Hello. I'm Daniel Brint. Welcome to the Upper Street TODAY language talk, a weekly podcast about English language, expressions, idioms and any other topics of interest inspired by TODAY's subject.

February 22 is Be Humble Day. People across the world, irrespective of their religion, culture, and philosophy come together and stress the importance of being humble. Many great personalities say that humility is the most difficult of all virtues to attain. Either way, Be Humble Day focuses on the importance of being humble.

Sounds good. But the use of the word humble says a lot about how problematic the concept is once it is applied to behaviour and values. On the one hand, humility – at least as a general concept – is taken as a positive thing, but maybe because it implies a disagreeable opposite – being vain, proud, feeling superior, showing off, for example. But thinking it's good not to be those things is not always the same as thinking it's good to be humble. It's a matter of self-perception and social context. If you have great competence in a skill, is it necessary to act as though you don't? It's tricky. Perhaps if we go back to the word's origins we can map its meaning with some more insights. Humble derives from the Latin humilis which means literally on the ground. So humilis is derived from humus, or earth. That's a really good starting point. After all, the only way is up from there. It's also where food comes. And I think that's the beginning of the complications. Being humble is often associated with class. The farmer, those who work the land, who have their feet firmly on the ground are supposed to inherit humility from their station. In 14th C French the word comes to mean 'lowly in kind, state, condition, or amount and of persons of low birth or rank.' So, a definite social element is introduced into how the term is understood. It becomes a definition of deference to and respect for those higher up the scale. At the same time, at the other end of the ladder, the idea of *noblesse oblige* seems to require humility at this other end. Shakespeare points out the twisted nature of this in his sonnet 154 in appropriately twisted syntax: 'They that have power to hurt, and will do none, That do not do the thing they most do show.' Or, to give another example, Golda Meir is said to have commented to a colleague, 'don't be humble – you're not that great.'

And perhaps because the word is problematic, it tends to appear in certain fixed expressions or collocations. These include 'my 'humble abode' to describe where you live. For a long time, correspondence could be signed off by saying 'I remain your humble servant.' 'In my humble opinion,' concedes to the opinion of others, and 'humble beginnings' contrasts where someone began their life to where they ended up.

Yet all those expressions have the potential for irony, or even a lack of humility. You might actually be very proud of your humble abode or certain your humble opinion is correct, even if you audience are the kind who need to feel they are cleverer than you. And that's why the falsely humble character in books and films is so fascinating. Someone who has occupied a lowly position, who is humble – on the surface – but actually has deep resentments and plans for revenge. One of the greatest examples of this characters is Dickens' Uriah Heep in David Copperfield. Dickens' brilliance is evident in the way his character evolves from a deferential, rather creepy comic persona to a calculating and dangerous adversary, so in a way, we as readers experience the sense of underestimating someone because they give the impression of being humble. The following extract is when David first gets to know Uriah:

I suppose you are quite a great lawyer?' I said, after looking at him for some time.

'Me, Master Copperfield?' said Uriah. 'Oh, no! I'm a very umble person.'

'I am well aware that I am the umblest person going,' said Uriah Heep, modestly; 'let the other be where he may. My mother is likewise a very umble person. We live in a numble abode, Master Copperfield, but have much to be thankful for. My father's former calling was umble. He was a sexton.'

'What is he now?' I asked.

'He is a partaker of glory at present, Master Copperfield,' said Uriah Heep. 'But we have much to be thankful for. How much have I to be thankful for in living with Mr. Wickfield!'

'I have been with him, going on four year, Master Copperfield,' said Uriah; shutting up his book, after carefully marking the place where he had left off. 'Since a year after my father's death. How much have I to be thankful for, in that!

'Mother will be expecting me,' he said, referring to a pale, inexpressive-faced watch in his pocket, 'and getting uneasy; for though we are very umble, Master Copperfield, we are much attached to one another. If you would come and see us, any afternoon, and take a cup of tea at our lowly dwelling, mother would be as proud of your company as I should be.'

I like to think Heep is also trying to trick Dickens. One critic has observed that Dickens is constantly in competition with his characters, that he, the writer and creator is, of course, the most important person in the books. He forms characters who take on such power in the narrative that they threaten to be more important than Dickens, so he has to control them through the narrative. Maybe Heep is just playing a long game – he wants to assume a major role without Dickens realizing his error in allowing him to do it.

The humble as a group, by the way, sounds very odd. Tasked with translating the Bible into English, the writers used the word 'meek,' which is why the quotation assures us that 'The meek shall inherit the earth.' So, there's the good news. I remember this biblical quotation written on the wall of the politics department at university. When I went past a few days later it seems someone had decided a bit of Uriah Heep was needed as it now read: The meek shall inherit the earth – um, as long as that's ok with everyone else.'

I hope you have enjoyed this week's humble Upper Street podcast.

I hope you'll join me again next week,

Thank you