



ESL Podcast 729 – Being Blunt and Stubborn

GLOSSARY

direct – sharing one’s opinion openly, without softening it or hiding some aspect of it

* It’s okay to share criticism, but did you have to be so direct when telling her the report was poorly written?

forthright – direct; bold; outspoken, very open, not hiding anything

* If you aren’t forthright about your opinion, how will anyone ever know what you’re really thinking?

to speak (one’s) mind – to share one’s opinion, especially if other people have a different opinion

* Very few people have the courage to speak their mind around the CEO.

to straddle the fence – to be indecisive; to not be able to decide what one wants to do or what one believes, because one is able to see the advantages and disadvantages of more than one option

* Jose Antonio is still straddling the fence, trying to choose between the two job offers.

namby-pamby – indecisive, not able to make a clear decision; changing one’s mind

* He’s too namby-pamby to be a successful politician.

there’s (something) and there’s (something) – a phrase used to emphasize how extreme something is, where the first word is a broader concept and the second word is more specific and extreme, usually in a negative way

* There’s dieting and there’s anorexia. I don’t think she eats anything at all!

pigheadedness – stubbornness, an unwillingness to change one’s opinion

* His pigheadedness is going to cause his business to fail. He has to learn to listen to his business advisors and accept their ideas, even if he doesn’t like them.

to budge – to move slightly when pushed, or to change one’s opinion in response to new information

* A compromise is possible only if both parties are willing to budge.



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to sway – to change someone’s opinion; to persuade or convince someone to consider another idea or opinion; to make someone move in some way

* The earthquake damage swayed lawmakers toward passing tougher building laws.

admirable – something that one likes and respects because one thinks it is good, especially when talking about characteristics of other people

* Her concern for her husband’s parents is admirable.

trait – characteristic; feature; some aspect of one’s personality or appearance

* I think his best traits are his generosity and self-confidence.

blunt – direct and straightforward, without softening one’s words to avoid hurting other people’s feelings

* Doctors have to learn to deliver bad news to their patients without being too blunt.

stubborn as a mule – very stubborn; highly unwilling to change one’s opinion or belief

* Jacques refuses to ask for help because he’s as stubborn as a mule and doesn’t want to admit his family doesn’t have enough money to buy food.

to pull (one’s) punches – to not be as forceful or damaging as one could be; to soften one’s actions and minimize the consequences of those actions

* Politicians rarely choose to pull their punches when campaigning.

to speak up – to volunteer to share one’s opinion, even when it is unpopular and/or nobody has asked to hear it

* If you feel that strongly about the plan, you should speak up during our next meeting.

to stand by – to be committed to something; to continue to believe in something even when it is unpopular or creates problems

* No matter what happens in court tomorrow, we’ll always stand by our son.

to be on the wrong side of an argument – to disagree with another person; to be involved in an argument or disagreement with another person

* Nobody wants to be on the wrong side of an argument with Liesel. She’s an excellent debater who always wins.



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COMPREHENSION QUESTIONS

1. Why doesn't Dirk like Bruce?
 - a) Because Bruce is too opinionated.
 - b) Because Bruce is too loud.
 - c) Because Bruce looks like a pig.
2. What are you trying to do if you're trying to sway someone?
 - a) You're trying to sell them something.
 - b) You're trying to persuade them to do something.
 - c) You're giving them something good to drink.

WHAT ELSE DOES IT MEAN?

direct

The word "direct," in this podcast, means sharing one's opinion openly, without softening it or hiding some aspect of it: "When Chantrelle asked for feedback, she specifically asked her co-workers to be as direct as possible." The word "direct" can also mean in a straight line or following the shortest route: "When there's a lot of traffic, sometimes the most direct route takes the longest." The phrase "direct flight" refers to airplane travel where a single flight takes a traveler from the departure city to the city they are traveling to, without stopping at any other airports: "A direct flight was too expensive, so we're stopping in Salt Lake City and Dallas." Finally, a "direct cost" is an expense that is tied specifically to a particular product: "Raw materials are direct costs, but management expenses are indirect costs."

to speak up

In this podcast, the phrase "to speak up" means to volunteer to share one's opinion, even when it is unpopular and/or nobody has asked to hear it: "Everyone was surprised when Marcia spoke up and explained why she disagreed with the group." The phrase "to speak over (someone)" means to speak very loudly while another person is speaking, trying to make sure that everyone listens to oneself: "Stop speaking over everyone else and wait for your turn!" The phrase "to speak down to (someone)" means to talk in a superior way, thinking one is better than other people: "Just because Ezra has a Ph.D., he thinks he's the smartest person in the world and he always talks down to everyone else."



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CULTURE NOTE

Animals Associated with Personality Traits

In this episode, we talked about “pigheadedness” and being as stubborn as a “mule” (an animal born to a female horse and a male donkey). Many other animals are “associated” (connected) with “certain” (specific) personality traits in English.

Intelligent people are sometimes described as being “as wise as an “owl” (a large bird with round eyes and the ability to turn its head almost in a full circle and is awake at night). And you might hear people say “an elephant never forgets,” referring to a general belief that elephants have “long memories” (the ability to remember things for a long period of time).

Lions are generally thought to be “brave” (courageous, not scared of things). But the phrase “to chicken out” means to change one’s mind and decide not to do something because one is too scared. Someone who is very “enthusiastic” (wanting to do something and looking forward to it) about doing something, especially work, can be described as an “eager beaver” (a rodent-like animal with a large, flat tail that uses its teeth to cut down trees and use them to block rivers to create ponds).

Shy people are sometimes described as being “as quiet as a mouse.” Someone who had a lot to say but suddenly stops talking is said to “clam up,” because a “clam” is a sea animal that lives between two round shells that can close like the lips of a person who doesn’t want to speak.

People who “eat like a bird” eat very little. The phrase “to pig out” means to eat a lot of something, and people who “eat like a horse” eat a lot of food.

Comprehension Questions Correct Answers: 1 – a; 2 – b



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COMPLETE TRANSCRIPT

Welcome to English as a Second Language Podcast number 729: Being Blunt and Stubborn.

This is English as a Second Language Podcast episode 729. I'm your host, Dr. Jeff McQuillan, coming to you from the Center for Educational Development in beautiful Los Angeles, California.

This podcast has a website, and the website is eslpod.com. Go there to become a member and download the Learning Guide for this episode. All of the cool kids are doing it!

This episode is a dialogue between Simone and Dirk about people who are perhaps a little more direct – a little more honest than you would want them to be. Let's get started.

[start of dialogue]

Simone: So, what did you think of Bruce? Isn't he great?

Dirk: Well, he's certainly direct and forthright with his opinions. I don't think I've ever met anyone who speaks his mind the way he does.

Simone: Yeah, isn't that great? I've never liked a guy who straddles the fence or has namby-pamby opinions. I've always liked guys with strong opinions.

Dirk: Well, there's strong and there's pigheadedness. Don't you think?

Simone: What?! You think Bruce is pigheaded, just because he doesn't budge when other people try to sway him? I think that's an admirable trait.

Dirk: I think being blunt can be admirable under the right circumstances, but being stubborn as a mule can make it hard on other people, don't you think?

Simone: No, I don't. Other people can pull their punches if they want to, but a man who'll speak up about what he believes in and stand by it is a real man to me.

Dirk: I can see why you two make a perfect couple. I hope never to be on the wrong side of an argument with either one of you.



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[end of dialogue]

Simone begins by saying to Dirk, “So, what do you think of Bruce?” meaning what is your opinion of Bruce. “Isn’t he great?” Isn’t he wonderful? Dirk says, “Well, he’s certainly direct and forthright in his opinions.” “To be direct” here means to give your opinion without trying to be nice to the other person; you tell them exactly what you are thinking even if it might hurt them a little. “Direct” has several meanings in English however; take a look at our Learning Guide for some more of those. “To be forthright” (forthright – one word) is the same as “direct.” To be “outspoken” or “bold” are other synonyms – other words similar to this word of “forthright.” He says, “I don’t think I’ve ever met anyone who speaks his mind the way he does.” “To speak your mind” is an expression that means to share your opinion even if other people have a different opinion. I speak my mind on the podcast sometimes. The idea is usually that maybe some people disagree with you, about cats or my neighbors’ children for example.

Simone says, “Yeah, isn’t that great? I’ve never liked a guy who straddles the fence or has namby-pamby opinions.” “To straddle (straddle) the fence” is an expression that means to be indecisive, not to be able to decide what you want or what you believe because you’re able to see the pluses and minuses – the advantages and disadvantages of both sides. So, you don’t make up your mind; you don’t give your opinion because you’re not quite sure. Simone says that she doesn’t like guys – men – who straddle the fence; she doesn’t like men who have namby-pamby opinions, either. “Namby (namby) -pamby (pamby)” means not to be able to make a clear decision, to be indecisive. It’s definitely a negative way of describing someone who doesn’t make a decision, who sits back and says, “Well, maybe yes, maybe no.” “To straddle the fence” is more neutral; that is, it doesn’t necessarily mean you’re criticizing the person. But “namby-pamby” – and those two words are not used in any other context in English that I know – “namby-pamby” is definitely a negative way to describe someone.

Simone says, “I’ve always liked guys with strong opinions.” Dirk says, “Well, there’s strong and then there’s pigheadedness.” Well there’s a couple of things going on in that expression, or that sentence. Dirk says that there is something called “pigheadedness.” This is a long word, all one word: “pig...headed...ness.” “To be pigheaded” means to not change your opinion, to be stubborn. You won’t change your opinion no matter what other people say. We can describe someone as being pigheaded, and that is definitely a negative way to describe them. Why pigs? I don’t know, but that’s the expression. So, “pigheadedness” is the state of or the condition of being stubborn. Dirk says, “there’s strong and there’s pigheadedness.” We might more commonly say, “there’s strong and then there’s pigheadedness.” That construction – that structure of “there’s



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(something) and then there's (something else)" is used to emphasize how one word seems to be okay but the second word – the second concept is definitely negative. So being strong, in your opinion, that's okay. But being pigheaded, that's not okay. Another example: "There's dieting and then there's anorexia." "To diet" means not to eat food because you are trying to lose weight. "Anorexia" is a disease that causes you to not want to eat, and that can be very dangerous to your health; it can make you sick, it can even kill you. So, the first term is positive or neutral, the second one is negative. There's something and then there's something else, and the something else is always negative. So Dirk says, "there's strong and then there's pigheadedness. Don't you think?"

Simone says, "What?! You think Bruce is pigheaded, just because he doesn't budge when other people try to sway him?" Simone is obviously upset by Dirk's comment. She says that he isn't pigheaded just he doesn't budge when other people try to sway him. "To budge" (budge) means to move when you are pushed. In this case, it means to change your opinion when you get new information; someone tells you something and you change your mind. But if someone tells you something and you still do not change your mind we might say that you won't budge, you won't change your opinion. "To sway" (sway) here means to persuade or convince someone to consider another idea or to have a different opinion – to change someone's opinion. Simone says that Bruce doesn't budge when other people try to sway him – try to change his opinion. She thinks that that is an admirable trait. Something that is "admirable" is something you admire. That's where the word comes from; (admire) is the verb, "admire." "Admirable" is the adjective, someone who you have a high opinion of, who you respect. A "trait" (trait) is a characteristic, a feature, an aspect of someone's personality, the way someone acts. You could say that he is an honest person or he is a confident person or he is a generous person, he gives his money to other people who need it. Those are traits, for most people admirable traits.

Dirk says, "I think being blunt can be admirable under the right circumstances, but being stubborn as a mule can make it hard on other people, don't you think?" Dirk is defending himself here. He's saying that being blunt – that is, being direct – is okay. It's okay to be forthright, direct, blunt, but to be stubborn as a mule can make it hard on other people. A "mule" (mule) is the offspring – is the child – of a horse and a donkey. They are used as animals usually for transporting or moving things or pulling things. Well, the idea is that mules are stubborn, like donkeys are stubborn; they don't change their mind, they don't like to be moved. I don't know if that's true or not, but that's the expression. So, "to be stubborn as a mule" means to be very stubborn, not to want to change your mind ever. Dirk



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says that that can make it hard on other people; it can be difficult when you are working with other people.

Simone does not agree. She says, “Other people can pull their punches if they want to, but a man who’ll speak up about what he believes in and stands by it is a real man to me.” “To pull your punches” means not to be as forceful as you could. Someone who could be more powerful or more forceful could perhaps damage someone else or hurt someone else more, but they decide not to. The expression comes from boxing. “Boxing” is a sport where two people – usually men, who try to hit each other with their fists – with their hands and their arms. A “punch” is when you actually hit another person with your fist, which is your hand closed up tight. “To pull your punches” would be not to hit as hard as you could; that’s where the expression, I believe, comes from. Simone says that other people may do that, but she wants a man who will speak up about what he believes in. “To speak up” is a two-word phrasal verb to meaning to say your opinion even when it is unpopular or no one wants to hear it. Simone says that Bruce, who I guess is her boyfriend or someone she perhaps wants to be her boyfriend, speaks up about what he believes in and stands by it. “To stand by (something or someone)” means to be committed to it, to continue to believe in something or someone even when they are unpopular, even when things are going badly for them. Simone says that Bruce stands by his opinions; he doesn’t change them because they are unpopular.

Dirk says, “I can see why you two make a perfect couple.” That is, why you are a good match, a good pair of people to be together. “I hope never to be on the wrong side of an argument with either one of you.” “To be on the wrong side of an argument” means to disagree with another person, to have an argument with another person. Normally when we say you’re on the wrong side of something, means that you’re wrong or that you are in a position or a situation that will probably lose – that will not be the winning situation. You may talk about someone being on the wrong side of history, meaning they’re supporting an opinion or an idea that in many years people will consider wrong, for example.

Now let’s listen to the dialogue, this time at a normal speed.

[start of dialogue]

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[end of dialogue]

Our scriptwriter always speaks her mind in her scripts. That's the one, the only, Dr. Lucy Tse.

From Los Angeles, California, I'm Jeff McQuillan. Thank you for listening. Come back and listen to us again here on ESL Podcast.

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