

Catch Word #231 – So cute, it hurts

Episode description

Super! Really! Very! Extremely! There are many ways to add emphasis to your conversation and show the intensity of a feeling or situation. In today's episode, Andrew and Jeremy share two catch words that native English speakers use every day.

Fun fact

Intensifiers are adverbs used to give force or emphasis. These parts of speech have a variety of rules and guidelines that native English speakers know instinctively but that require some research to fully understand.

Expressions included in the study guide

- So [adjective], it hurts
- Hella
- [Something] nerd
- Secondhand embarrassment
- Breeding ground
- Getting into [something] territory



Transcript

Note: The words and expressions that appear in **bold text** within the transcript are discussed in more detail in the Detailed Explanations section that follows the transcript. The transcript has been edited for clarity.

Andrew: Hello, everyone. I'm Andrew.

Jeremy: And I'm Jeremy.

Andrew: And this is the Culips English Podcast.

Andrew: Hello there, everyone. You are listening to Catch Word, the Culips series where we teach you interesting English vocabulary that will really make your English sound natural and also help you understand the English that you hear. Today we are going to teach you two expressions that you can use as intensifiers to modify adjectives, intensifiers. I'm joined today by my cohost, Jeremy, and I'm going to kick things off by asking Jeremy a tough question here. Jeremy, what does it mean, intensifier?

Jeremy: This is not a very commonly used word but, of course, as a native English speaker and language teacher, I understand what it means. It comes from the word intense and intense means that something is very extreme in a certain way. So if it is intensely hot outside, we can say that the temperature is very, very high. And the ending of the word intensifier, -ify, I-F-Y usually, -ify, this suffix, this word ending, is used to mean to make it that way. So to make something that way. So intensify means to make something intense. And -er, the E-R there, means a thing that does that verb or that does that thing. So a basketball player is someone who plays basketball. And a recorder is a thing that records. So, put it all together, intensifier is a thing that makes something intense.

Andrew: Jeremy, you're a real word geek. I love it.

Jeremy: Yes, I am. I am a nerd when it comes to words, **word nerd**.

Andrew: **Word nerd**. So I think that most of our listeners are probably familiar with the common intensifiers that everybody uses in English. Words like very and really, right? It's very beautiful. It's really beautiful. Or my personal favourite, super, it's super beautiful. And some of our listeners have mentioned that I use super a lot when speaking, super cool, super fun. But today we're going to look at some, I would say very informal expressions, very slang expressions that, you know, are very common, actually, to intensify adjectives in different ways. And I think this is going to be a super fun episode, Jeremy.

Jeremy: Super. So what's our first intensifier for this episode?

Andrew: All right, it's an expression. And it is a four-word expression, **so something, it hurts**.

Jeremy: **So adjective, it hurts**.

Andrew: Right. So the second word in this set expression, we can insert an adjective in there. So, for example, you could say, oh, it's **so cute, it hurts**. It's **so funny, it hurts**. **So beautiful, it hurts**.

Jeremy: Now, I have a question, Andrew. Would you say something like, it's **so hot, it hurts** or it's **so cold, it hurts**?

Andrew: Well, let's break this expression down first. Maybe it would help to explain the meaning of this expression and then we'll get to that question, Jeremy. 'Cause we know from this word hurt, right? Hurt means like a physical pain, right? But when we're saying something is **so cute, it hurts**, we're not actually talking about our body physically hurting, right? We're just saying that it's very, very cute. If a puppy is **so cute, it hurts**, it means the puppy is very, very cute.

Jeremy: You know when you said that, it reminds me of the way a very bright light can make your eyes hurt, but it doesn't really cause physical pain to your eyes. It's just sort of overwhelming, it's an overload. It's too much light in my eyes, it's too bright. So I have to close my eyes. But with hot or cold, these are things that can actually hurt you. If something is really too hot, it can burn your skin off, right? You can, you have to go to the hospital. That is real pain. But if something is very, very, very cute, that will not send you to the hospital. It is more like figurative pain. Would you agree?

Andrew: Yeah. I think the word that you use there, overwhelming, is a great way to describe it, right? When you see something that's very cute, you get this physical sensation that's overwhelming and –

Jeremy: Cringe.

Andrew: Yeah, almost like a cringe. Or, you know, sometimes you hear about people, like, if they see a newborn baby, they're like, I just want to bite the baby. And you're like, what? I want to bite it?

Jeremy: That's terrible.

Andrew: It's so cute, I want to bite it. And it's like that same feeling, like, you just have this intense –

Jeremy: Overwhelming.

Andrew: Overwhelming reaction. You don't know what to do with that energy that you receive. So I think that's what it means here, it hurts.

Andrew: Because the exact meaning of this expression is a little bit difficult, we would suggest keeping your ears open and listening to native speakers use this expression when you watch TV and when you have conversations with native speakers. And after you are exposed to it many times and you get a feeling for how to use the expression, then you can apply it to your own speech.

Jeremy: Yeah, our goal here is to make sure that you are not confused when you hear this expression in the future. So instead of going out and trying to use this expression tomorrow with some friend you have, it might be better to wait and listen and see if someone you know, some native English speaker you know, uses this expression. Or maybe you can ask your native English-speaking friends about this expression and then they can give you more examples and more context and help you understand it better.

Andrew: And I'll tell one story quickly here about how I used this expression this week, which was actually the inspiration for this episode. So there is a band called Foxwarren. And one of my friends sent me a music video of this band, Foxwarren, playing at a little bar in Canada. And, you know, I'm living overseas, so I'm a little bit separated from Canadian culture. And I clicked on this video and it was almost a culture shock moment for me because in my head, I said, wow, this is **so Canadian, it hurts**. All of the band members had long hair and beards and were wearing flannel –

Jeremy: I was going to say.

Andrew: Wearing flannel and the song just sounded really Canadian. So when I said it's **so Canadian, it hurts**, I didn't mean that I feel homesick or I feel any pain. I just was thinking that it's so Canadian. It's extremely Canadian.

Jeremy: Overwhelmingly Canadian that you can't stand it. Almost like you can't watch it. Would you agree?

Andrew: It's, like, right on the edge of being cringeworthy. Cringeworthy is another expression that we've talked about on Culips before, but I think our listeners don't need to worry about that. They just need to take home that this expression means something is so or very or extremely like that thing.

Andrew: And we have some conversation examples prepared. So, everyone, let's take a listen to example #1 using this expression, **so adjective, it hurts** right now.

Friend 1: I'm going to go to the park this afternoon to take Widget for a walk. Want to come along?

Friend 2: Of course I do. That puppy is **so cute, it hurts**. What time are you thinking?

Friend 1: Probably in like 20 minutes or so.

Friend 2: OK, cool. I'll meet you there.

Friend 1: OK, great.

Andrew: So, in this conversation example, we heard about a puppy that is **so cute, it hurts**. So it just means that the puppy is very, very cute, almost overwhelmingly cute, as cute as it's possible to be. Jeremy, why don't we listen to example #2 now?

Jeremy: All right, let's do it.

Friend 1: Dude, you see this video? It's so crazy.

Friend 2: Is that the one where the mayor accidentally trips while walking down the stairs?

Friend 1: Yeah, it's hilarious.

Friend 2: Oh, I don't know. It's **so embarrassing, it hurts**. I could barely watch it.

Jeremy: In this example, two friends talk about a video in which the mayor of a city accidentally falls while walking down the stairs. One of the friends says that it is **so embarrassing, it hurts**, meaning that watching the mayor fall and imagining how embarrassing it must have been for him is an overwhelming thought. So this is sort of **secondhand embarrassment**, we could say. The viewer is feeling the embarrassment of the mayor and is overwhelmed by how embarrassing it must have been.

Andrew: Yeah, sometimes when you watch people fail at something, especially in public, if somebody is doing a terrible job at giving a speech or a presentation or, you know, like, they fall or trip in front of many people, you feel embarrassed for them, right? You're, like, oh, I feel so bad for that person. This is what we mean by **secondhand embarrassment**.

Jeremy: Or maybe if you watch a college lecture by a very old professor who is very, very, very boring. You could say it's **so boring, it hurts**. That would be another example.

Andrew: Yeah, that's a great one.

Andrew: Jeremy, we're going to transition now into our second expression for today, which is one from your neck of the woods—in California—slang expression, which is **hella**, **hella**, **hella**, H-E-L-L-A.

Jeremy: Yeah, this word is very familiar to me.

Andrew: Everyone, this is a very casual slang expression that originated from, I believe, northern California. Jeremy, you think northern California-ish area?

Jeremy: Yeah. So my experience with this word is as follows. When I was in high school and college, I started to use this word, me and my friends started to use this word, and we use it did to intensify other adjectives. So, for example, if I ate a sandwich that was extremely delicious, I would say, oh, that was **hella** good. That sandwich was **hella** good, we would say it like that, drawing out the vowel sound. The university I went to was in southern California, so almost to Mexico, in the city of San Diego. And when I used this word there, the people from San Diego said, ah, are you from northern California? Only northern Californian people say **hella**. We don't say that word down here. And I realized that this word was specific to northern California. I don't know if that's still the case, though.

Andrew: Yeah, so it's kind of SoCal/NorCal divide, you could say?

Jeremy: Yes.

Andrew: California is a **breeding ground** for new English expressions. I think the rest of the English-speaking world sees California as a really hip and cool place and, of course, so many TV shows and movies are filmed in California that the language and the slang that originates there quickly spreads to other places in the English-speaking world. And **hella** is a word that I heard a lot of my friends use growing up, as well. So I grew up on, still on the West Coast of North America, but north of you, of course, Jeremy, in Canada, but it was still used there. And these days, I believe it's kind of spread all over the place.

Andrew: It is an extremely casual slang expression. So I would never say this to my boss or during a presentation or at work but, amongst friends, I think it's totally fine to use.

Andrew: And we should just clarify the meaning. OK, when we're using **hella** to describe an adjective, or that's **hella** cool, **hella** awesome, it just means it's really cool, really awesome, very awesome, very cool.

Jeremy: The origin of this expression, it did originate in Northern California. And it comes from the expression hell of a blank. And this is sort of an older expression, like that baseball player is a hell of a pitcher, hell of a pitcher, meaning he is very, very good at pitching or something like that. Or she is a hell of a lawyer. She's a hell of a lawyer, a hell of, a hell of, a hell of a, this phrase was used so much over time that it got condensed into **hella** instead of hell of a.

Andrew: The really interesting thing for me is that the original phrase, hell of a, actually sounds quite strong and almost like a curse. Like it's **getting into that rude language territory**. She's a hell of a lawyer. It's like, whoa, that's pretty strong, you wouldn't use that at the workplace, right? But for some reason, when we shortened it to **hella**, then it seems not as offensive. It's lighter, lighter sounding, lighter feeling.

Jeremy: It diverges from the hell meaning, as in the opposite of heaven. And so I think it loses its potency, we can say.

Andrew: Good word, potency. Yes.

Jeremy: So let's look at our first example. What do you think?

Andrew: Let's do it.

Friend 1: What should we do for dinner?

Friend 2: I don't know, pizza?

Friend 1: Yeah, I'm down. From where?

Friend 2: Mario's? That place is **hella** good.

Friend 1: All right, the regular order?

Friend 2: Yup.

Friend 1: OK, cool. I'll give him a call.

Andrew: So, in this conversation example, we heard two friends talking about what they are going to eat for dinner. They decided to order a pizza from Mario's, because Mario's is **hella** good. So that means it's very, very delicious. The pizza from Mario's pizza place is very delicious. Another way you could say that is it's **hella** good, **hella** good. We heard the speaker there say **hella** good, like, drawing it out, right? Emphasizing even strengthening the intensifier, even.

Jeremy: We have multiple versions, actually, of the word. We have **hella** and we have **hella**. Now we have **hella**, **hella** like almost adding a Y in there, H-Y-E-L-L. **Hella**, **hella** good. That emphasizes it even more.

Andrew: OK. Good to know. Let's take a listen to our final example here.

Jeremy: All right.

Friend 1: Which shirt do you like better? This brown one or the blue one? I don't know which one to get.

Friend 2: The blue one looks **hella** nice. If I were you, I'd get that one.

Friend 1: Yeah, I agree. All right, I'm gonna get it.

Friend 2: Good choice.

Jeremy: In this example, two friends talk about which shirt to buy. One friend says the shirt looks **hella** nice, which means that the shirt looks very, very nice.

Andrew: Perfect.

Andrew: All right, everyone, I think we will leave it here for today. Thank you for listening. We hope that you enjoyed this episode and learned something new.

Andrew: Don't forget that the study guide for this episode is available on our website, Culips.com. To download it, all you have to do is sign up to become a Culips member.

Andrew: We're all over the place on social media, and we'd appreciate it if you gave us a follow so that you could stay up to date with all of the comings and goings here at Culips. We're on Instagram, YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, just search for the Culips English Podcast and you'll be able to find us. And if you like Culips, please support us. You can support us by leaving us a five-star rating and a nice review wherever you get your podcasts or by becoming a Culips member. If you want to get in touch with us, our email address is contact@Culips.com. And we love hearing from you.

Andrew: That's it for us for now. We'll be back soon with another brand-new episode and we'll catch you then. Goodbye.

Jeremy: Have a **hella** good day, everyone.

Detailed Explanations

So [adjective], it hurts

Idiom

So [adjective], it hurts is another way over saying that something is overwhelmingly [adjective] or very [adjective]. So, if someone is **so pretty, it hurts**, it means that she person is very beautiful. Or if someone is **so successful, it hurts**, then that person is very successful.

Most native English speakers use this expression as a way to be overly dramatic, but in a funny way. They know that the thing isn't actually hurting them, but they are, in a way, overwhelmed by it.

In this episode, Andrew explains: "When you see something that's very cute, you get this physical sensation that's overwhelming ... You just have this intense ... Overwhelming reaction. You don't know what to do with that energy that you receive."

Here are a couple more examples with **so [adjective], it hurts**:

Ingrid: Have you seen Silvie and her new baby yet?

Rose: Not yet, but I'm going to visit her on the weekend. I saw pictures, though!

Ingrid: That little girl is **so cute, it hurts!**

Rose: I know, right? I just want to pinch her chubby little cheeks!

Baber: Yo, man! I watched the first episode last night. Dude, it was hilarious.

Yasin: Yes! That part where he avoided the banana peel and ended up slipping on the wrapper instead—**so funny, it actually hurts!**

Baber: I nearly died, man! I was laughing so hard that my girlfriend came in to make sure I wasn't choking on my chips.



Hella Slang

Hella is American slang that means extremely or very. As explained in this episode, **hella** is a shortened version of “hell of a.” The term started in San Francisco’s Hunters Point neighbourhood. It adds emphasis, much in the same that very, super, or really do when used in a sentence. “That’s **hella** expensive” is the same as saying, “That’s really expensive.”

Hella modifies or describes any part of speech—noun, adjective, adverb, or verb. Be careful, though, as the meaning does change depending on whether **hella** is used with an adjective or an adverb. When **hella** is an adjective (“We’ve got **hella** pizza” or “There are **hella** options”), it is a determiner and means a lot or a large amount.

Here are a couple more examples with **hella**:

Zackary: Having fun, man?

Ulrik: Dude, this party is **hella** chill. I didn’t know house parties were like this. I thought they were like what you see in the movies, all loud music and –

Zackary: Nah, that’s just Hollywood. Here, we keep it simple. We’d rather hang out than dance or whatever.

Ulrik: Well, I’m glad I came, man.

Tiffany: OK, I think I’m ready for my interview tomorrow.

Majda: Yeah, you are! You’ve got this. You’ll do great.

Tiffany: I hope so! I’m **hella** nervous, though. If I don’t get this job, I’ll be so upset. It’s my dream job!

Majda: You gotta have confidence, girl! They’re crazy if they don’t hire you!

Tiffany: Thanks, Majda. That helps. OK, I’ll rock this. I know it.

[Something] nerd

Noun

[Something] nerd is a term for someone who is an expert in a particular area or field. **[Something] nerds** enjoy learning and gathering new information about their subject of interest, but usually this information doesn't have any practical use. When someone is a **[something] nerd**, they don't need to use the information, they just like learning it. You could also use **geek** instead of **nerd**.

In this episode, Andrew calls Jeremy a **word geek** and a **word nerd**. This means that Jeremy really enjoys learning about words, what they mean, and how they're used. This knowledge isn't always practical. There aren't many situations, except maybe at Culips, where he can use his knowledge about words.

Here are a couple more examples with **[something] nerd**:

Katarina: I can't wait to see the new Jessica Chastain movie! I heard it's really good.

Riza: Ugh, no. Just no.

Katarina: What? Why not?

Riza: It's directed by Brett Ratner. I refuse to see his movies.

Katarina: Wow. I never knew you were such a **movie nerd**! Why don't you give it a chance? We're going on Friday night, come with us!

Riza: Nope. I haven't liked a single one of his movies and I doubt this will be any different.

Abbie: Oh! Wait, I want to read this plaque before we leave.

Sanjeev: I find it fascinating that you have to read every informational plaque we come across.

Abbie: What can I say? I'm a huge **history nerd**. I love learning about these little monuments and why they're here.

Sanjeev: To each their own, as they say. It's not like we're in a rush, so read away!

Secondhand embarrassment

Noun

Secondhand embarrassment is when you feel embarrassed for someone. A person with **secondhand embarrassment** feels as if they are doing the embarrassing action themselves. **Secondhand embarrassment** is also called **vicarious embarrassment** or **third-party embarrassment**.

You get **secondhand embarrassment** watching a movie, reading a book, listening to the radio, or watching someone. The other person's actions make you cringe. You feel like you need to leave the room because you're ashamed or embarrassed to see the other person fail.

Here are a couple more examples with **secondhand embarrassment**:

Phillipa: I feel so bad for Sarah. Her presentation today was so bad.

Florien: Same here. It seemed like she forgot half of it, then just ... Stumbled through the rest, making it up as she went.

Phillipa: I had so much **secondhand embarrassment** for her. It was like watching a train wreck.

Florien: It really was. I hope she's better prepared for the presentation next week.

Otis: Why did you stop reading?

Gabrielle: The character is acting like an idiot and doing something ridiculous. I couldn't stand it anymore.

Otis: Ah, you got **secondhand embarrassment**.

Gabrielle: Big time. Maybe I'll skip a few paragraphs and start reading again after the scene is done. But, for now, I need to cool off.

Breeding ground

Noun

A **breeding ground** is a place or situation that helps or allows something to grow or develop. A **breeding ground** is where new ideas, trends, and movements originate or start.

Usually the thing that is growing or developing is bad or unpleasant in some way. That isn't always the case, though. In this episode, for example, Andrew says "California is a **breeding ground** for new English expressions." New expressions aren't always bad, although some people may see slang as improper or unpleasant.

Here are a couple more examples with **breeding ground**:

Ji-U: Our bathroom really needs to be renovated. There's no air flow or fan or anything.

Gordana: Oh dear, that's the perfect **breeding ground** for black mold. That's gotta be a health risk or something. Have you talked to your landlord about it?

Ji-U: Yeah. They won't be able to fix it for a couple of months. They have other repairs on their schedule first. I wish I could do it myself.

Laura: As you can see, our company is the perfect **breeding ground** for innovation and change. We always strive to encourage creative, outside-the-box thinking in our staff so we can provide the best services to our customers.

Yoko: Yes, that's what drew me to your company. I'm always trying to find unique solutions to problems. I think that would make me a good fit for this job.

Laura: Well, we've got a lot to think about and will reach out in the coming weeks to let you know if you got the job. Thank you for coming in today.

Getting into [something] territory

Idiom

When you're **getting into [something] territory**, you're close to a situation that could be described with the adjective [something]. The most common version of this phrase is **getting into dangerous territory**. This means a person might say or do something that will have a bad result. The action hasn't happened yet, so the bad result may not even occur—but it's a possibility.

In this episode, Andrew says that “hell of a” is “**getting into that rude language territory**.” Saying “hell of a” could be considered rude by some people, even if you or others like you don't think it's rude language.

Here are a couple more examples with **getting into [something] territory**:

Haleema: I've been trying to help my coworker with her project management, but she doesn't want to follow any of my suggestions. I just wish she would.

Nina: Yikes, that's rough. But maybe you should just leave it alone. I mean, you're **getting into dangerous territory** there, trying to tell your coworker how to do her job.

Haleema: I know, I know. But if I don't do anything, our project will suffer. I need her to get her work done so I can do my work.

Rizwan: Do you know what Kit's plans are for the surprise party? Are we all meeting up at the park to go to the actual party together, or what?

Farrah: I'm not sure, you'll have to ask Kit.

Rizwan: She's not answering my texts. I was hoping you would know. Aren't you helping her organize this?

Farrah: Nope. That'd be **getting into party-planning territory** and I'm just not cut out for that kind of stuff. I'll ask her, though, since I should probably know the answer to that question, too.

Rizwan: Cool, let me know what she says.

Farrah: Will do!

Quiz

1. If you called someone a cheese nerd, what would that mean?

- a) they wear cheese as clothes
- b) they are very cheesy
- c) they know a lot about cheese
- d) they hate cheese

2. What do you call a place or situation that helps or allows something to grow or develop?

- a) dangerous territory
- b) home
- c) natural environment
- d) breeding ground

3. Which of the following words could replace “very” in a sentence?

- a) hello
- b) hella
- c) hero
- d) help

4. What does it mean when something is so awesome, it hurts?

- a) something is overwhelmingly awesome
- b) something is only a little awesome
- c) something is causing you pain
- d) something is not awesome at all

5. What is it called when you get embarrassed for someone?

- a) secondfoot embarrassment
- b) firsthand embarrassment
- c) secondhand embarrassment
- d) unreal embarrassment

Writing and Discussion Questions

1. Describe a conversation you've had recently when the two catch words—so [something], it hurts and hella—could have been used.
2. What topic, if any, are you a nerd about? Why?
3. Have you ever had secondhand embarrassment? If so, what happened and how did you handle the situation?
4. Think about your community or neighbourhood. What types of breeding grounds are there?
5. Was there ever a time when you felt you were getting into dangerous territory?

Quiz Answers

1.c 2.d 3.b 4.a 5.c

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