

Chatterbox #120 – Aleks: Part 1

Informal Contractions in this Episode

Informal contractions are unofficial short forms of other words, and they're usually only used in casual conversation. For example, when a native English speaker talks casually, they might say *gonna* instead of *going to*, or *whaddya* instead of *what do you*. Even though informal contractions are usually only used in spoken English, we include them in the Culips written transcripts to help you get used to how they're used and what they sound like.

These are the informal contractions used in today's episode, along with their meanings:

- **'cause**: because
- **gonna**: going to
- **wanna**: want to

Transcript

Harp: Hello everyone. This is Harp. And I'm here with my friend...

Aleksandra: Aleksandra!

Harp: Yes. And we're here at Culips bringing you another exciting episode. Make sure you check out our website, Culips.com, that's C-U-L-I-P-S.com, because there, you can sign up and become a member. And when you're a member, you have access to the Learning Materials, which include a complete transcript, detailed explanations, and even a quiz. Now today, we're doing a Chatterbox episode. And our Chatterbox episodes are where we chat. We've done topics where we interview people, and that's exactly what we're doing today. Today we're gonna talk to our friend—our new friend actually—and this is gonna be a bit interesting for all of you listeners, because I don't know anything about her yet, so why don't you introduce yourself?

Aleksandra: OK, well you already know my name, umm... It's Aleksandra. And in this part of the world, which is very far from where I come from, people call me Aleks. It is something that's absolutely unheard of in my home country of Serbia and in my hometown of Belgrade, where Aleks is a name reserved specifically and only for men and boys, so I had a bit of an identity change coming over to North America in the early '90s to do my studies in New York City, because everybody started calling me Aleks and that was both a paradigm shift and a personality changeover. But by now, I'm used to it. Umm... Difficult to describe myself and introduce myself in just a few words, but I'm a scientist by training and a creative personality by choice; a dancer, a writer, an educator, and I do a bit of work with physicians and researchers for a living. Montreal's my hometown, but to make it here I travelled a long ways, all the way from Belgrade, Serbia, then over to New York City and then to Copenhagen, Denmark, and then to Canada, Vancouver, and interior BC area. And subsequently to Toronto, Ontario; and then Kingston, Ontario; and then finally Montreal. Montreal's been my home for the past 8 years. Please do not calculate my age.

Harp: Wow. I have a lot of questions for you, Aleks. I like the name Aleks for a girl. I think it's quite cool.

Aleksandra: I think it sounds **sharp**.

Harp: Yeah, it's cool. OK, so, Serbia, Belgrade... Or Belgrade, Serbia. You grew up there?

Aleksandra: I grew up there. I actually spent exactly half of my life there. I keep thinking about it these days because it's an interesting **turning point**. I no longer know where is my home and where I really belong, because exactly half of my life has been spent in Belgrade and the other half in all the places that I listed for you, so...

Harp: Now, I'm not gonna ask your age, but this might give it a way a little bit. Did you go to university in Serbia, or did you leave when you started school?

Aleksandra: I completed my undergraduate studies in molecular biology and physiology at the University of Belgrade, and I left after I graduated to go to grad school in New York City.

Harp: Wow! Molecular biology and physiology? Very cool! And you did a master's degree in New York City?

Aleksandra: That's correct, yes.

Harp: Wow. So you were there for a couple of years, at least?

Aleksandra: I was there for a couple years and a couple months; couple years reserved for studying and a couple of months were reserved for a really large and really exciting cross-country trip. Umm... I thought it would be kind of indecent to have lived in only one city in the United States, a whole continent away from home, and not see the rest of the country. So when I completed my studies, I actually got myself a job as a bicycle messenger, one of those crazy people riding bicycles around Manhattan to...

Harp: Wow!

Aleksandra: To earn some money for the cross-country trip, which I then undertook with two close friends. And so we travelled for a couple months all the way to California and back, taking a different route.

Harp: So I imagine it was a road trip?

Aleksandra: It was a road trip and a camping trip.

Harp: Wow. Very cool. So you travelled all across the US. Which was your favourite part?

Aleksandra: The deserts. No doubt about it. You see the West Coast of the United States, and I would say British Columbia is much prettier. New Zealand is comparable; been there as well. But the deserts, specifically the so-called four corners: Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico. The deserts there are absolutely amazing, the whole entire landscape the colour of cinnamon, and incredible rock formations, and it's so different that you discover a whole new self under the stars and under the sky there. Definitely my number one favourite travel adventure.

Harp: Wow. So you camped in the desert?

Aleksandra: Yes. Yes, it was a summer trip, so camping was taking place in the desert and it was actually very, very, cold. Despite the fact that temperatures were going up to way over 40 degrees during the day, nights were very, very cold, **calling for** real down-filled sleeping bags and outfit—whole-body outfit.

Harp: OK. So it's true that the temperature changes drastically in the day in the desert.

Aleksandra: It does.

Harp: Wow. **K**, so then after the US, you went to Denmark?

Aleksandra: You got that!

Harp: You've travelled so many different places! I'm trying to keep up.

Aleksandra: I'm impressed. That was not a plan. So at the Rockefeller University in New York, I acquired a special skill, which is basically working with brain cells of newly born experimental animals. Brain cells do not divide after we are born, and after mammals are born. They simply just die off. But there is a way to actually grow them in vitro, meaning in a Petri dish, if they're isolated from the brains of really, really young newborn animals. And why would we wanna do such a horrible, cruel thing? Because that's the only way to test the mechanism of how certain drugs work. Before you ever test a drug working on a brain, you would wanna make it does something on cultured cells in controlled conditions. And this is a very, very difficult and a rare thing—nowadays not so much, but at the time it was a very rare thing—and I applied for a position at the Copenhagen University, where they needed somebody with that particular skill at the pharmacology department. And that sped up the process of me getting a work visa and I ended up in Copenhagen.

Harp: OK, so you were working there as a researcher?

Aleksandra: Yes. I was working there a researcher. And in the beginning, I was communicating with all my colleagues in English, because obviously all the academics are fluent in English. But I was compelled to get deeper into the society and expand my social circles, and decided to learn the language. Now that is by far the most interesting linguistic experience of my life, and probably one of the best accomplishments I've ever had that I can brag about. I learned Danish in exactly 4 months.

Harp: What?!

Aleksandra: There is a super special method to learn a new language. I think it's employed by some military departments around the world, but specifically in Copenhagen, they teach immigrants Danish using a system that requires you to invest about 15 hours a week. You go to school three times a week for 3 to 4 hours, and most of your time is actually spent doing homework. And your homework is much like a job of an actor. You go home every time after school with a homework to memorize 15 to 20 sentences.

Harp: OK...

Aleksandra: So in the course of a week, you would acquire a vocabulary of 45 to 50 full phrases—full sentences—and then you go onto the next week and the next week. And each sentence has 5 to 10 words. And to be proficient in a language, they say you need to know about 2000 to 3000 words. So if you do your math, you'll realize that in the course of 2 to 3 months, you will have acquired the vocabulary of a couple thousand words just by memorizing 15 or 20 phrases per class, *i.e.*, about 50 per week.

- Harp: Wow. That is really fascinating. I've never heard of this technique. Do you know what it's actually called?
- Aleksandra: I don't know what the technique is called, but the school is called **KISS, K-I-S-S**, and that stands for **Københavns Intensive SprogSkole—Copenhagen's Intensive Language School**. I probably used to know the name of the technique.
- Harp: We'll find it and we'll put it in the Learning Materials with this episode for sure, 'cause that's very fascinating. I'm sure a lot of our listeners are interested in that.
- Aleksandra: What's even more interesting is they start teaching you grammar at the end of 3 months.
- Harp: Really!?
- Aleksandra: At the end of 3 months, you have enough vocabulary and enough of a database of words and sentences—some of them are in the present tense, some in the future tense, some conditional, some in the past tense—that the grammatical patterns begin to emerge on their own, and then you just observe them, capture them, then encapsulate them into little roles and they sink in and they're integrated and memorized so quickly. It just cannot be compared with any other method of learning the language.
- Harp: This is the most interesting technique I've ever heard of. Wow, so in 4 months, you were fluent?
- Aleksandra: Absolutely fluent, in written and spoken Danish. And we're 17 years away from me living in Denmark; I still can read books in Danish. Danish and Norwegian are extremely similar. I would say more similar than Canadian and British English. And I tested my spoken skills with a Norwegian friend, and it's gotten a little **rusty**, but it's really coming back quickly.
- Harp: I am fascinated by that. Now, you brought up languages, so we're gonna take a little detour into that. Because growing up in Serbia, obviously your first language is Serbian, I'm assuming?
- Aleksandra: That is correct.
- Harp: So tell me about how many languages you speak now, because I'm counting three at least, but I know there're many more.
- Aleksandra: Well, the way I count languages, I would say I speak six. The way somebody else would count them, they could come up with even eight. The part of the world that I come from is actually filled with different dialects...

Harp: OK.

Aleksandra: Which are... Which have declared themselves to be completely autonomous languages. So what once used to be Serbian language is now Serbian, Croatian, Bosnian, Macedonian... They're extremely closely related languages and I have no better comparison than comparing Scottish English with Australian English. That's the degree of difference between the languages. So if we look at the Eastern European **slash** Slavic languages, then we can come up to four or five because Macedonian, Bulgarian, Serbian, Croatian, and Bosnian are all languages that I'm proficient in. Or we can just **boil them down to** two, most significantly different: Serbian and Macedonian, and add to that English, German, French, and Danish.

Harp: Where did the German come from?

Aleksandra: Oh, that's actually the first foreign language I started learning.

Harp: Wow! So interesting! I am very, very impressed with you. So did you start learning French when you moved to Montreal?

Aleksandra: Yes. I started learning French only 7 years ago when I came to Montreal, so it's the very first Latin language that I had any exposure to and everything else—German, English, Danish—they're somewhat related, actually, and then the Slavic languages are related.

Harp: Did you use the same technique for learning French that you did with Danish?

Aleksandra: I wish! I wish. I did not. I actually learned French at the YMCA here in Montreal, and I'm a really passionate phrase collector, so while I did not learn French or any other language using the same method as for Danish, I have, I feel, improved it significantly by using the phrases that I had diligently collected from both French French speakers and Quebecers.

Harp: OK, so now you're fully fluent, I imagine, now in French?

Aleksandra: I'm not as fluent as in English. I cannot joke in French and I definitely do not dream in French ever, ever.

Harp: What language do you dream in?

Aleksandra: Actually it goes between mostly English, but sometimes occasionally I would dream in Serbian as well.

Harp: Wow. I think you are the dream for everyone that's out there listening. They wanna speak English like you. They wanna speak other languages like you. You're the model student. 'Cause I... Seriously, when I met you, I knew that Serbian was your first language, and honestly, you speak English like a native speaker.

Aleksandra: I have only one comment to add to that. I would say it's a matter of feeling somewhat inadequate when one arrives to the English-speaking area, to a different continent, different country. And I arrived to the United States to go to graduate school. And I really felt compelled to—without comparing myself with people around me—catch up, in a way. And I think I may have at some point over-compensated somewhere, to the point that I actually started writing short fiction in English, and then I started doing some technical and medical writing as part of my job, part of what I do for a living. And because it's never been a habit to compare myself to others, I may have actually pushed the limits of my criteria for learning the language a little beyond what's considered the average.

Harp: Yep. I think you're definitely past average. I would have never used the word *average* to describe you.

Aleksandra: Thanks, Harp.

Harp: OK. So, I wanna continue on to your movements. How long did you live in Denmark for?

Aleksandra: I was in Denmark for 2 and a half years.

Harp: OK, and then from there you went to Vancouver?

Aleksandra: That is true. And that was not just **a leap of faith**. It was a love story that took me from Denmark to Vancouver, and then it actually ended up being a double love story, because while it was somebody that I loved and followed to Canada that took me there for a honeymoon, I actually fell in love with Vancouver itself once I landed there. And I knew **in my heart of hearts** that there was no going back.

Harp: OK. It's a beautiful city.

Aleksandra: It's a beautiful city. British Columbia is beautiful province. And I just really truly knew. It was one of those aha eureka moments when you knew you were in the right place at the right time. And I'm not very proud to admit this to whoever's listening to this podcast, but I actually never returned to Denmark afterwards. I resigned my job and my husband at the time travelled back to pack up all our belongings, and the move happened right after the honeymoon.

Harp: Oh, wow. It was quite a love affair with Vancouver.

Aleksandra: It was indeed. It was actually a love affair with the mountains, above all.

Harp: Wow. I want to hear more about your time in BC, and about how you ended up here in Montreal! But for now, I think we should end it here, and we'll come back again next week with a second part of this interview. Thank you so much for joining us!

Aleksandra: It's been such a pleasure.

Harp: And remember, the second part of this interview will be coming next week, so be sure to check that out! I'm sure that all our listeners out there are gonna have a lot of questions, because you've had a fascinating story that you've told us. And I know that I have more questions that I can't even think of because every way your story goes, it's interesting! I'm gonna say that you're probably gonna be asked to come back from our listeners. It's gonna be our fan demand for you. But thank you so much for joining us. And now, everyone, don't forget to check out the website, Culips.com, C-U-L-I-P-S.com. And check us out on Facebook, where we'll post a picture of Aleks. Thanks everyone! Bye.

Detailed Explanation

Sharp

Sharp is a word that normally means having a thin or pointy edge that can be used to cut something. But in this episode, Aleksandra says that she thinks her name sounds **sharp**. When used this way, the word **sharp** means refined, simple, clean, and stylish. Both ways of using the word imply that something is tidy, distinct, and clearly defined.

Here's another example with **sharp** used the way it's used in this episode:

Chipan: Why are you all dressed up?

Rosi: I have a job interview. Do I look OK?

Chipan: Yeah! I've never seen you in a suit! You look **sharp**.

Rosi: Really? Thank you.

A turning point

A turning point is an experience or event that causes a sudden change in the direction that a process has taken so far. In this episode, Aleksandra uses the expression **a turning point** to talk about her thoughts about growing up in Serbia and then leaving Serbia. She says that leaving Serbia was an interesting **turning point** in her life, meaning that leaving Serbia created a sudden change or turn in her life, and that everything was different after that.

Here's another example with **a turning point**:

Praphruet: Have you chosen your courses for next year yet?

Tati: Yes! And they're all science courses.

Praphruet: Science? But you're an art major!

Tati: I know. But when I took an art preservation course last semester, it was kind of **a turning point** for me. I really loved the science aspect of preserving art more than I loved making art.

Praphruet: Wow! It sounds like you've discovered what you want to do with your life! Congratulations!

To call for something

To call for something means to require, need, or depend on something. For example, a recipe may **call for** eggs, or a school course may **call for** a prerequisite. In this episode, Aleksandra tells us that the cold nights in the desert **called for** a warm sleeping bag and warm clothes.

Here's another example with **to call for something**:

Turbat: I'm so excited for our trip. Have you packed yet?

Michiyo: Not yet. I'm not sure how to pack because I haven't figured out what the weather will be like when we get there.

Turbat: Well, it's supposed to rain for part of it, and then it's going to be dry but still cold.

Michiyo: I guess that **calls for** a new raincoat. I'll have to go shopping before I pack!

I.e.

The abbreviation **i.e.** is short for **id est**, which is a Latin phrase meaning *in other words, in essence, or that is*. **i.e.** is used to clarify something previously said. In this episode, Aleksandra uses **i.e.** before summing up the number of Danish phrases she learned in a week at her Danish language school. Aleksandra first talks about how many Danish classes she took per week, and then tells us how many phrases she learned per class. She then uses **i.e.** to clarify how many phrases she learned per week, so that we can better understand what she means.

i.e. was originally intended for written English only, as a grammatical note or annotation, but it has now become popular in spoken English too.

Here's another example with **i.e.**:

Uriel: Do you want to come to the mall with me after work?

Louise: I'd love to, but my parents asked me to babysit my little brother; **i.e.**, to sit around the house and do nothing while he plays videogames all night.

Uriel: Oh, that's too bad. I can wait until tomorrow to go if you want to come with me.

Louise: Really? That would be awesome! I'll come tomorrow for sure.

The Københavns Intensive SprogSkole (KISS)

In this episode, Aleksandra talks about the **Københavns Intensive SprogSkole** (called **KISS** for short) in Copenhagen, where she learned to speak Danish, and how efficient it is in teaching Danish in such a short period of time. The technique this school uses is specific to the school and specific to learning Danish. The method uses forced memorization and is very difficult and intensive. The method is even patented, and the patent belongs to the school, so the method is not used anywhere else.

KISS is the school the military uses for teaching Danish. Preferred methods of learning languages vary by military and by language, but the ones that militaries use are preferred by many language learners because they are proven to be the most effective and help you to learn a language in the shortest period of time.

Because languages are so different from each other, there is no single method that works best for learning all of them. There's a lot of debate about which methods work best, and sometimes it depends on the student's background, age, and desire to learn. Other times, it depends on the language itself. There's no single right way to learn a language, but the method used by **KISS** seems to be the one that works best for acquiring the Danish language in many people's opinions.

Rusty

Rust is a reddish brown substance that forms on certain types of metal when it's exposed to air or moisture over a long period of time. Something that is literally **rusty** has rust on it, like an old metal bicycle left outside for many years.

But we can also say that something like a skill or ability is **rusty**, meaning that it hasn't been used for a while and is in need of work or practice.

Here's another example with **rusty** used in this way:

Vitor: A group of us are going skiing this weekend, do you want to come?

Wahyu: Oh, it's been a long time. My skiing is probably a bit **rusty**. I'd just slow you down.

Vitor: Oh, no. That's fine. We have all sorts of ability levels coming. You'll fit right in.

Wahyu: Really? That's great. I'd love to come.

K

K is often used casually as a short form of **OK**, which means all right, I approve, or I understand. Sometimes these words are spelled **kay** and **okay** instead.

English speakers use short forms quite frequently, and short forms are even more common since texting has become popular.

Here's another example with **K**:

Ryoichi: It's been so good to see you. We should meet up for coffee more often.

Tu: For sure! I should get going though. I have to feed my dogs at home.

Ryoichi: All right. Can you call me when you get home so I know you arrived safely? The roads are a bit slippery tonight.

Tu: **K**. Talk to you soon.

Slash

In this episode, Aleksandra uses the word **slash** when she talks about Eastern European and Slavic languages. Like *i.e.*, **slash** is the spoken form of a punctuation mark or grammatical annotation that's traditionally only written. A **slash** is a punctuation mark that signifies alternatives or divisions, written as "/." This punctuation mark is used between two comparable or similar terms, or when two terms are almost synonyms for each other. The way Aleksandra uses **slash** in this episode means *otherwise known as*, or *or*.

Here's another example with **slash** used this way:

Satoru: We should invite your friends over for dinner this weekend.

Jenny: That would be fun. I love parties!

Satoru: Well, it wouldn't really be a party. More like a small get-together.

Jenny: Well whatever it is, it sounds fun. When do you want to have this party **slash** get-together?

Satoru: Sunday works best for me if that's fine with everyone else.

Jenny: Sounds good. I'll ask them.

To boil down to something

To boil down to something means *to amount to* or *to end up as something*. In the literal sense, when a liquid is boiled down, it loses volume through the process of evaporation, which is when hot water turns into a gas and goes into the air. When you boil something watery, such as stew or soup, the liquid evaporates and separates from the main part of the stew, leaving the stew thicker and richer. Similarly, when you **boil down** an idea or experience, it means you get down to the most basic, substantial, or important part of it.

To boil something down can also mean to reduce it to a summarization or a shortened version, the way that a liquid is reduced when you boil it.

Here's another example with **to boil down to something**:

Sandegh: Have they hired a replacement technician yet?

Bundha: No. But they have two candidates they're trying to decide between. I guess it's taking them awhile.

Sandegh: Are they both good candidates?

Bundha: Yeah. They're both capable of doing the job. I think it'll **boil down to** who fits in better with the people who already work here, so the boss is taking both of them around to meet the staff.

Sandegh: It sounds like a tough decision!

A leap of faith

A leap of faith is the act of believing, trusting in, or accepting something even though you have no evidence for it or experience with it. When you take **a leap of faith**, you are taking a risk, because you don't have any guarantees that what you're doing will be successful, but you are choosing to believe that everything will be fine.

In this episode, Aleksandra tells us that moving to Vancouver wasn't just **a leap of faith**; she had a good reason to believe that it was a good idea, because she went there for her honeymoon and fell in love with the city. So she already knew she loved it when she decided to move there.

Here's another example with **a leap of faith**:

Hazem: Have you tried that new restaurant around the corner yet?

Yufu: No. I've never tried Ethiopian food before, and I'm not sure I'll like it.

Hazem: I took **a leap of faith** that I'd like it. I'd never tried it before either, but my brother loved it, and we generally agree about food.

Yufu: Yeah, and I usually agree with your food choices too, so maybe I'll try it out this week!

To know something in your heart of hearts

To know something in your heart of hearts means to know something with great certainty because you feel it very deeply. When we talk about knowing something in our hearts, it means we feel a personal knowledge of something through our emotions, even if we don't have actual learned knowledge or education about it. Knowing something in your heart is a feeling or intuition you get, rather than a logical conclusion you reach through education or rational thought. So if you **know something in your heart of hearts**, it means you know it very, very deep down in your emotions or conscience. This expression is a way of emphasizing your emotional feeling or intuition about something.

Here's another example with **to know something in your heart of hearts**:

Wanju: I'm really sorry that you and Maria are no longer friends. Nazlene told me what happened.

Ajisai: Yeah. I sort of knew it might end up like this. I tried really hard to save the friendship, but **I knew in my heart of hearts** that no amount of trying would help, and that things had just changed between us. I just didn't want to admit it.

Wanju: Well, it's hard to let go of these things, even when you know you should. Let's go for coffee and we can talk about it some more.

Ajisai: I'd like that. Thank you.

Quiz

1. **If someone tells you that your new haircut looks sharp, what are they saying?**
 - a) They think you should get a new hairdresser.
 - b) They think your haircut looks stylish and neat.
 - c) They're afraid your hair might cut them.
 - d) They liked your old haircut better.

2. **What is a turning point?**
 - a) the time it takes to get from failure to success
 - b) a point in your life when you must choose between three options
 - c) the temperature at which water boils
 - d) a point in time when a very significant change occurs

3. **If the instruction manual for your new couch calls for a hammer, what does that mean?**
 - a) A hammer is not necessary to build the couch.
 - b) You need a hammer to build the couch.
 - c) A hammer should be nowhere near you when you build the couch.
 - d) A hammer should have been included in the packaging of the couch.

4. **If you learned to play the piano when you were younger, but haven't practiced in a long time, your ability to play is probably _____.**

Fill in the blank.

- a) a little under the weather
 - b) a bit rusty
 - c) still very good
 - d) sort of out of line

5. **K is a short form of _____.**

Fill in the blank.

- a) OK
 - b) king
 - c) fine
 - d) oakey

6. When someone uses the word *slash* between two terms, what does it mean?
- a) The two terms are complete opposites.
 - b) Neither term is appropriate in the sentence.
 - c) The two terms are comparable or alternatives.
 - d) The terms should probably be replaced with another word.
7. If you agree to or decide on something because of instinct or belief rather than experience or evidence, you take a leap of _____.

Fill in the blank.

- a) adventure
 - b) honesty
 - c) love
 - d) faith
8. If you boil something down, what do you do?
- a) keep the unimportant parts of it
 - b) change your mind about it
 - c) decide on it even though you have no knowledge of it
 - d) summarize or get to the important part of it

Answers:

1.b 2.d 3.b 4.b 5.a 6.c 7.d 8.d