
BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

6 Minute English

Do you think for yourself?



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NB: This is not a word-for-word transcript

Sophie

Hello and welcome to 6 Minute English. I'm Sophie...

Neil

And I'm Neil... Here's your coffee, Sophie.

Sophie

Neil – remember that staff meeting we had yesterday? Why did you agree to having decaff coffee in the kitchen when I know you don't like it... and neither do I!

Neil

I know. It's just that the boss said that **decaffeinated** coffee – that's coffee with the caffeine removed – was a good idea, healthier, you know. And then everyone else agreed. And I... I don't know... I just felt uncomfortable disagreeing with everyone.

Sophie

Well, it's interesting you should say that, Neil. Groupthink is the subject of today's show. **Groupthink** refers to the type of bad decisions we make when we are in a group. Decisions that are **contrary to** – or against – what we really think. A psychology experiment conducted in the 1950s showed that a lot of people do exactly that – they submit to the will of the group.

Neil

But before we hear more about this, now would be a good time for today's quiz question. And I get to ask you, Sophie!

Sophie

OK. What is it?

Neil

In which story by Hans Christian Andersen does a young boy dare to tell the truth when everyone else goes along with an obvious lie? Is it...

- a) The Red Shoes
- b) The Snow Queen

Or c) The Emperor's New Clothes

Sophie

OK... I think it's c) The Emperor's New Clothes.

Neil

Well, we'll find out later on in the show if that's right or not. Now, the psychologist Solomon Asch is well known for his conformity experiments from the 1950s. Can you tell us what 'conformity' means please, Sophie?

Sophie

Conformity means behaviour that is the same as the way most other people behave. Asch's main finding was that group pressure can change a person's opinion, of even obvious facts.

Neil

And what did this Asch test involve?

Sophie

123 male participants were shown a card with a line on it, followed by another card with three lines on it. The participants were then asked to say which line matched the line on the first card in length. The right answer was plain to see, but the participants felt pressurized into saying the wrong answer.

Neil

Why would they do that?

Sophie

Because the majority of people taking part in the experiment had been told to give the wrong answer. Let's hear Professor Nick Chater's explanation. He works at the Warwick Business School here in the UK.

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Nick Chater, Professor at Warwick Business School, UK

By the time it comes to you a whole list of people have said something plainly wrong and you are either going to have to fold and say, 'well, I just agree with them' or you're going to rather uncomfortably say, 'well, I think it's *one* actually'. And most people, most of the time, tend to fold.

Neil

Professor Nick Chater. He uses the word **fold**, which means you give up. But, Sophie, if people are uncomfortable about supporting the wrong answer, or something they don't believe in, why do they do it?

Sophie

Because even though we feel uncomfortable **going along with** – or agreeing with – something we don't believe, we're even more uncomfortable about disagreeing with the group.

Neil

Well, I didn't realize that people were such sheep. I have a will of steel, Sophie.

Sophie

Is that right? So, your **will of steel** – or strong determination – somehow melted away in the staff meeting yesterday, I suppose?

Neil

Oh well... of course... yes...

Sophie

Let's move on and consider briefly how social media encourages groupthink.

Neil

Yes, there's a real danger with something like, for example, the Twitter – the social networking service. Because when an opinion on Twitter starts to “trend”, it can take on a momentum of its own, and people adopt it simply because it's popular, not because they really believe it.

Sophie

And **momentum** means a force that keeps something going once it has started. Let's hear from journalist and author, Jon Ronson. He has an interesting opinion about this.

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Jon Ronson, journalist and author

One of the ironies here is that on social media we all like to see ourselves as nonconformists but when we all get together in a group what we're doing is using our individual nonconformity to create a more conformist world. So if somebody steps out of line, all us nonconformists, in this frightened conformist way, tear them apart. It's like we're defining the boundaries of normality by tearing apart the people on the outside.

Sophie

Jon Ronson. Are you a **nonconformist** then, Neil – someone who thinks and behaves differently from other people?

Neil

I'm not the type that Jon Ronson is describing – one who joins up with other so-called nonconformists to bully people with different views. Now remember I asked you earlier: In which story by Hans Christian Andersen does a young boy dare to tell the truth when

everyone else goes along with an obvious lie? Is it... a) The Red Shoes, b) The Snow Queen or c) The Emperor's New Clothes?

Sophie

I guessed c) The Emperor's New Clothes.

Neil

And you were right, Sophie! The Emperor's New Clothes is a story by Hans Christian Andersen about two weavers who promise an emperor a new suit of clothes that is invisible to those who are stupid or incompetent. No one dares to say that he doesn't see any suit of clothes until a child cries out, "But he isn't wearing anything at all!"

Sophie

It's a great story – and a lesson to us all. Now can we hear the words we learned today please?

Neil

They are:
decaffeinated
groupthink
contrary to
conformity
fold
going along with
will of steel
momentum
nonconformist

Sophie

Well, that's the end of today's 6 Minute English. Don't forget to join us again soon!

Both

Bye.

Vocabulary

decaffeinated

coffee with the caffeine removed

groupthink

the type of bad decisions we make when we are in a group which may be contrary to what we really think

contrary to

against

conformity

behaviour that is the same as the way most other people behave

fold

give up

going along with

agreeing with

will of steel

strong determination

momentum

a force that keeps something going once it has started

nonconformist

someone who thinks and behaves differently from other people