

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

## MUSIC

Welcome to the fourth episode of *English in Practice*. Today, we will be listening to none other than the broadcaster and naturalist Sir David Attenborough, whom you may have heard on wildlife documentaries such as *Blue Planet*, *Life* or *Planet Earth*. He is absolutely adored in the UK and may well be the country's national hero. In fact, whenever I watch a wildlife documentary that is *not* narrated by David Attenborough, I feel like a traitor, as if I am committing a crime against the nation. Also, just to clarify, our protagonist's second name should be pronounced *at-en-burgh-ugh*, phonetically at least, but in England we tend to miss out the first *o* and say *at-en-brugh*.

Good. A couple of announcements to begin with, the first of which is that the *English in Practice* podcast now has over 500 downloads! It also has listeners from every continent – except Antarctica, of course. So, if you are listening to this, thank you very much for helping me reach these milestones, especially if you have also shared the podcast on social media or spread it by any other means. It's been very pleasing to see this project take off and I sincerely hope that it will continue to grow.

On a similar note, I have received kind and encouraging messages from two German listeners over the past fortnight, which I shall summarise briefly here. One of these listeners would like to remain anonymous, but they informed me that they find the whole mix of episodes (quote) 'useful and entertaining.' Thank you very much for this comment, because that is the first feedback I have received on the short story episode and on the episode on idioms.

The other listener to contact me recently was Silke, who is a teacher of English and Spanish. Among other points, Silke mentioned that she found the excerpt I used in the episode on Michelle Obama to be inspiring, uplifting, and encouraged me in general to use interview clips that focus on the positive. I personally think this is an excellent suggestion and so I shall try to put it into practice. Many thanks, Silke.

If you would like to leave some feedback and tell me a bit about yourself, you can reach me one of two ways. The best is to email me using the following address: [englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com). Otherwise, you can contact me through the Facebook page, 'English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.' As I mention every episode, I greatly enjoy hearing from my listeners and learning a bit about them – it's what makes this podcast worth running – so please don't hesitate to get in contact.

The only person to like the *English in Practice* Facebook page since the last episode was Abdallah. So, thank you very much, Abdallah; welcome to the family. To anyone listening right now, you'd do me a great favour by liking and sharing the Facebook page or by liking the podcast on whatever platform you use. I will include the link to the Facebook page in the description, which is where you will also find the link to my website: [www.jamesfable.com](http://www.jamesfable.com). If you wish to download the transcript, that's the place you'll find it. Remember, James Fable is my penname – a pseudonym that I use for writing.

That will do on the self-aggrandisement front for now. Let's learn about today's protagonist, Sir David Attenborough!

## MUSIC

David Attenborough was born on the 8<sup>th</sup> of May 1926, making him an astounding 94 years of age. He grew up on the campus of the University of Leicester and is the middle of three brothers, both of whom have since passed away. Interestingly, his parents fostered two Jewish girls from Germany during the Second World War.

As a child, David Attenborough spent his time collecting fossils, stones, and natural specimens. Then at the age of ten, he attended a lecture given by the famous conservationist Grey Owl, in which he learnt that mankind's activities were putting the natural world at risk. Of course, such ideas were practically unheard of in 1936, and this talk left a lasting impression on the young David.

Unsurprisingly, David Attenborough went on to study geology and zoology at The University of Cambridge. Then, after two years serving in the Royal Navy during World War Two, he began work as an editor of children's science textbooks. However, he grew bored of this quickly, and so applied in 1950 for a job as a radio producer with the BBC.

Although unsuccessful with this application, the BBC offered him a position in television. Like most Britons in those days, David Attenborough had never seen a television before and was sceptical, but he accepted the offer, nonetheless. Funnily enough, David Attenborough initially worked as a producer and was discouraged from appearing on TV by his boss, who thought that his teeth were too large. However, David's big break in this regard came in 1954, when he worked on a series about an animal-collecting expedition. This series was due to be presented by a zoo curator, though he fell ill shortly before filming, giving David Attenborough his chance.

You would be forgiven for imagining, as I did, that this opportunity served as a springboard for David Attenborough's career as a presenter of wildlife documentaries, but actually his career was destined to take a few more twists. In the early 1960s, David resigned from the BBC and began a postgraduate degree. However, he never finished this as he soon returned to television to become controller of BBC Two. Now in charge of deciding which programmes went on air, Attenborough revamped the failing television channel; and among the many successful shows that he commissioned was none other than *Monty Python's Flying Circus*, a comedy sketch series which has since shaped British television.

Despite the prospect of being made Director-General of the BBC in 1972, David resigned to become a freelance broadcaster, marking the beginning of probably the most successful part of his career. Since the 1970s, he has worked on a number of critically acclaimed wildlife documentaries, including *Life in Cold Blood*, *Nature's Great Events*, *Frozen Planet*, and many more. His distinctive narration has made him internationally famous, and his work as a naturalist has led to him receiving dozens of awards, among them a BAFTA, a knighthood, and the Order of Merit. He has collected 32 honorary degrees from British universities, which is more than anyone else, and at least twenty

different wildlife species have been named in his honour. There is even an extinct reptile called *Attenborosaurus*.

In recent years especially, David Attenborough has also become a prominent speaker on the dangers of climate change, which is exactly what the following audio clip is about. It comes from an interview conducted by Fredrik Skalvan – Skavlán, I think actually – in 2018 and was uploaded to YouTube by the interviewer’s channel. David Attenborough has just been asked whether he is a pessimist or optimist regarding climate change. A *pessimist* is someone who has a negative outlook on a certain topic or on life generally. An *optimist* is the opposite – someone who has a positive outlook. Here’s our protagonist’s answer:

**‘Do you know, I... I don’t try and think about that question – because, even if I was a pessimist, I would still have to do everything I can possibly do to help this current situation that we’re in.**

**‘I mean, it doesn’t help to say, umm, “oh, we’re all doomed.” Well, if you say that, you say, “alright, well, forget it,” you know? And, err – I can’t say that.**

**‘Umm, and I... I – I’m sure things are going to get worse before they get better. But I believe they *can* get better.**

**‘I believe... [I’m] sufficient of, umm, an optimist, I suppose, to think that human beings really can, and they ha- they know – we know what has to be done, you know? Umm, the question is, we’ve got to convince the world that we – that they’ve got to do them.’**

There we go: the words of David Attenborough, the man of the euphonious voice. Have you heard that word before, *euphonious*? It means ‘pleasing to the ear’, ‘nice to listen to.’ And I hope you did enjoy listening to him. Every time I hear David Attenborough speak, I feel as though I’m at home, since we grew up watching his documentaries and hearing his superb narration.

In terms of language, I imagine the vocabulary our protagonist uses does not present you with too many difficulties. However, he is certainly a challenge to understand at times. After all, he changes his mind midsentence on several occasions, making it tricky to follow his train of thought. No worries though, I'm confident that everything will be clear by the end.

With that said, let's begin our analysis of the first fragment, in which David Attenborough responds to the question of whether he is an optimist or a pessimist regarding climate change:

**'Do you know, I... I don't try and think about that question – because, even if I was a pessimist, I would still have to do everything I can possibly do to help this current situation that we're in.'**

*'Do you know, I... I don't try and think about that question – because, even if I was a pessimist, I would still have to do everything I can possibly do to help this current situation that we're in.'*

Very well. David Attenborough says that he tries not to think about 'that question', by which he means the question of whether he is pessimistic or optimistic towards climate change – or, perhaps more specifically, towards society's attempts to tackle climate change. The reason for this, he says, is that – no matter what his outlook was – he would still have to try everything possible, try his utmost, to combat climate change. That is what he means by 'to help this current situation that we're in.' Remember, this interview was carried out before the outbreak of Covid-19, when the phrase *current situation* still referred to global warming and not to the corona pandemic.

Now, David should actually have said here: 'to help us *out of* the current situation we are in.' If the current situation is the earth heating up, as it is, then we need help getting out of it. We do not need to help global warming itself, as David Attenborough's answer technically implies. Of course, we know what he means, which is why this small error doesn't cause too much confusion, but I thought it was worth noting, nonetheless.

So, what exactly does David Attenborough mean by ‘help us out of the current situation’? In other words, what is his role in combatting climate change? Well, David Attenborough’s documentaries often have a focus on the impact of humans on the natural world, and he has given many talks on the impending ecological disaster. He even spoke at the UN, encouraging the world leaders to reduce their countries’ emissions of greenhouse gases. These are the gases which contribute to the greenhouse effect and result in global warming, such as carbon dioxide and methane.

Therefore, David Attenborough’s main roles in the fight against climate change are to raise awareness of the issue and to encourage politicians to act. He infers that he would do these things even if he (quote) ‘was a pessimist.’ Now, David Attenborough says later in the interview that he is an optimist overall, and so he should have said here: ‘even if I *were* a pessimist.’ This is because he is referring to something which is not true, and to express counterfactual conditions we have to use the past subjunctive, *were*, not the indicative, *was*. We call this mood of the subjunctive the *irrealis*, which is Latin for ‘not real’, as it indicates something that is contrary to fact, that is *not* real. In this instance, it is not true that David Attenborough is a pessimist regarding climate change – he is actually an optimist.

Let me give you a few more examples of the past subjunctive in the *irrealis* mood:

‘If I *were* an animal, I would be a sloth, because I’m lazy.’ Sadly, however, I’m a human, which means I can’t spend twenty hours a day sleeping. Remember, the name *past* subjunctive refers to the *form* of the verb. It does not have to refer to past time; in fact, it usually doesn’t.

Another example: ‘If the Queen *were* male, she would be a king.’ Obviously, her Royal Majesty is not a man, but a woman, and so she is a queen, not a king. Don’t forget, in every person of the verb *to be*, the past subjunctive form is *were*.

Last example: ‘If dinosaurs *were* alive today, they would be the largest animals on land.’ Of course, dinosaurs have been extinct for millions of years, meaning that we are

expressing a counterfactual condition, something that is *not* real, *not* true. Therefore, *irrealis* mood, *past* subjunctive: if dinosaurs *were* alive...

I hope you understand. Generally, I try not to use too much technical vocabulary. But in the cases of the *past* subjunctive and the *irrealis* mood, I think the linguistic terms are helpful, since they tell you the *form* and the *function* of the verb, respectively.

Here comes the second fragment:

**'I mean, it doesn't help to say, umm, "oh, we're all doomed." Well, if you say that, you say, "alright, well, forget it," you know? And, err – I can't say that.'**

*'I mean, it doesn't help to say, umm, "oh, we're all doomed." Well, if you say that, you say, "alright, well, forget it," you know? And, err – I can't say that.'*

Good. I imagine there is only one word here that you might not have heard before, namely *doomed*. We mostly use this verb in the passive – *to be doomed* – and it means that something is destined to fail or be destroyed. For example, 'The soldiers realised they were doomed when they saw the size of the opposing army.' That means, the soldiers realised that defeat was inevitable when they saw the strength of the enemy forces.

Another example, this time in the active: 'The loss of their best player to injury *doomed* Manchester United's chances of winning the football match.' In other words, 'Manchester United were destined to lose the game after their best player got injured.'

Sometimes people also speak of 'doom and gloom'. *Gloom* is partial darkness, such as when it is so cloudy or misty that very little sunlight comes through. But we use this phrase, *doom and gloom*, metaphorically, figuratively, to infer that something only looks on the negative side, that it is depressing. For example, 'I read a book the other day on artificial intelligence, but it was all doom and gloom.' That means, the book only discussed the negative side of AI, which is an abbreviation of 'artificial intelligence'. The author didn't write about the potential benefits of AI.

You can also describe people as being *all doom and gloom*. It's rather of informal, of course. Let me give you an example, 'Ben has been all doom and gloom since his girlfriend left him.' That means, 'Ben has been miserable, depressed, pessimistic, ever since he and his girlfriend broke up.'

Therefore, David Attenborough is saying that there is no use in being extremely pessimistic regarding climate change. It is of no help to say, 'We're all doomed: climate change cannot be stopped. We're all going to die.' If you adopt this attitude, then you might as well say, 'alright, forget it then. Let's not even try to stop global warming, since we have no hope of making a meaningful difference anyway.'

Obviously, David Attenborough cannot say that, because he has an important role in the fight against climate change. He has to motivate people to take global warming seriously and encourage them to reduce their carbon footprints. Someone's *carbon footprint* is the amount of greenhouse gases that they release into the atmosphere through their activities. If you eat meat and drive a van, for example, then you probably have a higher carbon footprint than someone who is vegetarian and cycles everywhere.

In the next fragment, David Attenborough begins to look on the positive side:

**'Umm, and I... I – I'm sure things are going to get worse before they get better. But I believe they *can* get better.'**

*'Umm, and I... I – I'm sure things are going to get worse before they get better. But I believe they can get better.'*

Good, not much to comment on here, as I imagine this fragment was easy to understand. David Attenborough says that things regarding climate change are going to worsen before they improve. It's unclear exactly what he means by 'things', but I should think he is referring to both the effects of global warming and society's responses to it. For example, sea levels will rise, before they sink. Global average temperatures will increase, before they reduce. Similarly, there might be politicians who relax the regulations on greenhouse gas emissions, before these are then tightened again. Also, drilling for natural oil and gas

will carry on for some time, leading to the burning of more fossil fuels, before countries realise the transition to clean energy.

This is an honest and realistic approach to the fight against climate change, as David Attenborough essentially says that society still has hurdles to jump – challenges to overcome – with regards to tackling global warming. However, he believes that society can overcome these challenges and improve our situation.

In the fourth and final fragment, David Attenborough emphasises that we have little choice but to combat climate change:

**'I believe... [I'm] sufficient of, umm, an optimist, I suppose, to think that human beings really can, and they ha- they know – we know what has to be done, you know? Umm, the question is, we've got to convince the world that we – that they've got to do them.'**

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Very well. How did you get on here? If I'm not mistaken, David Attenborough changes his mind midsentence on five occasions in this fragment, making comprehension challenging indeed. However, I'm sure we'll manage.

Perhaps the most difficult part of this fragment comes right at the beginning, when the naturalist says, 'I believe... Sufficient of umm, an optimist, I suppose, to think that...'. Essentially, David Attenborough starts a new sentence after saying 'I believe', which is the first instance of him changing his mind midsentence. However, he then misses out the words *I am* or *I'm*, in shorthand, perhaps because he is uncertain of how he wishes to express himself. What he should have said here is: '*I'm* sufficient of an optimist to believe that...' Who knows? Perhaps he was planning to say: 'I'm sufficient of an optimist to believe that humans will save the planet.'

Now, the adjective *sufficient* is a formal synonym of ‘enough.’ Therefore, our protagonist is saying, ‘I’m enough of an optimist to believe that... humans will save the planet.’ That is the same as saying: ‘I am optimistic enough to believe that humans will save the planet.’ These constructions indicate, in this instance, that David Attenborough is *partially* an optimist, but not fully. Another example would be: ‘I have read *enough of* Herman Hesse’s novels to know that I enjoy his writing.’ That means, ‘Although I have not read every novel by Herman Hesse, I have read a sufficient number to know that I like his style of writing.’ I hope that’s clear.

After explaining that he is partially an optimist regarding climate change, David Attenborough says: ‘and they ha- they know – we know what has to be done, you know?’ I sometimes think that you can tell someone is speaking from the heart, that they are saying what is really important to them, when they don’t speak smoothly – much as our protagonist doesn’t here. He changes his mind twice in this sentence, initially saying that ‘they’, meaning human beings, have to do something – presumably combat climate change. But he ends up saying, ‘we know what has to be done, you know?’ In other words, society is aware of what measures must be undertaken in order to tackle global warming.

As you might have noticed, David Attenborough says this almost in exasperation. That means, he speaks as though tired of and irritated by the fact that humanity is not doing what is necessary to combat climate change. This comes through both in the tone of his voice and in the last two words, *you know?*, which form a rhetorical question, a question that requires no answer. Had David Attenborough wanted to make this point explicit, meaning very clear, he might have said: ‘We know what we must do to stop climate change and yet we still aren’t doing it, don’t you agree?’

However, he does not say this, because that would be rather pessimistic; and as the interviewee said at the beginning, there is no use in him being a pessimist regarding climate change. Instead, he emphasises at the very end of his answer, here in the fourth fragment, that society has to act. He says, ‘the question is, we’ve got to convince the world that we – that they’ve got to do them.’

Now, David Attenborough doesn't actually phrase this part as a question, even though he uses this word. Therefore, it would have been more grammatically correct for him to say: 'The question is *whether we can* convince the world to do them.' Even better, he could have said: 'Our *task* is to convince the world to do them;' that is, to convince everyone to take the measures necessary for ensuring that global warming comes to an end – or at least nearly to an end.

The last point I would like to comment on is David Attenborough's final change of mind, when he says: 'we've got to convince the world that we – that *they've* got to do them.' You may be asking yourself: Why does David Attenborough change from saying 'we' to 'they'? Well, the pronoun *we*, in this sentence, would suggest that it is mainly the task of ordinary people to combat climate change, whereas the pronoun *they* presumably refers to politicians and world leaders. In other words, David Attenborough is implying that it is mostly the duty of politicians to tackle global warming, as they are the ones who can make a difference on a large scale. This makes absolute sense, considering that David Attenborough, as mentioned earlier, spoke before world leaders at the UN climate summit in 2019, encouraging them to take action.

So, feel you understand everything a little better now? I hope so, because now's the time to check your progress. Here comes David Attenborough's full answer to the question: Are you a pessimist or an optimist regarding climate change?

**'Do you know, I... I don't try and think about that question – because, even if I was a pessimist, I would still have to do everything I can possibly do to help this current situation that we're in.**

**'I mean, it doesn't help to say, umm, "oh, we're all doomed." Well, if you say that, you say, "alright, well, forget it," you know? And, err – I can't say that.**

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**‘I believe... [I’m] sufficient of, umm, an optimist, I suppose, to think that human beings really can, and they ha- they know – we know what has to be done, you know? Umm, the question is, we’ve got to convince the world that we – that they’ve got to do them.’**

That is exactly what climate activists, such as Greta Thunberg, are striving to do now – namely, convince world leaders that they have to act immediately. It’s a very pertinent, or salient, topic – especially in Germany, as the German government is on the point of passing a decree that grants the coal industry extra protection until 2038. This would result in millions of tonnes of carbon dioxide being released into the atmosphere, taking Germany even further away from its climate goals and endangering the transition to clean energy. Once again, we see here the relevance of David Attenborough’s words.

Anyway, looking on the bright side, I hope you found this podcast helpful. I apologise if I got a little technical at times, but I wanted to include plenty of vocabulary related to global warming, as we are only going to be hearing more about this in the future. With any luck, some of the news about climate change will end up being positive.

As mentioned at the beginning, please do get in contact to let me know a bit about yourself and to leave any feedback. Once again, the email address is [englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com](mailto:englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com), and the Facebook page is called, ‘English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.’ Also, you would do me a great favour if you could like the podcast on whatever platform you use – whether that’s Apple Podcasts, Spotify or any other – and to share the podcast on social media.

If you would like to watch the whole interview with David Attenborough, 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*, Felipe Galán’s podcast for learners of Spanish.

That’s all from me for today. I hope you have enjoyed this episode of *English in Practice*. I’m away next week, so there won’t be a new episode available on Saturday, but I’ll try my best to upload one as soon as I can. All the best. Over and out.

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

*Se Habla Español*: <https://www.facebook.com/sehablaespanolpodcast/>