

# Do you use litotes?

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The answer is probably yes. Consider this: how are you? Not bad (= I am quite well). You have just used a litote (the word is the same in Spanish).

Litotes are a common feature in speaking and writing and part of the culture of British English, a facet (faceta) of the national character. A litote is a deliberate understatement (una subestimación deliberada).

Here are some examples:

- I am not amused (no me hace gracia). In other words, I am angry.
- I am not a little angry (meaning that I am very angry).
- Mrs Merkel, the German Chancellor, is not a bad person. In other words, she is a good person.
- Ricardo is not a bad chef (meaning he is quite a good chef).
- How was the meal? Not bad (meaning that it was quite good). An understatement.

So, there is either the negation of a positive word (not amused) or the negation of a negative word (not a little angry).

Why do we use litotes?

One reason is that you want to avoid causing offence (evitar a ofender a alguien). If you can communicate in a gentle manner, why not? Should we behave like cavemen (hombres de las cavernas)? Another reason is that you want to be a little

vague (impreciso).

Look at these examples:

- The task of governing Spain is not easy (= quite difficult). Mr. Sánchez is learning this!
- Mr. Rajoy's life has not been a bed of roses (no ha sido un lecho de rosas). This means that his life has been difficult. The language here is positive "a bed of roses", with the negative "not", so we have a negation of a positive phrase.
- That is a matter of conjecture (...una cuestión de conjetura). If you were to say this, you could mean three things: "you are wrong", "I do not agree", the issue is not clear.
- How was the Cambridge Advanced exam? "Quite good", meaning it probably was very good
- I beg to differ (siento tener que disentir), meaning "I disagree". It is an elegant way to disagree with someone.

So to avoid causing offence English people often "tread carefully" (andarse con pies de plomo) by using litotes, or they use them to be vague because they do not want to reveal their full feelings or views.