

It's quite understandable why some Americans might find the use of this word rather confusing

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Long ago, when I first took my American girlfriend to meet my parents and she was shown some of my father's paintings, she said that she thought they were "quite nice".

Dad wasn't too pleased – to him it sounded like damning with faint praise. But she didn't mean it like that. The problem was that Americans can use the word *quite* in a way which is rather different from the way in which we use it.

Quite is a complex word. If we say that something is quite awful, we mean that it's extremely awful. If we say that somebody is quite wrong, we are claiming that they're absolutely wrong. But if we say that something is quite nice, we don't mean that it's extremely or absolutely nice. We are saying that it's somewhat, rather, fairly nice.

The word *quite* is historically related to *quit* and *quiet*, and comes down to us via Norman French from Latin *quietus* 'at rest' – which is of course also where our word *quiet* comes from. Latin *quietus* became Old French *quite*, which meant 'resting, free, at liberty; clear'. In the Anglo-Norman French used in England, it also meant 'without opposition'. This was



borrowed into English in the 15th century, and when it was used as an adverb modifying an adjective, it was very easy for the 'clearly' meaning to turn into 'thoroughly'. So *quite brilliant* came to mean thoroughly brilliant, and *quite good* meant totally good.

The weaker sense of *quite* signifying 'somewhat, rather, fairly' arose very much later. It began being used in the 19th century; and then only in Britain; this meaning has never really developed in America. So when my girlfriend said "quite good", she really did mean "very good", just as we would if we said "quite splendid".

The 19th-century partial shift in



■ So is Sandi Toksvig quite good as the new host of *QI* (Quite Interesting), having replaced Stephen Fry? A perfect illustration of the complex meanings of *quite*. *Quite*.

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meaning might seem to be rather strange. How can a word go from meaning 'totally' to 'partially'? According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the change of meaning was a weakening from 'certainly having the specified character in (at least) some degree' to 'having the specified character in some degree (though not completely)'.

The difficulty is that with some adjectives, like *brilliant*, British people tend to use *quite* in the earlier stronger meaning, whereas with other adjectives, like *good* and *nice*, we tend to use it with the newer weaker meaning. You can't blame the Americans if they find that confusing.