with an interview excerpt in every two weeks. These are the main episodes and they will all last roughly thirty minutes. In the weeks in between, I plan to upload shorter episodes in which I read out and analyse a short story or in which I explain the meanings of a few English sayings. Now, I cannot commit to uploading these bonus episodes on a regular basis, I'm afraid, but with any luck a new episode of *English in Practice* will be available every week.

In theory, then, this podcast series should run as follows:

Today – Interview episode

Next week – Short story episode or episode on English sayings

The week after – Interview episode

In three weeks – Short story episode or episode on English sayings

And so on.

I hope that is clear. Next week, I will upload a short story episode, and I am quite excited to do so. The reasons why I decided to read out short stories and explain them are twofold: for one, it's a different form of practice for you. Secondly, I imagine there are some of you out there who are learning English because you wish to read anglophone literature in English, not in translation. Who knows? Perhaps you have your eyes set on the works of Oscar Wilde, Jane Austen, Mark Twain, J.K. Rowling, or any of the other great anglophone writers. After all, I certainly did not study Ancient Greek and Latin at university to become rich. I studied them so I could read the works of Sophocles, Homer, Ovid and Virgil in the original languages. Right now, I am teaching myself Spanish, and one of my dreams is to read *100 Years of Solitude* from Gabriel García Márquez in the original Spanish, for that book is my bible.

Excellent. Enough of my nerdy love for magical realism. Let's learn a bit about today's protagonist, the British actor Benedict Cumberbatch!

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Benedict Cumberbatch was born in the Hammersmith district of London on the 19th of July 1976, making him 43 years old. Both of his parents were actors, but the Cumberbatch family has enjoyed high social standing for generations. In fact, Benedict Cumberbatch is distantly related to Richard III, the King of England from 1483-1485.

After a gap year teaching English at a Tibetan monastery in India, Benedict Cumberbatch studied Drama at The University of Manchester. He followed this up with an MA in Classical Acting at the London Academy of Music and Dramatic Art, of which he has now been made director. Benedict Cumberbatch made it to the stage not long after; and since 2001, he has played major roles in a dozen classic productions at several prestigious theatres in London.

The year 2005, however, was to prove particularly eventful for the emerging actor, both in terms of his career and his personal life. While travelling in South Africa, he was abducted, kidnapped, after his car tyre burst. He and two friends were then held at gunpoint, though they were later released without explanation. Benedict Cumberbatch said that this experience made him (quote) ‘want to live a life less ordinary.’

And that is exactly what he has done – lead an extraordinary life. In the same year, Benedict Cumberbatch made his first appearance in the West End, which is a form of shorthand for the very best theatres in London, as these are located in the west of the city. Since then, he has played leading roles in a number of West End plays – including *Frankenstein*, for which he received the Olivier Award, one of the highest distinctions in British theatre.

Most of us, though, will be more familiar with Benedict Cumberbatch from television and film, particularly from the hit series *Sherlock*, which is based on the *Sherlock Holmes* novels by Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. You may well have seen him in other productions too, such as *Star Trek Into Darkness*, *The Hobbit*, and *Hawking*.

If you have seen Benedict Cumberbatch on TV, you will be aware that he is a very handsome man. However, you don’t have to visit the theatre or the cinema to see pictures of him. Just take a look at one of his many fan sites, such as Cumberbatchweb. To use

Wikipedia's words, Benedict Cumberbatch has one of the 'most aggressive fanbases to date'. In fact, millions of words of fan fiction have been written about him – stories, for example, in which fans imagine what they would do if they were to meet the actor. If you want to find out if you are a 'total Cumberbatch', as some fans apparently like to call themselves, just scroll to the bottom of the transcript and have a read of the article linked there.

Fortunately, though, you don't have to be a total Cumberbatch to admire this celebrity, as he is a man of principle. Benedict Cumberbatch plays an active role in various charities, such as the Motor Neurone Disease Association, and he fronted a video campaign for Save the Children in its mission to aid young refugees from Syria. He also identifies as a feminist, follows a vegan diet and subscribes to Buddhist philosophy.

The following audio clip comes from an interview conducted in June 2016 by BAFTA New York and was screened by the YouTube channel BAFTA Guru. The interviewer has just asked Benedict Cumberbatch how acting the part of Julian Assange, the founder of WikiLeaks, is different to playing a fictional character. Remember, at the time of this interview, Julian Assange was still living in the Ecuadorian Embassy in London:

'Well, there are two things, I suppose, that are immediate and very obvious. Which is that there's a moral responsibility, because that person in particular – his life is still, err, very much evolving.'

'His situation is very precarious and there's a responsibility to not do him an injustice – which a lot of his followers and him said that I did, but I was trying very hard not to.'

'And my correspondence with him was to try and eek from him what I could bring to, you know, work the part into something more empathetic.'

'I wanted to meet him, not to study him and then turn him into a two-dimensional, um, asshole.'

‘I wanted to make him somebody who was complex and human and inspirational and extraordinary and unique and did – who’s done something which is profoundly important for democracy. And I believe... I believe he *has*, and hopefully some of that is reflected in the film.’

So, how did you get on? Did you find Mr Cumberbatch’s voice as sexy as everyone on the internet does? With any luck my accent is similar to his, since we both come from Southeast England, though to me my voice just sounds repulsive.

As you may have noticed, Benedict Cumberbatch almost merges many of his sentences – which is to say that some of them flow into each other, that it isn’t always clear where one sentence ends and another begins. This is because he is speaking so quickly, since he is passionate about the subject.

He also says, right at the beginning, that there are two important things to be aware of when playing the part of a real-life character such as Julian Assange. However, he never actually makes it clear what the second thing is. This makes the clip more difficult to understand, I know, but a challenge is certainly good once in a while.

I think that’s all for now. Let’s start our analysis of the first fragment, in which Benedict Cumberbatch begins his response to the question of how it was to play the part of Julian Assange in the film *The Fifth Estate* and how that compares to playing a fictional character:

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Excellent. So, Benedict Cumberbatch says there are two aspects of playing the part of a real-life character which are immediate and very obvious. Here, 'immediate' means that it comes to you at once, that it is common sense. You know what the thing is without having to think, which is essentially what *obvious* means as well.

Now, Benedict Cumberbatch makes a small grammatical error at the start of the next sentence, as he should have said 'One of these', not simply 'which'. We can put this mistake down to the fact that he is speaking so quickly and merging his sentences.

Anyway, the obvious thing he was referring to at the beginning is that any actor playing the role of a real person has a moral responsibility. Why? Because millions of people will watch the film and use it as a source of information for the actual person. Specifically, they will judge the actions and personality of the WikiLeaks' founder, based upon how Benedict Cumberbatch plays him in *The Fifth Estate*.

In this particular case, Benedict Cumberbatch's level of responsibility was especially high, for Julian Assange was still at risk. After all, he had been accused by Sweden of sexual assault – which he claimed was a pretext, an excuse, for him to be extradited to the USA – and so he was still living in the Ecuadorian Embassy in 2016.

Here, Benedict Cumberbatch uses the verb *evolve* as a synonym for 'develop' or 'change'. I'm sure you've heard of Darwin's theory of evolution, which postulates that new species emerge through a continual process of genetic mutation. Well, Julian Assange's situation was also one of evolution – it was still changing, it was still in flux – when *The Fifth Estate* was released, as it remained unclear whether the WikiLeaks' founder would, for example, end up in prison, be granted Ecuadorian citizenship, or anything in between.

Let's move on to the second fragment:

'His situation is very precarious and there's a responsibility to not do him an injustice – which a lot of his followers and him said that I did, but I was trying very hard not to.'

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Very well. This is a clarification of what Benedict Cumberbatch said in the first fragment. Julian Assange, having sought refuge in the Ecuadorian Embassy, is in a 'precarious' situation, which means it is unstable, insecure, uncertain. His situation could change for the worst quite easily.

For this reason especially, Benedict Cumberbatch did not wish to do Julian Assange an injustice when acting his part in the film. This phrase, *to do someone an injustice*, means to do someone wrong. If something is *unjust*, it is unfair or wrong. In the case of Benedict Cumberbatch, he would do Julian Assange an injustice if he were to play his character in a manner that does not reflect who he actually is.

And that is, sadly, exactly what many people believe Benedict Cumberbatch did. Here, the actor makes another small, very common grammatical error: instead of saying, 'which a lot of his followers and him said I did,' he should have said, 'which *he* and a lot of his followers said I did.' We need the subject pronoun, *he*, for Julian Assange is one of the subjects of this clause. You hear people make this mistake often, usually when they say something along the lines of: 'Me and my friends found the film excellent.' It should be: 'My friends and *I* found the film excellent.' But that's English for you.

Benedict Cumberbatch changes the tone of his answer in the third fragment, as he moves on to explaining how he wished to act the part of Julian Assange:

'And my correspondence with him was to try and eek from him what I could bring to, you know, work the part into something more empathetic.'

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Splendid. As you may remember from the previous episode, 'correspondence' simply means to be in regular contact with someone, for example, by exchanging emails or

speaking on the phone. So, Benedict Cumberbatch hoped through his correspondence with Julian Assange to eek information from him that he could use for acting his character in *The Fifth Estate*. Now, 'eek' is more often used as an interjection to express surprise or fear. You might see someone in a book say 'eek' when they see a spider, for example.

However, you are unlikely to find the verb 'eek from' in a dictionary. In fact, it is arguably not even a real word. Here, 'to eek from' essentially means to extract little by little, to gather what information you can. Perhaps an example will make this clearer. Imagine Benedict Cumberbatch calling Julian Assange up and saying, 'Hey Juli, I'm playing you in a film and want to try and act the part well. Can you tell me a bit about yourself?' Julian Assange might then start to relate, to recount, why he set up WikiLeaks, what this involved, and so on. And while he spoke, Benedict Cumberbatch might be noting down any pieces of information that he considered especially important, especially relevant to acting the part of Julian Assange accurately. This manner of gathering information is what he means by *eking*.

Now, what information did Benedict Cumberbatch wish to eek from the founder of WikiLeaks? Well, anything that might enable him to play the part more *empathetically*. *Empathetic* – or *empathic*, the two are synonyms – comes from the noun *empathy*, which is formed from the Ancient Greek words *en*, meaning 'in', and *pathos*, meaning 'feeling'. Therefore, empathy is the entering into another's feelings, [the action] of understanding another's feelings. From this comes the verb *empathise*, which is to understand another's emotions and sympathise with them, to put yourself in their shoes and imagine how they feel. It follows then that the adjectives *empathetic* and *empathic* denote the ability to understand and consider another's feelings.

Therefore, Benedict Cumberbatch says that he wished to play the character of Julian Assange in a manner that would make him appear capable of understanding others' emotions, someone with whom people could identify. He did not wish to turn the founder of WikiLeaks into a robot, someone who doesn't appear human. As you can imagine, Julian Assange was receiving a lot of mixed press in 2013, when *The Fifth Estate* was released. Some described him as a hero, a champion of free speech, while others considered him a traitor for publishing state secrets. That is presumably why Benedict Cumberbatch

believed it was especially important for him to make Julian Assange an empathetic character, to avoid these negative associations.

Here comes the fourth fragment:

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So then, Benedict Cumberbatch essentially explains here what he said in the last fragment. He says that he wished to meet Julian Assange, not study him. By that he means to meet the *real* person and not just learn about him from books and the internet, from secondary sources. He wanted to get to know the *man* Julian Assange, rather than simply learn about the things he has done and how he is portrayed in the media.

In other words, Benedict Cumberbatch wished to get to know Julian Assange as a *person*, so that he wouldn't turn him into a two-dimensional arsehole. Very well. *Arsehole* is a vulgar term for 'anus', and like most slang names for body parts, it can be used as an insult. In this usage, 'arsehole' is similar to 'idiot', though a little stronger. An arsehole is someone who is extremely unfriendly, who is selfish and who lacks empathy.

To be a two-dimensional arsehole, then, is not to be desired. A dimension, of course, refers to an object's spatial properties. For example, a square has two dimensions, namely length and breadth, whereas a cube has three dimensions, which are length, breadth and depth.

However, we like to use *dimension*, and the adjective *dimensional*, figuratively; that is, in a metaphoric sense. If you are *two-dimensional*, then you lack depth, you can only be read in one way or the other. In the case of Julian Assange, perhaps this would be either as a hero or a traitor, nothing in between. Writers, for example, seek to create *three-dimensional* characters – characters who are lifelike, who experience internal conflict,

who are not plain and have depth. As you can imagine, *one-dimensional* is the plainest and shallowest, *two-dimensional* is less plain, but still lacks depth, and *three-dimensional* is the most characterful, the truest to life. We will leave the fourth dimension to the mathematicians.

Without further ado, let's listen to the fifth and final fragment:

'I wanted to make him somebody who was complex and human and inspirational and extraordinary and unique and did – who's done something which is profoundly important for democracy. And I believe... I believe he *has*, and hopefully some of that is reflected in the film.'

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Good, lots of lovely adjectives for us to go through in this fragment. First of all, *complex* is a synonym for 'complicated'. Here, Benedict Cumberbatch means that he didn't want to turn Julian Assange into someone who is simple and predictable, but to give his character many layers – to make him complex. You would not describe a person as complicated, though. Complex is better.

Human, in this context, means real, not artificial. Someone who's human is not two-dimensional, but they have substance.

Next, we have *inspirational*. To inspire someone is to exert an exalting, enlivening influence. For example, David Beckham inspired a whole generation of footballers, he motivated a great number of young people to start playing football. They found the way he played football inspirational; it excited them, it motivated them to start themselves. I think that's clear. Perhaps Julian Assange is inspirational for many people because he sacrificed his own wellbeing, put himself in danger, for the sake of freedom of information.

Moving on. *Extraordinary* is exactly as it reads. It is more than ordinary, it is something extra, special. Mozart was an extraordinary musician, for example.

In addition, Benedict Cumberbatch wished to make Julian Assange in *The Fifth Estate* *unique*, which is one of the most misused words in the English language. It simply means entirely distinct, the only one, that there is nothing like it. People often say that something is less or more unique than something else. This is wrong. Something is either unique or it isn't – there's no middle ground. Let me give you an example. The situation we have right now with covid-19 is unique, because nothing *exactly* like it has happened before. There have been pandemics, but never have so many countries closed their borders due to a virus. As you can imagine, it is usually a compliment to describe someone as unique, because it means this person is like nobody else.

From this long list of complimentary adjectives, it's clear that Benedict Cumberbatch thinks very highly of the WikiLeaks' founder. In the second half of this fragment, he even says that Julian Assange has done something 'profoundly important for democracy'. As you perhaps heard, Benedict Cumberbatch initially says 'did' – as in, 'Julian Assange did something profoundly important for democracy – but then he corrects himself and says, 'who's done something profoundly important for democracy.'

Now, it is worth dedicating a minute to explaining why the present perfect – *who's done*, which is an abbreviation of *who has done*, is the correct tense here. After all, it can be difficult to determine in English whether to use the simple past or the present perfect. Germans, for example, often make this mistake – they confuse the tenses – since the German language does not distinguish between the simple past and the present perfect as clearly as English does.

The main difference between the simple past, such as *did*, and the present perfect, *has done*, is that the latter is a present tense, as the name suggests. It is the state of having done something – or of having been done, in the passive – which is a present state. In other words, you use the present perfect to describe a past action that still has bearing on the present, that is still true today.

For example, take the sentence: ‘I visited Sri Lanka last year.’ For this sentence, I need the simple past, because I am speaking about last year, which has already passed. However, the sentence, ‘I have visited Sri Lanka’, is still true today. I have been there; I still have that travelling experience. Therefore, present perfect.

Another example: ‘The Beatles influenced the 1960s greatly, and their music has inspired many musicians since then.’ In the first clause, we are referring specifically to the 1960s, to the past alone, and so we need the simple past, *influenced*. In the second clause, we use the present perfect, because it remains true that The Beatles’ music has been a source of inspiration for many artists right up to today.

In the case of Julian Assange, Benedict Cumberbatch says he *has done* something profoundly important for democracy, because WikiLeaks still exists today. The efforts of Julian Assange in founding WikiLeaks continue to impact our lives. In case you are unfamiliar with the term, *profound* is a smart synonym for ‘deep’, though it is only used in the figurative sense. That means you could call a topic or an idea profound, but you could not call, for example, a swimming pool profound. In fact, it would be very entertaining to hear some describe a swimming pool as profound.

Good, just one more thing to comment on. Benedict Cumberbatch hoped that the positive, inspiring aspects of Julian Assange’s character and of his work would come through in the film, that you would see these in the film. Sadly, it seems they did not. In fact, *The Fifth Estate* was what we call a box-office bomb, or a box-office flop, meaning that it was highly unprofitable. Although it had a budget of \$28 million, it only grossed \$8.6 million worldwide. Julian Assange himself called it (quote) ‘a serious propaganda attack’ on WikiLeaks and its staff, and the film received poor reviews. Although some critics praised Benedict Cumberbatch’s acting, many believe the film failed to offer him an appropriate platform for showcasing his genius. In other words, the screenplay and direction were simply not good enough for Cumberbatch’s class to come through.

Good. On that slightly sombre note, let’s listen to the whole excerpt again, shall we? I know you want to. Off we go:

‘Well, there are two things, I suppose, that are immediate and very obvious. Which is that there’s a moral responsibility, because that person in particular – his life is still, err, very much evolving.

‘His situation is very precarious and there’s a responsibility to not do him an injustice – which a lot of his followers and him said that I did, but I was trying very hard not to.

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‘I wanted to make him somebody who was complex and human and inspirational and extraordinary and unique and did – who’s done something which is profoundly important for democracy. And I believe... I believe he *has*, and hopefully some of that is reflected in the film.’

This podcast may not have done something profoundly important for democracy, but hopefully it has helped you to improve your English and has perhaps even entertained you. I found it interesting to research this, and I also believe it’s healthy to hear about when famous people, particularly arts professionals, do not succeed or perform as well they can. It reminds me that they are still human.

As mentioned at the beginning, please do get in touch to tell me a bit about yourself and to leave any feedback. Once again, the email address is englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com, and the Facebook page is called, ‘English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.’ Don’t be afraid of making mistakes in your message; it would simply be nice to hear from you. Suggestions are always welcome as well. If you have enjoyed the podcast or found it helpful, please subscribe, comment, share it on Facebook, etc. It all helps.

If you would like to watch the whole interview with Benedict Cumberbatch, you can find the link at the bottom of the transcript. There, you will also find the link to the Facebook page of *Se Habla Español*, the podcast from Felipe Galán.

That's all from me for today. I hope you have enjoyed this episode of *English in Practice*. Look out for a bonus episode next week in which I shall read out a short story. All the best. Over and out.

Watch the whole interview: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pWTmfEJMqSw>

Find out if you're a total Cumberbitch: <https://www.theloop.ca/signs-youre-a-total-cumberbitch/>

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