



“Can you repeat that?” 6 Tips to Reduce Our Frustration with Accents

By Dr. Maura Cullen

Recently I found myself on the phone for over 55 minutes dealing with "customer service" for a problem with a product I purchased. During this very frustrating period I spoke with two different agents, both of whom spoke with an accent, which made it challenging for me to understand what they were saying. As the conversation progressed I often found myself asking the agent to repeat what he had just said and reminded myself that my Boston accent was probably no easy task for him to decipher either. Now, for those of you who have spent time trying to get assistance from a real live human being over the phone, it can be a lesson in patience and persistence. By the time you have actually connected with someone you are already annoyed for having pressed forty three buttons just to be placed on hold for what seems to be an eternity. When you finally get to speak to a human, the last thing you want to do is to let them go and start the entire process over. With this in mind, the agent and I both muddled through for as long as we could. In the end, I asked to speak with another agent and was connected to a person with a similar accent to the person with whom I had just spoken. Either I was experiencing some karmic payback or there was a very good chance that the call center was in another country.

Later, I reflected on what had taken place, am I racist because I was frustrated at not being able to understand the agent and asked to be transferred to someone else? Would others judge me to be racist or ethnocentric? Or, is it okay just to be frustrated and not have to make it bigger than that?

Not understanding someone's accent does not make you racist. However, too often our frustration of other people's accents gives way to racial or ethnic stereotypes which reveal racist attitudes and beliefs. Such statements as, "If they are going to live here they should learn the language", or "They should go back to their own country" are comments said out of frustration yet have racial undertones. Two thoughts on these comments;

First, it is always helpful for people who reside in the United States to learn English. However, this doesn't happen overnight and even when they learn English they will still speak with an accent. The irony is that many Americans can only speak one language and the people they are ridiculing are usually multi-lingual. Yet the racial/ethnic underlying assumption is that they must be stupid because they can't speak English or they speak with an accent. Second, with the exception of Native Americans, we are a nation of immigrants. At some point some other group was directing that very statement to your ethnic or racial group. The following are six helpful guidelines to keep in mind when speaking with people whose accent is different from your own.

1. **REMEMBER WE ALL HAVE ACCENTS.** Who has an accent is relative depending on who is doing the speaking, with whom and where. Accents are not limited to people from other countries. Even here in the United States there are very clear geographic accents. For instance, when I conduct speaking seminars, once I travel outside of Massachusetts, I am the one with the accent. People say they love my Boston accent and they request that I say, "I parked my car in Harvard yard". I am asked this quite a bit because saying those words magnifies my accent. I always find this annoying. They however, find it humorous.

I find it odd that some accents are more appealing than others. Many Anglo-Americans tend to enjoy listening to people with British and French accents and are usually annoyed with Spanish and Indian accents. I am unsure if there is a correlation between the accents we find acceptable and race, but it is a fair question to ask. Also, the more you engage the person, the more familiar you become with their accent and the easier it is to understand what the other is saying. Yet many of us tend to avoid

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people whose accent is difficult for us to understand. Perhaps it is uncomfortable for us or it takes too much time and energy so it is easier just to avoid interacting. Thus, we do not create the time needed to forge a meaningful exchange.

2. **BE PATIENT.** Both people engaged in the conversation want to have a successful exchange. It's okay if you let them know that you are having difficulty in understanding them and would appreciate if they could repeat themselves in order for you to understand better. If you do experience frustration, take a deep breath to calm yourself. It is important to make the distinction between being frustrated at the situation and being frustrated with the person.

3. **CREATE A CLIMATE OF MUTUAL RESPECT.** Assessing someone's intention and attitude happens very quickly. Taking the time and effort to create a comfortable and respectable climate will make a connection less challenging. Kindness is always appreciated.

4. **AVOID SLANG.** Americans have a love affair for slang and use it more than we realize. For people whose native language is not English this may add to their confusion. If you do use slang, explain it to the other person as it will increase their English speaking competency.

5. **SPEAK SLOWER NOT LOUDER.** At times our frustration may have us speaking much louder than our usual conversation level. This will not result in having the person understand you any better, in fact, it can be upsetting. People who are multi-lingual need time to translate the conversation they are having with you in English to their native language. Speaking slower gives them time for this transition.

6. **LEARN THEIR NAME.** The most important word for every person regardless of their language is their name. Yet one of the most challenging parts of communicating across accents is pronouncing names. Both people engaged in the conversation may have names that are not common in the other person's culture. As a result, many of us pretend we understand by nodding our heads, but never use their given name ever again and use the default setting of, "Hi, how's it going?". At this point we may assign them a nickname for the sake of our convenience. Learning people's name is vitally important. It is perfectly acceptable to ask them to repeat their name, but please remember that they are probably asked this quite often so if you notice some frustration, be patient. You may even ask them to spell it if it is an appropriate setting so that you have it for future reference. Personally, I write down the name as I hear it phonetically.

Today's global economy has us interacting and doing business with people from all over the world. Often we find ourselves interacting with people whose first language is not English and our communications and interpersonal skills may be tested. It is beneficial for us to fine tune our skills in order to have successful interactions both personally and professionally.

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