

# Better@ English

## Cultural differences: part 3 of 3

### Introduction

Hi! Lori here, welcoming you to another episode of Real English Conversations from *Better at English*. Again, I apologize for the poor audio quality this time, but I'm still posting from abroad, using my laptop. This is the third and final episode of a three part series in which Michael and I discuss some of the potentially embarrassing differences between British and American English dialects. This episode takes up right where we left off in part two, so if you are a new listener you might want to go back and listen to parts one and two before you listen to part three. You can find all the previous episodes and full transcripts on the website, [www.betteratenglish.com](http://www.betteratenglish.com).

Hey ho, let's go!

### Conversation Transcript

Michael: Well, do you know, just to change the subject slightly, you just reminded me of something, of a very good friend of mine, an English computer programmer who went on a business trip to the United States. And when he was over there, somebody asked him where one of the other programmers was 'cause they couldn't find him. And my friend Peter said, "Oh, I think he's just **popped** outside for a **fag**."

Lori: **Oh, dear!**

M: Now, in British English the word *fag* is a very, very common, perfectly innocent slang word for a cigarette.

L: Right.

M: And everybody knows it, everybody uses it, and you would be far more likely to talk about a *fag* and *fags* as being cigarettes than you would actually say *cigarette*.

L: Uh huh.

M: So, but, but the look that the American fellow gave to Peter, saying that he **nipped** outside for a fag, was quite **priceless**. So he had to explain **on the spot**, "No that's not what I meant," because, as we know, the word *fag* in American English is a slang word for somebody who is homosexual.

L: Yeah, usually, a male, male...and it's not a very nice word I think, from what I've understood. It's a **derogatory** word for...

M: That's, that's what I understood.

L: ...it's not very nice to say.

M: But it was a perfectly innocent mistake, but you just reminded me of that.

L: I know! No, it's funny. And these are the kind of things...I'm not sure they even teach those types of words, you know, I've never seen that taken up in a mainstream ELT [English Language Teaching] course book.

M: Well, probably not. But it's the kind of thing that, as we know from experience, this kind of mistake is very easy to make. And if you wanted to sound particularly, umm, if you wanted to

sound like your English was British English, then knowing words like that, that *fag* for *cigarette*, is...would be a very important one. You would need to know what it was—and not to get it confused.

L: Exactly.

M: You know, umm, so, I mean, a typical thing, "I'm just going to the shop to buy some fags," you know is an ev—

L: [laughs] It's like, what kind of shops do you have over there?

M: [laughs] I know, I can understand...

L: Didn't know they sold those!

M: That's, well, when you come back from abroad in the **duty-free** you can get 200 fags very cheaply!

L: OK, yeah, they have them **on discount**. Oh, funny!

M: But I can understand this must sound ridiculous to you [an American], but as a British guy this is just normal speak, this is what we say.

L: Well, that's another thing: Do you consider yourself British or do you consider yourself English, or, does it matter?

M: Well no, I'm English. I'm very much English. I'm sure you don't want to know about my family history, but no, I think of myself as being English.

L: OK

M: And certainly the other countries, I mean, Scotland and Ireland and Wales, they like to think of themselves as being exclusively Scottish and Irish, they don't really like to be thought of as being British.

L: Mmm hmm.

M: I think they prefer to be thought of as independent. So...But, I don't know, I think foreigners tend to think of...the people on that little green island in the middle of the sea, umm, as just being British. It's just easier to say, to say Britain, you know.

L: Mmm hmm.

M: Umm, but no, I'm English. That's it, yeah.

L: OK, and is it actually **offensive** to be called British, or...?

M: Not if you're English. But in...actually, some...as I was suggesting, that the Scottish, Irish, and Welsh people could be offended to be called British.

L: Really?

M: Oh yeah, because, umm, they very much, you know, they like to have their independence, and I'm not completely sure, but I think that some...we have an independent Irish parliament now. They're still governed overall by the English parliament, but they try to break away, really. And certainly in southern Ireland, which is known as Eire, they're not British. I mean, they're not part of the United Kingdom. It's all, it's all kind of complicated—I'm from the country and I don't even understand it properly!

## Final words

OK, that's it for this episode of Real English Conversations at Better At English. Before I sign off, I just want to thank you all for listening and for your continued support. Paul's generous donation came in right after I posted my latest message to you all—thanks so much, Paul! And Michael, your donation just popped in a few minutes ago as I was preparing this episode—thanks so much!

If you'd like to leave feedback about the site, you can email me at info AT BetterAtEnglish DOT com, or leave a message on my voicemail line at 1 (for the USA) 206 350 2283. And don't forget that your donations make the Better at English possible, so if you get value from the show, please visit the website [www.betteratenglish.com](http://www.betteratenglish.com) and make a donation. Your support really means a lot! Bye for now!

## Vocabulary list

### Popped

*To pop* [+ adverb or preposition] is an informal way of saying “to go quickly” in Br.E. For example, “I'm just going *to pop into* the post office to buy some stamps.”

### Fag

An informal word for *cigarette* in Br.E. In Am.E, *fag* is a disparaging (i.e., not nice) word for a male homosexual. It has several other meanings as well — see here.  
<http://dictionary.cambridge.org/results.asp?searchword=fag&x=0&y=0>

### Oh, dear!

A common exclamation of surprise.

### Nipped

To go quickly. Similar to *to pop* (see above).

### Priceless

If something is extremely amusing to see or hear, you can describe it as *priceless*.

### On the spot

If you do something *on the spot*, you do it immediately. In this example, Michael's friend had to immediately explain that “fag” means cigarette in British English.

### Derogatory

If something is *derogatory*, it shows disapproval or disrespect.

### Duty-free

The duty-free is short for “the duty-free shop.” Duty-free shops are usually found in airports, and are special shops where travelers can buy goods that are free of government taxes. Duty-free shops usually sell “luxury” items that normally carry heavy government taxes, such as alcohol, cigarettes, perfumes, and cosmetics.

### On discount

If something is *on discount*, it is being sold at a reduced price.

### Offensive

If something is *offensive*, it means that it causes someone to feel upset, angry, or hurt. People can *be offended by* something, or *take offense at* something.