

British Understatement Assembly

I would like to make British understatement the focus of this – my last assembly of the year. As an example, let us take David Livingstone, a missionary doctor famous for fighting slavery and exploring the jungles of Africa. In 1873, he was suffering from pneumonia, malaria, and foot ulcers so savage he could barely walk. The heat was roasting; his porters had run away; he had been forced to pull out most of his rotting teeth. In his gut was a blood clot the size of a cricket ball that would shortly kill him.

In his tent, by the light of a candle, Livingstone picked up his pen and, using berry juice because he had run out of ink, he wrote these magnificent words: "It is not *all* pleasure, this exploration."

The words were not for publication, but were for his private diary.

This was not the grandstanding of someone determined to appear *tough* at a moment of spectacular suffering, but the statement of a most resilient man, finding humour in downplaying horrors that could hardly be exaggerated.

The English are rightly renowned for their use of understatement, not because we invented it or because we do it better than anyone else, but because we do it so much. It all stems from our tendency to restrict the use of earnestness, gushing, emoting and boasting. Rather than risk exhibiting any hint of seriousness, unseemly emotion or excessive zeal, we go to the opposite extreme and pretend dry, deadpan indifference.

The understatement rule means that a terrible and painful illness must be described as 'a bit of a nuisance'; a truly horrific experience is 'well, not exactly what I would have chosen'; a sight of breathtaking beauty is 'quite pretty'; an outstanding performance or achievement is 'not bad'; an act of abominable cruelty is 'not very friendly', and an unforgivably stupid misjudgment is 'not very clever'; and any exceptionally delightful object, person or event, which in other culture would warrant streams of superlatives, is pretty much covered by 'nice', or, if we wish to express more extreme approval, 'very nice'.

Needless to say, English understatement is a trait that many visitors to the country find utterly bewildering and infuriating. And they have a point - why can't the English just say what they mean?

Even the English, who understand their own humour, are not exactly riotously amused by understatement.

At best, a well-timed, well-turned understatement only raises a slight smirk. But then, this is surely the whole point of the understatement: it is amusing, but only in an understated way. It is humour, but it is a restrained, refined, subtle form of humour. A very English sort of humour.

Sometimes, the language of understatement can lead to *lethal* misunderstanding. In 1951, 650 soldiers of the Gloucestershire Regiment were surrounded by an entire Chinese division on the Imjin River in Korea. Their commander, Brigadier Thomas Brodie, told the Americans that "*things are pretty sticky*", a statement that sounded reassuring to American ears but was as close to a scream for help as British understatement would allow. The British were left to fight on without reinforcement. Just 40 survived.

The year 1912 was something of a golden era for some of the finest understatements in British history, for 1912 saw a series of heroic failures and a corresponding refusal to get too het up about them. Cosmo Duff-Gordon survived the sinking of the Titanic in April 1912, and went so far as to remark: "*It was rather a serious evening, you know.*"

I have previously given an assembly on the exploits of explorer Robert Scott. He led an expedition to the South Pole which set off in 1910. Scott's party of five reached the South Pole on 17 January 1912, only to find that they had been beaten to the pole by Roald Amundsen's Norwegian expedition. During the return journey, in March 1912, Captain Titus Oates famously left the tent to allow himself to die so that his comrades had a chance of living with the apparently offhand remark: "*I am just going out and may be some time.*" It was a sacrifice in vain - Scott and his comrades all died from a combination of exhaustion, starvation and extreme cold.

During these events, Captain Robert Scott kept a diary, in which he showed himself capable of some impressive understatement. With his comrades dead or dying, leading an expedition that had failed, food and fuel all but exhausted and knowing they were all about to perish. Scott wrote these words to his wife "*We are in a very tight corner. Well, dear heart, I want you to take the whole thing very sensibly as I am sure you will.*"

The quality reflected in British understatement is not a display of the 'stiff upper lip', an unwillingness to confront embarrassing or emotionally challenging reality. Rather, it is a refusal to succumb to drama or pander to the demands of high public emotion, whatever the extremity. However, the knack of understatement is increasingly under threat.

In recent years, when you read the words of politicians, journalists and commentators they never hesitate to portray various crises, both natural and manmade -- earthquake, riots, economic meltdown -- in the most extreme colours. The language of X Factor and political exaggeration is slowly killing off the British determination to understate and play down.

We need to revive the tradition. There are still flickers of old-fashioned understatement. During the inquiry into the 7/7 London bombings, an insurance broker, Michael Henning, described his first reaction to the blast: "It's strange the thoughts that go through your mind, but I think it was one of obviously complete British understatement: 'Oh, this isn't good.'"

Similarly, Sally Dowler told the Leveson inquiry into media ethics of her feelings when she first saw a photograph in the News of the World reconstructing a private walk she and her husband had taken after the murder of their daughter: "I was really cross." To put this in context, you may recall that journalists from the News of the World hacked into Milly Dowler's phone messages and deleted voicemails, thus giving hope to the family that she was still alive.

Understatement is also at the heart of British humour. For example, in Monty Python's *The Meaning of Life*, a dinner party is visited by Death, who wears a long black cloak and carries a scythe. "*Well,*" says one party guest, "*that's cast rather a gloom over the evening, hasn't it?*" In another scene, an Army officer has just lost his leg. When asked how he feels, he looks down at his bloody stump and responds, "*Stings a bit.*"

The differences and the subtleties of the English language are fascinating and can be very confusing at the same time – I have only explored one tiny aspect of language this morning.

When we speak, what exactly are we trying to say? Understatement appears in many different guises. The British can speak in a very indirect way and the results can be very difficult for others to interpret. I hope in this assembly we have been able to celebrate a very important element of our shared culture.