



Skills 360 – Levels of Formality in English (Part 2)

Discussion Questions

1. How many different levels of formality do you think there are in English?
2. In what situations do you think it's acceptable to interrupt other people in conversation?
3. What do you think about using humor in professional settings?

Vocabulary

Consultative: involving discussion, or giving information and advice; "We've involved all staff and managers in a very broad and consultative strategic planning process."

Spouse: husband or wife; "All employees are welcome to bring their spouses to the Christmas party, but kids are not allowed."

Neutral: not strongly one way or another; "I know both candidates for the job personally, so I'd prefer to stay neutral in this discussion."

To take turns: when a group "takes turns," each person has a chance to do something, one after another; "I'd like everyone to talk about one challenge they're facing this month. Let's take turns, starting with Jenny."

I'd be willing to bet: I think that probably; "Ned's still not here? Well, I'd be willing to bet he got stuck in traffic because there's a big accident on Highway 403."

Chaotic: disorganized, messy, and confusing, for a place or situation; "Yeah, the office is quiet now, but come back in December when it's totally chaotic in here and nobody can focus."

To talk over: to discuss; "Frank, I think we need to sit down and talk over some of these new project ideas for next year."

Well-timed: happening at an appropriate or good time; "I thought the joke was funny, but it wasn't well-timed, coming right after Dave delivered some bad news."

Good form: proper behavior; "If you're sitting down and someone walks up to introduce themselves, it's good form to stand up and shake hands."

Conversation strategies: methods of managing conversation with other people; "In today's seminar, we're going to be looking at some conversation strategies for checking listeners' understanding."

Ridiculous: unreasonable or silly; "You think we should hire more people? That's ridiculous! We can barely even afford our current operating costs."

When it comes to: regarding; "Marion's pretty good at graphic design, but when it comes to websites she doesn't really seem to know what she's doing."

To bomb: to be very unsuccessful, especially for a performance or presentation; "I really thought I was ready for my presentation, but I got really nervous and it totally bombed."

Sarcasm: saying something but meaning the opposite, in order to be funny, critical, or mean; "Tony, it was just sarcasm when I said I'm enjoying this project. Actually it's a total pain."

Exaggerated: done in an extreme way; "It's okay to use some gestures and body language in your presentation, but if it gets too exaggerated, you'll distract your audience."

To pick up: to learn something new; "I'm not really a programmer, but I did pick up a few coding skills in my work with Dayton Robotics."

Offensive: causing people to be upset or feel insulted; "Customers have complained that our latest beer commercials are somewhat offensive to women."

Embarrassing: making you feel silly, ashamed, or nervous; "I went through the entire morning meeting with food in my teeth. It was terribly embarrassing."

To stick to: to continue doing one thing without changing; "Getting custom software is just too expensive, so I think we should stick to Simply Accounting for now."

Transcript

Hello and welcome back to the Skills 360 podcast. I'm your host, Tim Simmons, and today I want to talk about the different levels of formality in spoken English.

Think about how you speak in your first language. Do you talk the same way to your colleagues as your wife? Or the same to your friends as your boss? Of course not. Different people, and different situations, mean different levels of formality.

We can think about four different levels of formality in spoken English. First, is "formal" English. This is what you might use when you're giving a public presentation or speech. Next is what we call "consultative," which is basically professional conversation like talking to your colleagues in a meeting. Then there is "casual," which is the style you use when talking with your friends. And finally, there's "intimate" language, which is used with your spouse or family members.

Now, some language is what we call "neutral," which means it works at all levels of formality. But if you listened to our previous lesson, you know that there are many expressions or ways of speaking that go clearly with one level or another. I mean expressions that are either formal, or consultative, or casual, or intimate.

Okay, now here's an easy question for you: at which of these four levels do people interrupt each other the most? Of course, it's intimate. Just think of the last family meal you enjoyed. Did everyone listen carefully while everyone took turns speaking? I'd be willing to bet they didn't. Family discussions tend to be more chaotic, with people constantly talking over each other and interrupting.

That's okay with family, but as you move up the scale of formality, interruption becomes less and less frequent. With friends, there's still lots of interruption. In meetings, there's some well-timed interruption. But in a presentation, it's not good form. People tend to listen and wait for the speaker to invite questions. Or if you do interrupt, you have to make sure you do it very politely.

There are a couple of other conversation strategies that change along this scale of formality. One of them is *directness*. Think about a statement like "you must be crazy." In which situation would you hear that? Yes, that belongs in casual or intimate situations, when a friend or family member makes a suggestion you think is ridiculous. In meetings and other professional settings, we tend to be more indirect. So if you think your colleague has a crazy idea, you might say "are you sure that's the best way to go?"

Humor is another thing that depends a lot on circumstances and audience. When it comes to jokes, the more formal the situation, the higher the risk. You'll know this if you've ever started a presentation with a joke that bombed. But with your family and friends, you probably don't worry about that.

And there's one particular form of humor that you should be especially careful with, and that's sarcasm. Sarcasm is when we say one thing but mean the opposite. And

the way we know is with **exaggerated** intonation. For example, if I say to my friend "oh, *that's* an *amazing* idea," what I really mean is that it's a terrible idea. This can be extremely confusing, which is why it's best to save it for friends and family. Or don't use it at all.

By now it should be pretty clear that we don't use the same forms of language with all people in all situations. What this means is that you're not just learning *one* form of English but several. So if you're **picking up** new expressions from TV, or from the world around you, pay attention to the situation. Is it formal? Consultative? Casual? These things matter, because mistakes with formality can be **offensive** or **embarrassing**.

But what if you're not sure about whether the situation requires formal or more casual language? Well, in that case, **stick to** language that you know is neutral. And remember, neutral language is acceptable at all levels. Also note that there are *individual* differences in formality. Different people have different conversational styles. Some tend to be more formal, while others are more casual.

Still, whatever your personal style, you should be able to understand and adapt to the four different levels of formality. That means knowing how much interruption is acceptable. It also means understanding how direct, or indirect, you can be in conversation. And finally, you should be able to use humor wisely, which sometimes means not at all.

That's all for today. If you'd like to test yourself on what we've just covered, have a look at the BusinessEnglishPod.com website. There you'll find a quiz about today's show as well as a complete transcript.

So long. And see you again soon.

Review

1. Which of the following are levels of formality in English?
 - A Intimate
 - B Presentational
 - C Consultative
 - D Indicative
 - E Casual
 - F Friendly
 - G Awkward
 - H Formal

2. What is "neutral" language?
 - A Language that many people find offensive.
 - B Language that is used only in formal situations.
 - C Language that can be used in any type of situation.
 - D Language that is natural for native speakers.

3. What are two conversational strategies that *decrease* as the level of formality *increases*? [choose 2]
 - A Giving advice.
 - B Speaking directly.
 - C Criticizing.
 - D Interrupting.

4. When it comes to using humor in professional situations, you should...
 - A ... always avoid it.
 - B ... use it to make people more comfortable.
 - C ... limit yourself to sarcasm.
 - D ... consider the circumstance and audience carefully.

5. What should you do when learning new English words and expressions from television or the world around you?
 - A Always ask a teacher or native speaker how to use them.
 - B Write down everything you hear.
 - C Imitate only people who are very similar to you.
 - D Pay attention to the situation in which they are used.

6. What should you do when you're not sure whether the situation you're in is formal or informal?
 - A Make sure you use language that you know is neutral.
 - B Speak directly so that people understand.
 - C Avoid speaking until you are spoken to.
 - D Ask someone how formal the situation is.

Review Answers

1. Which of the following are levels of formality in English?
A Intimate
C Consultative
E Casual
H Formal
2. What is "neutral" language?
C Language that can be used in any type of situation.
3. What are two conversational strategies that *decrease* as the level of formality *increases*? [choose 2]
B Speaking directly.
D Interrupting.
4. When it comes to using humor in professional situations, you should...
D ... consider the circumstance and audience carefully.
5. What should you do when learning new English words and expressions from television or the world around you?
D Pay attention to the situation in which they are used.
6. What should you do when you're not sure whether the situation you're in is formal or informal?
A Make sure you use language that you know is neutral.