

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

MUSIC

Welcome to the eighth episode of *English in Practice*. Our protagonist on this occasion is the physicist and TV presenter Brian Cox, who hails from northern England. In the last couple of decades, Brian Cox has become popular all over the English-speaking world and he has been credited with inspiring many young people to study physics.

I would like to dedicate this episode to two people who have been kind enough to send me a donation. Estela is a Filipino-German who lives in Munich and enjoys listening to *English in Practice* on her daily powerwalk, and Vanessa is a student at the University of Heidelberg, just like myself. Estela said that she particularly enjoyed the challenge of listening to Adele – so if you found the singer difficult to understand as well, don't worry, you're in good company.

Also, I would like to welcome Monic to the *English in Practice* family – thank you for liking the Facebook page – and give a shout-out to Merle, again from Germany. Merle listens to this podcast on the bus to school and she sent me some feedback a couple of weeks ago. So, thank you very much to all of you – your generosity and kind messages made me smile.

If the sound quality of this episode is a little different to usual, that's because I am now living on the Costa del Sol in Spain. I'm also recording this in my wardrobe, so hopefully my clothes are absorbing some of the echoing noise. Anyway, I've started work here as a journalist and will be living for at least six months in the small city of Estepona. Sadly, that means that I now have a little less time for this podcast – and my recent move is the reason why this episode is shorter than usual – but I will make sure to upload at least one new episode every two weeks. I will probably focus on producing interview episodes and short story episodes, since they seem the most popular.

As always, you can download the transcript for this episode from my website – just follow the link in the description. And if you wish to message me or tell me a bit about yourself, simply send an email to englishinpracticepodcast@gmail.com.

I also greatly appreciate likes on the Facebook page or donations via PayPal. Once again, the links are in the episode description.

Without further ado, let's learn a little bit about our protagonist for this episode, Brian Cox!

MUSIC

Brian Edward Cox was born in 1968 in the town of Oldham, which belongs to Greater Manchester. Both his parents worked in banks, but Brian became fascinated with the stars and cosmos at a young age. His childhood hero was the American astronomer Karl Sagan, who was one of his inspirations for becoming a physicist.

Remarkably, Brian Cox did not follow the usual British route of going to a private school and then studying at Oxford or Cambridge, or Oxbridge for short. He did poorly in his A-level maths exam, and shortly after leaving school he became a professional keyboard player in the rock band Dare. Dare released two albums with Cox, then he joined the group D:Ream, who had several hits in the UK charts.

Brian Cox remembers these years fondly. However, the musician's lifestyle of making albums and going on tours proved too repetitive for him, and so he quit music to pursue his dream of becoming a physicist – which is ironic, considering his former band was called D:Ream.

Anyway, the career change turned out to be a good decision. Brian Cox completed his PhD in high-energy particle physics at the University of Manchester in 1998. Then in 2005, he began a career in broadcasting, when he appeared in a show on Einstein for the BBC documentary series *Horizon*. Since then, he has presented numerous popular science programmes, including *Wonders of the Solar System*, and has been a guest or panellist on several others, such as *QI*, *Doctor Who*, and *Stargazing Live*.

To date, Brian Cox has been the author or co-author of over 950 publications. In recognition of his contributions to physics and helping to popularise science, he has been

awarded an OBE, which stands for Order of the British Empire, as well as a Fellowship of the Royal Society. Some even regard him as the natural successor of David Attenborough.

The following clip comes from an interview with Brian Cox that appeared on ABC TV Australia. It was uploaded to YouTube in July 2019 by the channel Top Cat. The interviewer has just asked our protagonist if he has ever had experiences that make him wonder about the nature of belief and who made the world:

‘Um, no, not in that context. I have experiences that... that make me wonder about nature, um, and I want to find out more about it.

‘But um – but no, I have not and never have reached for any kind of supernatural explanation.

‘Um, I’m... I think... Being a scientist is – one of the key traits you... you have to have is to be comfortable with not knowing. Because if you think about what a research scientist’s job is, it is to go to the edge of your knowledge and peer out into the unknown and try and find out some more stuff.

‘So, if you’re not comfortable with being on the edge of knowledge and not knowing things, then you can’t be a research scientist, really – in my view, anyway. See, you have to enjoy the unknown.’

So, how did you get on? Was most of the vocabulary known to you, or did it exceed the limits of your knowledge? Terrible puns, I know.

Unlike the other British protagonists to appear on this podcast so far, Brian Cox comes from the north of England – hence his accent is a little different. In fact, he has a Manchurian accent, as he comes from Manchester, or you can say ‘Manch’ for short.

For example, Brian Cox does not say ‘stuff,’ as those in southern England would, but *‘stuff.’* That *uh*-sound is very typical of northern English accents. There’s actually a supermarket

in the UK whose slogan is *'good with food.'* Of course, those two words only rhyme when read in a northern accent. In Oxford English, you would say 'good with food.'

Let's begin with the analysis of the first fragment, in which Brian Cox reveals that he has never before had any experiences that make him question who made the world:

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Good, I imagine that you did not have too many difficulties here. Brian Cox says he has never had any experiences that make him wonder whether there might be a god. The *verb wonder* is a synonym for 'question,' 'think about' or 'be filled with curiosity.' For example, I wonder how many people will listen to this episode; hopefully millions, though that's not gonna to happen.

Anyway, the *noun wonder*, on the other hand, is something you marvel at, something awe-inspiring. For example, the Egyptian pyramids are one of the seven wonders of the ancient world. You might also experience the *feeling* of wonder when gazing at something *wonderful*, such as the northern lights. Be careful not to confuse *wander* with wonder, as the former means to 'walk' or 'stroll.'

Brian Cox does not wonder about who made the world, because he does not believe in a god. However, he does wonder about nature. Since he is a physicist, we can assume he is mostly referring here to the cosmos.

Here comes the second fragment:

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Let's start with the adjective *supernatural*. This comes from the Latin preposition *super*, meaning 'above' or 'beyond,' and *naturalis*, meaning 'natural.' Therefore, *supernatural* indicates anything that is beyond the bounds of nature, that cannot be explained by natural law, such as the existence of deities or aliens. In other words, Brian Cox is saying that he has never turned to religion for explanations of the universe. Instead, he believes science can provide the answers to its mysteries.

Before we move on, I'd just like to recap the present perfect. Brian Cox says he has not and never has looked to religion for answers. The present perfect is correct here because the physicist never did turn to religion for answers in the past and nor does he today. In other words, we need a tense that connects the past and the present – and that is literally what the present perfect does, as the name reveals.

In the next fragment, our protagonist moves on to explain why he considers it important for a scientist to be comfortable with not knowing:

'Um, I'm... I think... Being a scientist is – one of the key traits you... you have to have is to be comfortable with not knowing. Because if you think about what a research scientist's job is, it is to go to the edge of your knowledge and peer out into the unknown and try and find out some more stuff.'

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Brian Cox jumbles up his word order in the first sentence of this fragment because he is still thinking about what exactly he wants to say. If he had paused to think, he might have said: 'One of the key traits you have to have as a [research] scientist is to be comfortable with not knowing,' which is better English. Since *knowing* is a gerund, which is a noun

formed from a verb and that ends in -ing, it is fine to use this with both a preposition and a negation. ‘To be comfortable with not knowing’ is perfect English. No problems there.

There are a couple of words here that you may not have heard before. The first of these is *trait*, which denotes a distinguishing feature, similar to ‘characteristic’ or ‘quality.’ A trait is often inherited, though not always. For example, ‘playfulness is a typical trait of dolphins.’ But you could also say, ‘honesty is probably Lydia’s best trait,’ even though honesty is not inherited.

The other tricky word here is the *verb peer*, which means ‘to look intensely’ or ‘to be partially visible’, such as when the moon peers from behind the clouds. Don’t confuse this with the *noun peer*, which denotes a person of equal rank, class or age; for example, your classroom peers.

Brian Cox uses the verb *peer* metaphorically, as he says that a research scientist’s job is ‘to go to the edge of your knowledge and peer out into the unknown and try and find out some more stuff.’ Let me paint a picture to clarify what he means here. Imagine you are standing at the edge of a dark, rocky chasm, which is a deep hole in the ground. The rock you are standing on represents your knowledge, as you know what material it is made of – stone. But in the darkness below, you see several mysterious shimmers of light. These represent the unknown; and if you were a research scientist, your job would be to try and find out what they are.

Our protagonist says that a research scientist’s job is to go to the edge of *your* knowledge, but it would have been much better for him to say simply ‘the edge of knowledge.’ After all, a research scientist does not only wish to expand her own knowledge, but *humanity’s* knowledge; she wants to find out something that nobody knows.

In the final fragment, Brian Cox reiterates the point he has just made:

‘So, if you’re not comfortable with being on the edge of knowledge and not knowing things, then you can’t be a research scientist, really – in my view, anyway. See, you have to enjoy the unknown.’

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Good. As you may be aware, *in my view* is simply a synonym of 'in my opinion.' And in Brian Cox's opinion, you have to enjoy the unknown if you wish to be a research scientist.

He talks about the unknown so much here because, as I'm sure you know, religion usually provides explanations and answers to the big questions, such as How was the earth made? If religion provides the correct explanations and answers is a whole other debate, but there is no doubt that some people find comfort in religion because it takes away these uncertainties. That's why Brian Cox goes on to say later in the interview that 'cosmology is what we now have instead of theology: the terrors are less, but the comforts are nil.' It's a quote from John Updike, an American writer, and I'll leave you to ponder exactly what he meant by it.

Let's listen to the entire clip once more so that you can check your progress. Here it comes:

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Wonderful. I found that excerpt interesting and I hope you did as well. If there are any aspiring physicists listening, be sure to go and watch a few programmes presented by Brian Cox. I’m sure you’ll enjoy them.

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, and the Facebook page is called, ‘English in Practice: A Podcast for Intermediate-Advanced Learners.’ If you have enjoyed the podcast or found it helpful, please do tell your friends about it, share the Facebook page on social media, etc.

If you would like to watch the whole interview with Brian Cox, you can find the link in the description. 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 short story episode next week or maybe in a fortnight. All the best. Over and out.