

Not in a million years!

It was my first week in Japan. I was naive, innocent, full of enthusiasm for my new home and alive with a hunger to try out everything it had to offer. I was making my way out of the Olympic stadium in Gaiemmae after watching an exciting game of football between Japan and Brazil when I spotted a brightly lit food stall offering what I imagined, in my untrained British mind's eye, to be trays of mouth-watering roast potatoes. I purchased some, bit into one of the enticing, succulent looking globes and then discovered that I had made a serious error. With horror I spotted the grotesque, protruding, purple tentacle staring back at me. Octopus! Tacoyaki! Nightmare!

Now I have no wish to offend tacoyaki lovers and I will admit that the UK has plenty of its own unusual seafood specialities such as whelks and jellied eels (David Beckham's favourite dish apparently).

<http://www.bbc.co.uk/dna/h2g2/A8573132>

However, I have to confess that personally I have a horror of certain kinds of seafood and top of the list is tacoyaki. Some creatures are simply too ugly to be eaten and should be left to hide their hideous forms in the deepest, darkest oceans, not scooped up and served and certainly not hidden within harmless looking batter, disguised as something far more appealing, to catch out the unsuspecting foreigner. So when a friend suggested recently that I might like to join a group on a visit to the famous Tsukiji fish market to witness an auction of freshly caught Octopus, I gave a very British reply - "Not in a million years!"

This phrase is typical of the hyperbole often employed by English speakers to make our everyday conversations more colourful and interesting. I could of course have simply replied "No thank you" or "I'd rather not, if you don't mind" but the phrase above seemed more fun and more precisely captures my true feelings towards the suggestion.

English is full of phrases like these; other notable examples are:

I could sleep for a year! – I'm really tired.

I've got a million things to do! – I'm really busy.

The film went on forever! – It was very long and boring.

Yet fond as the British are of exaggeration, we take even more delight in understatement, either to be polite or for comic effect (our default mode). For example:

He bought some tacoyaki thinking they were roast potatoes - **he's not exactly the brightest person I've ever met!** – He's very stupid.

Similarly, something very disappointing would be – **Not quite as good as I expected.**

Something fantastic would be – **Quite good!** or **Not bad!**

The employment of these linguistic devices reveals that the British, like the Japanese, enjoy arriving at their true meaning by an often rather circuitous route. This can be tricky for a non-native speaker but there are often clues to be found. For example, we often preface an understatement with the phrase let's just say as in:

'Let's just say.....it wasn't the best written book I've ever read' he said, flinging his copy of the Da Vinci code to the floor.

Once you have tuned into our eccentric circumlocutions you can begin to appreciate how they subtly add rather than detract from the power of the language and are good fun besides. And if you ever find yourself asked to do something you really, really don't want to, like attending an auction of live, wriggling Octopus at 4 o'clock in the morning, you will know exactly how to respond.

By the way, if you are a fan of fish markets you may wish to visit Britain's own Tsukiji - Billingsgate in London which like its Japanese equivalent is surrounded by some of London's best fish restaurants .

<http://londontown.com/LondonEvents/BillingsgateMarket/b1985>



Written by Philip Patrick
<http://www.britishcouncil.or.jp/learn-english/>