**The Importance of Not Being Earnest**

An important rule of any English conversation is the ban on ‘earnestness’. Although the English may not have a monopoly on humour, they are probably more sensitive than any other nation to the distinction between ‘serious’ and ‘solemn’, between ‘sincerity’ and ‘earnestness’. It is crucial to any kind of understanding of Englishness. If you are not able to grasp these subtle but vital differences, you will never understand the English – and even if you speak the language fluently, you will never feel entirely at home in conversation with the English. Your own English may be impeccable, but ‘the grammar of your behaviour’ will be full of glaring errors.

On the other hand, when you get used to these distinctions, the *Importance of Not Being Earnest* rule will appear really quite simple. Seriousness is acceptable, solemnity is prohibited. Self-importance is outlawed. Serious matters can be spoken of seriously, but one must never take oneself too seriously. The ability to laugh at themselves is one of the most attractive characteristics of the English.

Take, for example, the tearful speeches of American actors at the Oscars awards ceremonies. English television viewers across the country respond to them with the same finger-down-throat - ‘I’m going to be sick’ gesture. You will rarely see English Oscar-winners indulging in these heart-on-sleeve displays – their speeches tend to be either short and dignified or self-deprecatingly humorous.

Altogether, the sentimental patriotism of country leaders and the arrogance of actors, musicians and other public figures of all nations are treated with equal disapproval by the English, who can spot the slightest hint of self-importance at twenty paces, even in a language they don’t understand.

The sharp-eyed English public has even less tolerance of any breaches of these rules on home ground. Even the smallest lapse – the tiniest sign that a speaker may be crossing the fine line from sincerity to earnestness – will be spotted and picked up on immediately, with scornful cries of ‘Oh, come off it!’

Those who break the *Importance of Not Being Earnest rule* are described in the latest slang as being ‘up themselves’, or ‘full of themselves’. In time this may be described by some new expressions, but the underlying rules and values are deep-rooted, and will definitely remain unchanged.