

BBC LEARNING ENGLISH

7 Minute English

Angela Merkel

Sam

Hello. This is 7 Minute English from BBC Learning English. I'm Sam.

Neil

And I'm Neil.

Sam

In this programme, we're talking about a famous leader and teaching you some useful vocabulary...

Neil

..like 'chancellor' – the person in the highest position in a government or a university – and especially the title for the head of the government in some European countries.

Sam

Such as Germany, where a chancellor runs the country. It's a position like the prime minister in the UK.

Neil

And one of Germany's longest serving chancellors was Angela Merkel, who led the country from 2005 until the recent elections in September 2021.

Sam

Well, we're going to find out more about her soon but not before I've challenged you to answer this question, Neil. Who was Germany's first ever chancellor? Was it:

- a) Otto von Bismarck,
- b) Helmut Schmidt or
- c) Franz von Papen?

Neil

Well, my knowledge of German history isn't great but a) Otto von Bismarck, sounds most likely.

Sam

OK, I'll reveal the answer later on. But let's talk more about Angela Merkel now. She was in office for 16 years – 'in office' means 'in power' or 'in charge', until she stepped down last month.

Neil

Yes, that's a long time – which meant that she had to make lots of decisions, popular with some people and not with others.

Sam

Over that time, she's gained a nickname – 'mutti' – German for 'mother'. This could be seen as a compliment but started life as more of an insult, as BBC correspondent Damien McGuinness, explained on the BBC Radio programme, From Our Own Correspondent...

Damien McGuinness, BBC correspondent

The 'mummy Merkel' image in fact, started off as an insult from conservative rivals. It was made up during her first term in office by hardline conservatives in her predominantly male party. A patronising put down behind her back. Given her dry academic distinctly un-cuddly style, it was meant to be slightly ironic to put her in her place as a woman, possibly even meant to be hurtful, given that in reality she has no children.

Sam

Oh dear, so the nickname of 'mother' was really used as an insult to start with, probably invented by the men in her political party – described as the hardline conservatives – ones with traditional and strict beliefs that can't be changed.

Neil

Yes, the nickname was used as a put down – that's an insult, used to make someone feel stupid or embarrassed. And the intention was to make her feel less important – or to put her in her place.

Sam

Well, politics is full of insults and critics, but it sounds rather cruel, and Damien McGuinness does go on to say that this image is really a 'media myth' and not quite accurate.

Neil

The media has not always been negative about Angela Merkel. She is the longest serving amongst current EU leaders and participated in an estimated 100 EU summits. She has often been described as "the only grown-up in the room". So, the media has also labelled her 'The Queen of Europe'.

Sam

What is true is that following the recent elections in Germany, her successor – the person who became chancellor - will lack the experience and gravitas that Merkel has gained over her 16 years as chancellor.

Neil

But Damien McGuinness, in his report for the BBC's From Our Own Correspondent programme, concludes that many people aren't sure which of her nicknames is accurate. What word does he use to mean 'phrases or ideas that have become meaningless because they've been overused'?

Damien McGuinness, BBC correspondent

[But] The confusion around these cliches does point to another truth - The Chancellor is discreet, to the point of sometimes being invisible. So, there's a fascination about what's really going on behind that deadpan exterior. Angela Merkel may have been in power for more than a decade and a half, but people are still not really sure they know who she is.

Sam

He used the word cliches to mean 'phrases or ideas that have become meaningless because they've been overused.' People are unsure which description of her is true because she is discreet – she keeps quiet about things so as not to attract attention.

Neil

Yes, it's hard to know what she is thinking because she looks deadpan – that means she looks serious and doesn't show expression or emotion.

Sam

Hmmm, I wonder if Germany's first ever chancellor had a deadpan exterior?

Neil

Ah yes, earlier you asked me who that was, and I said it was Otto von Bismarck.

Was I right?

Sam

Yes, you were – well done. [He became chancellor in 1871 and was responsible for transforming a collection of small German states into the German empire.]

Neil

Wunderbar! Now it's time to recap some of the vocabulary we've mentioned today, starting with chancellor - the person in the highest position in a government in some countries.

Sam

Hardline describes someone with traditional and strict beliefs that can't be easily changed.

Neil

A put down is an insult, used to make someone feel stupid or embarrassed.

Sam

When someone is put in their place, they are made to feel less important than they are.

Neil

Cliches are phrases or ideas that have become meaningless because they've been overused. And deadpan describes someone's serious facial expression that shows no emotion.

Sam

Thanks, Neil. That's all for now but don't forget there are lots more 1 Minute English programmes to enjoy on our website at bbclearningenglish.com. You can also find us on social media and on our free app. Thanks for listening and goodbye.

Neil

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Sam

Thank you for listening and goodbye.

Neil

Goodbye.

VOCABULARY

chancellor

person in the highest position in a government or a university, and especially the title for the head of the government in some European countries

hardline

describes someone with traditional and strict beliefs that can't be easily changed

put down

insult, used to make someone feel stupid or embarrassed

put in their place

made to feel less important than they are trying to be

cliches

phrases or ideas that have become meaningless because they've been overused

deadpan

serious facial expression that shows no emotion