

Transcript

INTRODUCTION

00:00 Welcome to the English with Rhys podcast. My name is Rhys, I'm a professional master's-level English teacher from the UK, and I'm here to help you level up your English.

So, in today's episode you're going to learn all about phatic phrases, you'll acquire a lot of advanced vocabulary, and, of course, you'll improve your listening comprehension.

On the English with Rhys podcast, you'll always learn through an interesting or fun context and today is no different. Today's topic is the very short history of the word 'hello' and the origins of the word 'goodbye'.

So today, we're going to learn why 'hello' was sometimes considered rude, we're going to talk about how the invention of the telephone turned 'hello' into a
01:00 greeting, and I'm going to reveal how religion has shaped one of the most useful words in English.

Now, if you'd like to get more out of this episode, there are a few ways you can do that. First, you can download the transcript. Studies have shown that reading along as you listen can help you acquire vocabulary fully and more quickly, okay? And that is available for free using the link in the description. Or, if you're watching this as a video, you can just turn on the subtitles.

The next way is to download the worksheet for this episode. In today's worksheet, we have additional pre- and post-listening activities such as vocabulary practice, synonym linking, comprehension checks, and phatic phrase practice.

02:00 But, if you're really, really serious about levelling up your English, the best way is by supporting me on Patreon. There, you'll be able to download the transcript and the worksheet, but you'll also get to listen to the podcast with no ads. And, you'll get additional behind the scenes content and activities, you'll join a monthly live chat with me, and you'll just feel good about yourself for helping me push my free videos and podcasts. And you can have all of that for one small price.

MAIN PART

Here's a conversation between a young nurse and an older nurse in the BBC's *Call the Midwife* which is set in the 1950s.

Nurse 1: Phyllis Crane SRN SCM. I am expected.

Nurse 2: Oh of course. Hello.

Nurse 1: Hmm. When I was in training, we were always taught to say, 'good morning', 'good afternoon', or 'good evening'. 'Hello' would not have been permitted unless we were talking to Americans perhaps.

03:00 It seems strange to us now that something as innocent as 'hello' could be seen as rude. But, in the 1950s, for some people, it was. And to understand why, we need to understand something called 'phatic phrases'.

Now, some of you may have seen my short video on phatic phrases, but today we're going to go in-depth on the topic. We're going to learn more about it.

So, phatic phrases, or phatic expressions, are kind of like small talk, phrases that don't have any real meaning in themselves. These phrases just have a job to do, like keeping the conversation going.

Think of the phrases 'good morning' and 'good night'. Now, if we look at these on their own, clearly the only difference is the time of day. But actually, they serve different jobs.

So, 'good morning' is a way to say 'hello' in the morning, and 'good night' is a way to say 'goodbye' in the evening.

04:00 So, you can see that the words themselves don't contain that much meaning but, together as a phrase, they become phatic and they have a job to do in conversation.

So, right now, you might be wondering why we even have phatic phrases in the first place when they give no real information. But they're important because they signpost what's going on in a conversation. In other words, they tell us what is happening, and they put the listener at ease.

So let's look at another way to say 'hello' that you might not expect. Here are three.

'What's up?', 'How's it going?', 'Alright?'

These are all questions that seem to be requests for information, but often, they actually aren't. They're just ways to say 'hello'. So, here's something you might
05:00 hear from two British native speakers.

'Alright?'. 'Alright?'

/ɔ:'raɪ?/ is the weak form of the word, 'alright', and in the UK, it just means 'hello'.

But it's all about context because sometimes you actually want to know if your friend is alright. Okay, maybe they look sad, and you want to check in on them. So, you can do this with your tone. See if you can hear the difference.

'How's it going?'. 'How's it going?'

You can see that when I have that falling intonation, by 'intonation', I mean 'stress' or 'pitch'. When I have that falling intonation, I let the listener know that this is a genuine question. I really want to know how they feel.

A couple of other English phatic phrases would include, 'thank you', 'you're welcome', 'no problem', 'nice to meet you', 'sorry for your loss', and 'have a nice day'.

06:00 When people use these phrases, they're not thinking of each individual word. They are thinking about the job that each phrase does for the conversation. Of course, the list is much, much larger than that but today we're talking about the word 'hello', so let's get back to that.

When we first used 'hello', it wasn't a phatic phrase. In fact, phatic phrases are never phatic to begin with. They just get used repeatedly over time and they become phatic later.

So, you see, 'hello' never used to be a greeting. Not in the beginning. In the 1800s, the most popular greetings would be 'good morning', 'good afternoon', 'good evening', 'good day'. And 'hello' at that time was just a way of grabbing someone's attention or expressing surprise.

(Glass smashes in the next room). Hello!

07:00 And you might be surprised to learn that we still use 'hello' in this way today.

Think about when you're on the phone and suddenly the connection drops. You can't hear your friend anymore. Oh, what do you say?

You say, 'Hello?', 'Hello?', 'Hello?'.

You're not trying to start the conversation again. You're trying to get your friend's attention. And it's funny that I mentioned the phone because that's where 'hello' finally became a greeting.

When you answered a phone call, you didn't know who was calling. This is before mobile phones; this is before any kind of system to tell you who's calling. So, it would just be a ringing phone. It could be anybody in the world, in any country, and most importantly, in any time zone.

So, if you're in India and somebody's calling from America, for example, you don't
08:00 know what time of day it is. Is it morning? Afternoon? Evening? So, suddenly
'good morning' doesn't work. You needed a new greeting.

So, two men put forward a solution. The first man was Thomas Edison who I'm
sure you've heard of. He suggested the word 'hello'. And then Alexander
Graham Bell, who is credited with inventing the phone, suggested 'ahoy'. I'm
sure you can guess which suggestion won.

Now, the thing that really spelled victory for 'hello' was the phone book. You see,
when we first had phones, people were a bit confused about how to use them or
about the etiquette on the phone. How do you speak on the phone that's different
to everyday conversation?

So, in the beginning, phone books had guidelines on how to speak on the phone
09:00 and one early phone book suggested beginning with a firm and cheery 'Hulloa!',
and at that point, 'hello' was 'h-u-l-l-o-a'.

Another suggestion is saying 'What is wanted?'. And instead of 'goodbye' they
suggested, 'That is all'. So even then, you can feel that some of these feel rude
and some don't. But, at that time, they all felt the same. 'Hello!' felt the same as
'What is wanted?', and I think that's so interesting.

Now, of course, not everything in this phone book caught on. But 'hello' did and it
wasn't long before it spread to the wider English language.

So, let's go back to our 1950s nurses.

Nurse 1: I am expected.

Nurse 2: Oh of course. Hello.

Nurse 1: Hmm. When I was in training, we were always taught to say, 'good morning', 'good afternoon', or 'good evening'. 'Hello' would not have been
10:00 permitted.

The older nurse didn't feel like she was being greeted. To her, the younger nurse was just trying to grab her attention.

Imagine someone saying, 'Oi you!' today. It doesn't feel very friendly, does it? So, it's not surprising that the older nurse reacted in the way that she did.

Now, in the modern world, you might think we don't have problems like this, but you would be wrong. We have these kinds of problems a lot, and it's mostly to do with different generations.

For example, the word 'hey' to mean 'hello'. For a younger person, maybe younger than 35/40, 'hey' is just a normal way to say 'hello'. But, if you're older than that, 'hey' might be the same as 'Oi you!'. It's just another way to grab
11:00 someone's attention and it's not really polite. 'Hey' has become phatic.

The same has happened with 'no problem' and 'you're welcome', and depending on your age, you'll likely see one of them as phatic, and one of them as giving actual information.

To an older person, 'you're welcome' is the proper response to 'thank you'.

Somebody says, 'thank you', you say 'you're welcome'. That's the way we do it.

So, when they hear 'no problem', well, they start thinking about the details of those words. What do they mean? And they think to themselves, 'Well, I didn't think there would be a problem'.

On the other hand, for a younger person, the proper response to 'thank you' is 'no problem'. So, when a younger person hears 'you're welcome' it feels a little old-fashioned and, if they think about what those words mean, it kind of feels like the older person believes they're giving some extra special effort, even when the thing is not really difficult for them.

12:00 Another thing that can split people in this way is location. So, '/ɔ:'raɪ?/', or 'Alright?' doesn't really mean 'hello' in the US. It's actually asking if someone feels alright. And in the UK, 'What's up?' doesn't mean 'hello'. Again, that's either asking 'What are you doing?' or 'How are you?'.

Things are changing a little bit, though, because in the modern world, we all share our media. So, an American might listen to an Australian podcast, and a British person might watch an American movie. So, these phatic phrases are getting shared and equally understood more and more as we become more globalised. And I'm sure that you can find something similar in your own language.

13:00 So, for example, in Mandarin Chinese which is a language I'm kind of trying to study. I'm very much a beginner but I know this much.

In Mandarin Chinese, we have the phrase 'bié kèqì', which means 'you're welcome', and it's used in various dialects and places where Mandarin is spoken.

In Beijing, for example, you could also say 'bùyòng xiè', which literally means 'no need to say thank you', but it is phatic so it's just understood the same as 'you're welcome'.

In Taiwan, though, for some people, the phrase isn't phatic. 'Bùyòng xiè' might feel like you are refusing their 'thank you'. It might not feel very polite.

AD BREAK

14:41 But, there is one phatic phrase that has stood the test of time. First used so long ago and still used today, it is the word 'goodbye'.

Now, in English, just like pretty much every language, words change over time.

15:00 So, in English, 'nice' used to mean 'silly', 'naughty' meant you had naught or zero of something, and 'meat' referred to any solid food. But 'goodbye' is a little bit different.

It's actually a contraction. Now, a contraction, to remind you, is something like 'I'm' which is short for 'I am'. Now, 'goodbye' is a contraction of four words, 'God be with ye'. Now, 'ye' is an old word for 'you'.

We have our first written evidence of this in a 1573 letter by Gabriel Harvey where he spells 'goodbye' as 'g-o-d-b-w-y-e'. Or, in other words, 'g-o-d' God, 'b-

w' be with, 'y-e' ye, which is 'you'.

16:00 It may be similar to how some people today might say something like 'May God bless you', or 'May God be by your side'. And, as you can imagine, that is more serious than just saying 'goodbye'.

Back then, we didn't know if we would see the other person again. There were no telephones, there was no internet, and not everybody could write. So, when you said 'goodbye' to someone, it could be the last time. So, it really called for something serious. 'God be with you' was appropriate at this time.

But as we've seen with 'hello', using a phrase again and again and again and again and again makes it become phatic, and 'goodbye' was no different.

At some point, it just became another phrase with no serious meaning but it helped with a social situation; leaving, saying 'goodbye'.

17:00 In fact, the word 'God' in 'God be with ye' was eventually replaced with 'good', and now when we parse out that 'goodbye' phrase, it doesn't make any sense. 'Good be with you'. It doesn't really mean anything in English. I'm having trouble understanding what that means. But as a phrase, as a contraction, 'goodbye', it makes total sense. We know what that does in a social situation.

The phrase was truly phatic by this point and the spelling has changed over time too. It's become standardised. So, now we find ourselves saying and writing 'goodbye' without any thought to the original religious meaning and if you spoke to any native it's unlikely they would know that it used to be a religious saying.

Just like all phatic phrases, 'goodbye' just does a job. It doesn't have any specific meaning. And there are plenty of phatic phrases out there that you might not even think of.

18:00 Most idioms are phatic, like the phrase 'you're pulling my leg'. Like, nobody's actually pulling my leg, and when you say it, I'm not really thinking about someone pulling a leg. I just know it means 'you're teasing me'. 'You're pulling my leg'. 'You're teasing me'.

Likewise, a lot of the small talk that you have with a stranger is phatic. A lot of what you say doesn't contain information, and you're not really trying to give information either. You're just trying to move a conversation along.

IN CONCLUSION

It's surprising to learn that 'hello' wasn't always a part of English. We think of it as the first English word, whatever that means. Probably because it's the first thing we say to a new person. But, of course, like every word in every language, it had to come from somewhere.

19:00 And I think that's an important takeaway from this podcast episode. Phatic phrases can be different depending on your age, your location, and your language, and we shouldn't just assume that the other person is being rude.

Our phatic phrases that we carry in our brains aren't exactly the same as the

phatic phrases someone else carries. They'll have a few that are different to yours, you'll have a few that are different to theirs. And if you speak different languages, well your lists are totally different.

I also find it interesting to think about how much of what we say is phatic. Now, studies have come up with all sorts of numbers from under 10% to over 50% and I find it hard to place my own opinion in there. But I think a lot of what we say is phatic.

Personally, I often wonder about how much of our vocab, the phrases we use, are just copy and pasted from somewhere else. You know, when we think of
20:00 vocabulary, we think of individual words. But that's not all vocabulary is.

Vocabulary is also phrases, collocations, and quotes. So, if you're interested in learning more about that kind of idea, what you want to search for is 'lexical chunks'. Okay, 'lexical chunks'. 'Lexical' is the adjective form of 'lexis', and 'lexis' just means 'words'.

And if you'd like to learn more about phatic phrases, I would love to recommend a book that I've been reading. It's by Gretchen McCulloch and it's called *Because Internet*. Now, I will tell you this book is aimed at high level native speakers. But, if you take a dictionary with you and you take your time to understand it, it could be a great learning experience, not just about how language has evolved over
21:00 time, but also a good vocabulary exercise.

So, before we wrap up today, let's just talk about a few of the key phrases that I used in this episode, starting with this.

I said that in the past hello could be seen as rude. And that's our phrase, 'could be seen as'. Notice that I didn't say 'hello' was rude, I said *could be*. I used 'could be', or you can use 'can be' to show that something isn't always true. And I used 'seen as' to show that I am talking about opinions and viewpoints.

For example, when you come to the UK, do not show your two fingers to the camera. It could be seen as offensive. Okay.

22:00 Now, I also said that 'hello' was used as a way of grabbing someone's attention. That's the phrase, 'grabbing someone's attention'. When you grab someone's attention, you make them interested.

The loud bang in the hallway really grabbed our attention.

At one point, I also said that it was funny that I mentioned the phone. But it wasn't 'haha' funny. It wasn't something that made you laugh. I was using funny in a different way. 'Funny' in this sense means 'surprising' or 'unexpected'.

The fridge is making a funny noise.

And the final key phrase I want to share with you today is 'stood the test of time'. It simply means that something is still popular or still strong after a long time.

For example, the TV show *The Simpsons* is in its 34th season. Now, that is really
23:00 long. Most shows only make it to six or seven seasons. So, *The Simpsons* has really stood the test of time.

Now guys, if you have found this podcast useful and you would like to help me continue to make free podcasts and free videos, you can do that by supporting me on Patreon. The link is in the description.

Remember, if you subscribe, you'll get ad-free episodes, PDF worksheets, live chats, and other behind the scenes content and activities.

You can also share this podcast with your friends or leave a review on whichever app you're using. That would really help me out a lot.

I'll see you next time.

Enjoying the podcast? Become a member!

Ad-free podcast episodes.

Access to **The Podcast Course** for every episode.

Zoom live chats with me and **quizzes** about my videos.

[Click here to join!](#)