TRANSCRIPT · EPISODE 219

What Does That Even Mean? Pants or Trousers? A British English Surprise

English learning resource · EN

Full episode script · English

70 lines

Study task: Listen again and notice the expressions you studied.

Imagine I walk into a shop in Britain because I need a new pair of trousers.

I ask the assistant, where can I find the pants?

What might the assistant think you are looking for?

I am thinking of clothes to wear over my legs.

But in Britain, the assistant might understand pants as underwear.

Today we are using an imagined situation to explore a real difference in English.

Welcome to What Does That Even Mean?, from Your English Toolbox.

Let us go back to the shop.

I have learned that pants means the clothes I wear over my legs.

I have heard it in American films, and I am looking for a pair to wear to work.

So I ask, excuse me, where can I find the pants?

The assistant may understand the word in its British sense and show you the underwear section.

I look at the shelves and realise that these are not the clothes I had in mind.

Your question makes sense if you learned the American meaning.

The misunderstanding comes from a word that can mean different things in different varieties of English.

So what should I ask for in that British shop?

You can say, excuse me, where can I find the trousers?

Where can I find the trousers?

Trousers usually means the piece of clothing that covers your legs from your waist down.

For example, I wear black trousers to work.

And in American English, someone might call those same clothes pants.

Yes, although individual usage can vary.

In British English, pants commonly means underwear.

So the same word may point to two different parts of my wardrobe.

Exactly, and the situation and the people speaking will help you understand which meaning is intended.

Now let us add a useful phrase for buying clothes.

I need a pair of trousers.

We often use a pair of with trousers, even when we are talking about one item of clothing.

You can say, I need a pair of trousers for work.

Or, I would like a pair of black trousers.

If you see one item and like it, you can say, those trousers look comfortable.

Notice that we say those trousers are, rather than that trousers is.

The two legs help me remember that the word behaves like a plural.

And a pair of trousers is still one item.

Suppose the shop assistant has understood, but you need a different size.

Could I try these trousers in a larger size?

That is a clear, polite question.

You might also ask, where can I try them on?

Try them on means put the clothes on briefly to see how they fit.

In many shops, the assistant may point you towards the fitting rooms.

Once you have tried the trousers on, you can describe the fit.

These trousers are too long, or these trousers fit well.

That helps the assistant understand what you need next.

If the assistant shows you something unexpected, you do not need a complicated explanation.

I can say, sorry, I mean trousers.

Or, I am looking for trousers to wear to work.

Those extra words make your meaning clear.

And the assistant has a chance to help me find the right section.

No one has to be wrong for a misunderstanding to happen.

Sometimes people have simply learned or used different varieties of English.

Now let us try a quick challenge.

You are in a British clothes shop looking for the item that covers both legs.

Which word is a clear choice: trousers or pants?

Trousers.

You could ask, where can I find the trousers?

Now imagine an American friend says, I bought a new pair of pants.

What does pants normally mean in that sentence?

In American English, it normally means trousers.

And in a British context, it may mean underwear instead.

If I am unsure, I can ask what the person means.

That is often more useful than guessing.

Let us return to our imagined shop.

I say, sorry, I am looking for a pair of trousers for work.

The assistant points you towards the right section.

Now I know how to explain what I need and why the first question could have led somewhere else.

One word, two common meanings, and a much clearer conversation.

On our website, you can read this example, explore the vocabulary and choose the listening speed that suits you.

The link is in the episode description.

Thanks for learning with us.

See you next time.