

SELECTIONS  
FOR  
EXTENSIVE  
READING

BOOK TWO

# 英语泛读文选

下 册

中国人民解放军国防科学技术大学

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## Unit Three

### 47. The American Scene

#### Extracts

One often hears of the Englishman's "reserve"; how he likes to "keep himself to himself"; and how on a long railway journey, with four Englishmen in the carriage, often there won't be a word spoken during the whole journey. I'm sure that wouldn't be the case in America. The Englishman thinks it is ill-mannered to ask personal questions. The American doesn't feel that at all. In the short ride between the boat on which you arrived in New York and the hotel to which you are being driven, the taxi driver will have told you all about himself, his wife and family and probably the towns in England that he was in during the war. He will inquire where you have come from, what your job is, how you like America and how long you are staying in New York. The Englishman prizes privacy, the American prefers sociability. I think this same feeling shows itself in the houses in the two countries. The Englishman's suburban house has its little garden with a hedge or a fence all round it to shut him off from his neighbours. "The Englishman's home is his castle".

The American houses have no hedges or fences separating them from the pavement or from each other. There are none of those little shut-off gardens; generally just a strip of grass with trees in it. The American in his home doesn't object to being seen by everyone—he actually likes it. And inside the house, instead of the separate hall, living-room, dining-room so typical of the English house, the American has the “open plan” house, just one large room where all the family activities (usually noisy) go on with, perhaps, a “dining recess” or a “kitchen-breakfast-room”.

“But, Hank,” I said to a young man I know here, “don't you sometimes want privacy, to be by yourself?” If I “want privacy,” said Hank, “I go to bed.”

With this sociability goes overwhelming hospitality. I don't think any door in the world is more open to the stranger than is the American's. You get taken to parties at the houses of your friends and of your friends' friends; you are invited to theatres, dinners, sports meetings, motor trips; from the first minute you are on “first name” terms with the people you meet (“Hiya Lucille, pleased to meet you”); they all show the keenest interest in your affairs and ask you to let them know if they can help you.

“Yes,” said a somewhat cynical young American to me, “and by the following week they have forgotten all about you. They like new things—and they get rid of their friends as they do their cars. No one strikes

up acquaintance sooner than we do, and nobody finds it harder to make a real friendship."

Well, that may be what happens to *male* visitors, but I must say the young men here even after three or four weeks, certainly don't seem to have forgotten all about me! But I agree that they like new things, a new car every year, the latest thing in television, this year's, or, if possible, next year's, washing-machine. In England—and in France—I knew people who had lived in the same house and been in the same job for twenty, thirty, forty years, and who would hate to pull up their roots and change to something new. That's not the American way of life. They love change, they call it "the spirit of adventure", a spirit that they think is more characteristic of America than of Europe. There may be something in this. There was a very interesting remark in a book (written by an Englishman, Kenneth Harris) that I read recently giving what he thought was a reason for this American characteristic. He wrote,

"We in England, and the French, the Germans, the Italians, even the Russians, have all got one thing in common—we are descended from the men who stayed behind. In the States they are descended from the folk who moved away."

And so they still like to "move away", to change homes and jobs. They seem to be constantly pulling down old and often quite beautiful houses or throwing

away things merely because they are old. They have none of the Englishman's sentimental love for things because they are old. I thought of that beautiful big old clock that stands in Mr. Priestley's hall. Mrs. Priestley told me that her grandfather had it made, more than a hundred years ago, for his wedding. I used to love to hear it striking twelve, though it usually did so when the hands were pointing to twenty to two! An American would throw out the old clock and have a shining new electric one. It might not be beautiful; it would have no history or "tradition"; it would certainly not be loved, and its life would be short, lasting only until a newer model came out. But as long as it lived it would strike the hour at the right time.

I happened to mention Mr. Priestley's old tweed jacket (you remember it!) to a young American. The jacket was beautifully cut and you could see at a glance that it had been made by a good tailor, but it was at least ten years old, the colour had faded and there were leather patches at the elbows; but how fond he was of it! The young American gazed at me in surprise and said, "I don't want a suit to last me for more than a year. What's the point of wearing an old suit if you can afford to buy a new one? In fact," he added, "I consider your Mr. Priestley a bad citizen. If Americans didn't get a new car every year thousands of our workpeople would be out of work. I sell clothes, and I'd hate to have three or

four million Mr. Priestleys in America saying, 'This suit of mine is three years old, but I can make it last another year.' If, instead of doing that, he and a few thousands more bought a new suit—that they really don't need—I should be more prosperous. I could buy a new and better radio and a new washing machine or go for a longer holiday—and so bring prosperity to the men who make and sell radios or washing machines, to hotel keepers, to the railways or air-lines or shipping companies. America is prosperous because it has a 'waste economy'; and the greater the waste, the greater the prosperity."

I have a feeling that there is something wrong in this argument—but I can't see what it is;

There is the point, of course, that the wealth that most people seem to be enjoying, is not theirs in reality. These cars, refrigerators, television sets, the wife's fur coat and the husband's gold watch, the house and the furniture in it are usually bought on hire-purchase and are being paid for by monthly instalments over a number of years. A lot of these people are really living beyond their income "to keep up with the Joneses". If a slump in trade came, like the one in 1931, the greater part of these goods that the people are using could not be paid for. Even in the present period of prosperity many people have a struggle to pay these monthly instalments. There was an interesting sidelight on this struggle in a "commercial" that

I heard on the radio (and here you can't help hearing commercials; every few minutes the programme is interrupted to give you one advertising something or other). This one said: "You got money troubles? You being pushed around because you can't pay the instalments on your car, your television, your washing machine or your home? That's bad. But don't worry, friend; I'll tell you what to do. Get right into your car and come and see me at the Omega Bank right here in your town. Just ask for the President. And this is what I'll do—I'll advance you enough money to pay off all those accounts, and after that you'll only have *one* monthly payment to worry about. Did I say "worry"? With the Omega Bank you won't have any worries, so just ask for me, the President."

Easy, isn't it?

You can't escape from the radio here. Radios are switched on early in the morning and go on all day as a permanent background noise. So you hear them wherever you go—in houses, cars, restaurants, taxis, railway stations. You don't pay for a licence, as you do in England, to have a radio. The money for the programmes is provided by the manufacturers of cars, soap, cigarettes, beauty preparations who "buy time" in which to advertise their products. And advertising is a fine art here; an American said to me: "The best brains in our country go into salesmanship. Any fool can *make* a thing. What takes real brains is to *sell* it

when the customer has got one already and doesn't want another." The result is that when you listen to their "commercials" you are more or less told that if you use A-'s soap powder in your kitchen you will remain young and beautiful, if you smoke B-'s cigarettes, women will find you irresistible; if you use "Dento" toothpaste a rise in salary is a certainty, and by always buying Bob's Tomato Sauce, you will sing like Maria Callas. I don't suppose anyone believes a word of it—nevertheless, people do buy this particular brand of soap powder, cigarettes, ~~tooth-paste~~ and sauce in large quantities.

(From ~~Lucille's Journal~~)

### Multiple Choice ~~Questions~~

Choose the one answer (a, b, ~~c or d~~) which you think is correct in the following:

1. The different attitude of the Englishmen and the Americans towards social life lies in the fact that
  - a. Englishmen think it ill-mannered to ask personal questions, but Americans don't feel that at all.
  - b. on a long journey, often there wouldn't be a word spoken among several Englishmen, but it wouldn't be the case with Americans.

- c. Englishmen prize privacy, but Americans prefer sociability.
- d. Englishmen's house has a fence all around it, whereas Americans' house hasn't.
2. "No one strikes up an acquaintance sooner than we do." 'Strike up an acquaintance' here means
- a. to become a real friend.
- b. to stop being on good terms with other people.
- c. to begin to get rid of a friend.
- d. to start to make friendship.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ is more characteristic of an Englishman than of an American.
- a. Hospitality
- b. Keeping to himself  
Moving away
- d. The spirit of adventure
4. An American would throw out an old clock merely because
- a. it strikes twelve when the hands are pointing to twenty to two.
- b. it is old.
- c. it can't last long.
- d. it tells the right time.
5. "I have a feeling that there is something wrong in this argument." 'This argument' here refers to
- a. this discussion.

- b. this viewpoint.
  - c. this consideration.
  - d. this debate.
6. "A lot of these people are really living beyond their incomes trying 'to keep up with the Joneses'." 'To keep up with the Joneses' means trying to
- a. reach the highest standard of living.
  - b. sell as many goods as Joneses do.
  - c. make enough money to keep their families together.
  - d. compete with other people for a better social position.
7. "People don't like to pull up their roots" means
- a. people don't like to leave their familiar surroundings.
  - b. people hate new things.
  - c. people don't like throwing things away.
  - d. people don't like to live in one place only.
8. "I'll advance you money" means that
- a. I'll pay you by weekly payment.
  - b. I'll lend you the money you need now.
  - c. I'll give you the money you need in the future.
  - d. I'll return the money borrowed from you.

## 48. The Voices of Time

Time talks. It speaks more plainly than words. Time communicates in many ways.

Consider the different parts of the day, for example. The time of the day when something is done can give a special meaning to the event. Factory managers in the United States fully realize the importance of an announcement made during the middle of the morning or afternoon that takes everyone away from his work. Whenever they want to make an important announcement, they ask, "When shall we let them know?"

In the United States, it is not customary to telephone someone very early in the morning. If you telephone him early in the day, while he is shaving or having breakfast, the time of the call shows that the matter is very important and requires immediate attention. The same meaning is attached to telephone calls made after 11:00 p.m. If someone receives a call during sleeping hours, he assumes it is a matter of life or death. The time chosen for the call communicates its importance.

If a late telephone call is regarded in the United States as a cause for concern, imagine the excitement and fear caused by a crowd of people arriving at the

door at 2:00 a.m. On an island in the South Pacific, a plant manager from the United States had just such an experience. The natives of the island met one night to discuss a problem. When they arrived at a solution, they went to see the plant manager and woke him up to tell him what had been decided. Unfortunately, it was after two o'clock in the morning. They did not know that it is a very serious matter to wake up Americans at this hour. The plant manager, who did not understand the local culture, thought there was a fight and called out the military. It never occurred to him (or to the natives) that parts of the day have different meanings in different cultures.

In social life, time plays a very important part. In the United States, guests tend to feel they are not highly regarded if the invitation to a dinner party is extended only three or four days before the party date. But this is not true in all countries. In other areas of the world, it may be considered foolish to make an appointment too far in advance because plans which are made for a date more than a week away tend to be forgotten.

The meanings of time differ in different parts of the world. Thus, misunderstandings arise between people from cultures that treat time differently. Promptness is valued highly in American life, for example. If people are not prompt, they may be regarded as impolite or not fully responsible. In the

U. S., no one would think of keeping a business associate waiting for an hour; it would be too impolite. When equals meet, a person who is five minutes late is expected to make a short apology. If he is less than five minutes late, he will say a few words of explanation, though perhaps he will not complete the sentence.

This way of treating time is quite different from that of several other cultures. This helps to explain the unfortunate experience of a certain agriculturist from the United States, assigned to duty in another country. After what seemed to him a suitable waiting period, he announced that he would like to call on the minister of agriculture. For various reasons the suggested time did not suit the minister; there were indirect indications that the time was not yet suitable. The American, however, pressed for an appointment, which was finally granted.

Arriving a little before the appointed hour (according to the American way of showing respect), the agriculturist waited. The hour came and passed; five minutes, ten minutes, fifteen minutes. At this point he suggested to the secretary that perhaps the minister did not know he was waiting in the outer office. This gave him the feeling of having done something to solve the problem, but he had not. Twenty minutes passed, then thirty, then forty-five. To an American, that is the beginning of the "insult period". No matter

what is said in apology, there is little that can remove the damage done by an hour's wait in an outer office. Yet in the country where this story took place, a forty-five-minute waiting period was not unusual. Instead of being the very end of the allowable waiting scale, it was just the beginning. Thus, when the American agriculturist left the office (after giving the secretary an angry message for the minister), his action seemed as unreasonable as it was impolite.

In the Western world, particularly in the United States, people tend to think of time as something fixed in nature, something from which one cannot escape. As a rule, Americans think of time as a road or a ribbon stretching into the future, along which one progresses. The road has many sections, which are to be kept separate—"one thing at a time." People who cannot plan events are not highly regarded. Thus, an American may feel angry when he has made an appointment with someone and then finds a lot of other things happening at the same time.

Americans look ahead and are concerned almost entirely with the future. The American idea of the future is limited, however. It is the foreseeable future and not the future of the South Asian, which may involve centuries. Someone has said of the South Asian idea of time, "Time is like a museum with endless halls and rooms. You, the viewer, are walking through the museum in the dark, holding a light to each scene

as you pass it. God is in charge of the museum, and only He knows all that is in it. One lifetime represents one room."

Since time has such different meanings in different cultures, communication is often difficult. We will understand each other a little better if we can keep this fact in mind.

### Multiple Choice Questions

Choose the one answer (a, b, c or d) which you think is correct in the following:

1. In the United States it is customary
  - a. to telephone someone at lunch time.
  - b. to wake someone at midnight.
  - c. to make a short apology when one is five minutes late.
  - d. to invite someone to dinner a couple of days in advance.
2. In America ... will make other people assume it is a matter of life and death.
  - a. a late telephone call
  - b. an early call
  - c. a call during sleeping hours
  - d. making appointments too far in advance
3. "Time talks" refers to
  - a. time has different meanings in most countries of the world.
  - b. the time chosen for the call communicates