Understatement (2) – quite (part 1): Are you quite sure you know this word? Check it out!

Kitty: Douglas, today I want to discuss the word “**quite**”.

Douglas: What do you want to talk about? I think many people know this word.

Kitty: Yeah, but I’m afraid not many people “really” know this word. I think most people know it means “fairly” or “to some degree”, but they don’t know that this word can also mean “completely”, “very”, “unusual” or “a large amount”.

Douglas: Really?

Kitty: uh-huh.

Douglas: But I suppose teachers at school do teach this word or you can check its meaning in dictionaries yourself?

Kitty: I suspect they don’t know all the meanings. Even if you look at dictionaries, although there’re explanations and examples, it can be difficult to really understand them. For instance, when “quite” is described as “fairly”, they use this example: “I’m quite **tired**.”

On the other hand, when “quite” is described as “very”, they **illustrate** this meaning by using this example: “Her performance was **quite** **good**.”

These two sentences are very similar, but it’s hard to tell their differences.

Douglas: Oh, I see what you mean now. It’s not something you can learn from books. Very often the real meaning of the sentence is expressed through our intonation and stress rather than the words **per se**.

Kitty: When we learn British English, we have to understand the British culture, too. I think we discussed this last time the Brits like to use understatement in their speaking to avoid offence. “Quite” is one of the words you guys use the most in **day-to-day** life and use it to understate your feelings, opinions or a situation.

Douglas: Yeah. We like to be **tactful** and polite.

Kitty: Shall we play a game with the word “quite”?

Douglas: Sure, why not?

Kitty: We can take turn to **demonstrate** **a** particular **shade of meaning** of “quite” by giving one or two examples until we are short of ideas. What do you think?

Douglas: It sounds very fun. May I suggest the other player can also **chip in** with their comments after the demonstrator presents their examples?

Kitty: Yeah. Good idea, Douglas!

Douglas: Thanks! Do you want to start first?

Kitty: OK. I’d like to start with the two examples I gave earlier. **You might want to** listen carefully to my stress and intonation.

“I’m quite **tired**” which means fairly tired.

“Her performance was **quite** **good**” which means very good.

Douglas: Well, when you said “I’m quite **tired**”, you only stressed “tired” but didn’t stress the word “quite”. On the other hand, when you said “her performance was **quite** **good**”, you stressed both the words “quite” and “good”.

Kitty: Yeah, we don’t stress “quite” when it means “fairly”. But in other occasions, we usually stress it especially when we use it to understate something. Perhaps we could just move on and find out more.

Douglas: Right. Since you’ve mentioned gradable adjectives, I have some examples for **non-gradable adjectives**. Here they are:

I’m **quite exhausted**.

It’s **quite terrible**.

**What do you make of them?**

Kitty: Well, when we use “quite” with non-gradable adjectives, “quite” means “completely”. It’s kind of an understatement and we have to stress both the word “quite” and the adjective and say:

I’m **quite exhausted**.

It’s **quite terrible**.

Douglas: Excellent. When we feel tired, we say “I’m quite exhausted” rather than saying “I’m completely exhausted”. We prefer to be more **subtle** and polite. Very often we just **drop a hint** by using understatement. So, you really have to listen to the context and intonation.

Kitty: I agree. By the way, there’re two types of non-gradable adjectives. “Exhausted” and “terrible” are just one of them. These adjectives carry the meaning of “extreme” or “to the greatest degree”. For example, “exhausted” means “extremely tired” whereas “terrible” means “very bad”. There’s another type which is not about the extremity of a quality. In fact, they’re about opinions which can either be “yes or no” or “true or false”. They can’t be in-between. “Correct” and “right” are the examples. We can say:

What he said was **quite correct**.

You’re **quite right**.

In these sentences, “quite” means “completely” or “absolutely”.

Douglas: We’ve just discussed how to use “quite” with “gradable” and “non-gradable” adjectives, but I think there are some exceptions in “gradable adjectives”. I mean some “gradable adjectives” are treated as “non-gradable adjectives” when they are emphasised with “quite”. Um… **Off the top of my head**, there are at least three. They’re ‘**clear’**, ‘**different’** and **‘sure’**. I can give you some examples:

You’re **quite** **clear**.

It’s **quite** **different** from what we’ve found.

Are you **quite sure** she won’t mind?

In these sentences, quite means “absolutely” or “very”.

Kitty: Well done, Douglas. You’re **quite clear**!

Douglas: Haha… Thanks!

Kitty: **To my way of thinking**, “quite” can also be used with certain adverbs and verbs and has the meaning “completely”, too. For example, you can use it with “clearly”, “enough”, “frankly” or “honestly” in:

I remember **quite clearly** that he left early yesterday.

I’ve had **quite enough** of your **tantrums**.

**Quite frankly**, I don’t blame you.

Or use it with some verbs like “agree”, “understand”, “enjoy” etc. You can say:

I **quite agree**.

I **quite understand** your situation.

I **quite enjoy** **walking** in the park.

Douglas: Right. We can use it in some fixed phrases like “**quite** the **contrary**” or “**quite** the **opposite**”, which means the complete opposite.

Or use it in negative sentences and produce the meaning “not completely”. For instance,

I **don't quite** **follow** you.

I've **never quite** **understood** why she's so successful.

Kitty: Good! Using “quite” in negative sentences is another way of using understatement. It’s much more polite to express our negative opinions. Of course, we can say “I can’t follow you”, but in some situations you might **run a risk of** giving the **interlocutor** the impression that you’re accusing them of something.

Douglas: **Quite**.

Kitty: Haha… Thanks! You’ve just given another example. When we give a reply simply with “**quite**” or “**quite so**”, it means we agree with what they’ve just said. Er… For example, there’re two people. The first guy says, “We must finish it today.” The second one replies, “**Quite**.” It means the second guy agrees that they need to finish it today.

Douglas: **Quite so!** I think we can also use “quite” with “a noun” or “a noun phrase” to understate the quantity or a quality. For example, you can say:

This is **quite** a **different problem**.

She hasn't been seen for **quite some time**.

He's **quite** the **little gentleman**, isn't he?

“Quite” in these sentences simply means “unusual” or “a large amount”.

Kitty: Yeah. I remember we discussed last time about the word “bit” which is used in understatement. We can say “**quite** a **bit** of **something**” or “**quite** a **lot** of **something**” to mean “a large amount or number of something”. For instance, they drank **quite** a **lot** of **wine**.

Douglas: Yeah. I remember that. We can also use “**quite** a **bit**” or “**quite** a **lot**” with comparatives to mean “much”. Let me give you some examples.

We went to France when I was **quite** a **bit** **younger**.

The new TV set is **quite** a **lot** **heavier** than the old one.

Kitty: Douglas, I really like the one you said “when I was **quite** a **bit younger**”. It’s **an awful lot** better than saying “when I was much younger” which implies I’m very old now. I like it!

Douglas: Haha… Thanks!

Kitty: Oh, it just **popped into my mind**. We can say “**quite** a **few**” to mean “a fairly large number”. For example, if I say, “I’ve been there **quite** a **few times**”. It could be negative or positive. Er… Let me give you two scenarios.

In the first scenario a husband asks his wife, “Shall we go to London for vacation this time?” The wife then replies, “Come on, we’ve been there **quite** a **few times**.” It means the wife feels it’s boring to do the same thing and doesn’t want to go to London this time. It’s a mild way to show our annoyance.

And here is the second scenario. Peter asks his colleague Mary, “Do you think it’s safe to stay in that hotel?” Then Mary says, “Don’t worry. I’ve been there **quite** a **few times**.” It means Mary is positive about staying in that hotel because she has been there more than a few times.

Douglas: Your examples are **quite good**! If we want to fully understand the context, we have to **read between the lines** and their intonation. I think you’re today’s winner.

Kitty: **Not quite**. I think we both are the winners. We’ve learned **quite** a **lot** from each other today. Well done!

Douglas: Yeah, **quite right**!