### Too much of a good thing!

Understatement in the English language is an unwritten prohibition on earnestness, gushing, public display of emotions and boasting. The Hungarian humorist George Mikes said that understatement “is not just a specialty of the English sense of humour, it is a way of life”.

Rather than risk exhibiting any hint of forbidden solemnity, emotion or **excessive** eagerness, the English go to the opposite extreme simulating dry, blank **indifference**. The understatement rule means that a **painful** chronic illness must be described as ‘a bit of a problem’; a truly horrific experience is “well, not exactly what I would have chosen”; a sight of breathtaking beauty is ‘quite pretty’; an outstanding **performance** or **achievement** is ‘not too bad’; an act of barbarous cruelty is ‘not very friendly’. Any exceptionally **delightful** object, person or event, which in other cultures would get **appreciation** in superlative degree, is pretty much covered by ‘nice’, or ‘very nice’.

**Needless** to say, the English understatement is trait that many foreign visitors find utterly confusing. The common reaction is: “I don’t get it! Is it supposed to be funny? Why can’t the English just say what they mean?”

Even those **foreigners** who appreciate the English understatement and find it amusing, still experience considerable **difficulties** when it comes to using it themselves. There is a story about some anglophile Italian family who wished to be as English as possible. They spoke perfect English, wore English clothes, they even developed a taste for English food. But they complained that they couldn’t quite follow the English understatement. One of them was heatedly describing a horrible meal he had had at a local restaurant. The food was **inedible**, the place was filthy, the service was rude. “Oh,” said their English friend, at the end of this tirade, “So, you wouldn’t recommend it, then?” And that was all!

Here is another example of the English ways given by the social anthropologist Kate Fox. “My fiancé is a brain surgeon. When we first met, I asked what had led him to choose this profession. ‘Well,’ he replied, ‘I studied Philosophy, Politics and Economics at Oxford, but I found it all rather beyond me, so, I thought I’d better do something a bit less difficult. In fact, brain surgery is just like plumbing with a microscope, except plumbing requires far more **accuracy**.’ It later turned out that far from failing to cope with intellectual demands of Oxford, this guy had a scholarship and graduated from Oxford with a First Degree.”

So was he being truly modest? No, he was simply playing by the rules, dealing with the **embarrassment** of success and prestige by making a joke out of it all.