



Leif Parsons for NPR

## Tower Of Babble Nonnative Speakers Navigate The World Of 'Good' And 'Bad' English

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Picture this: A group of nonnative English speakers is in a room. There are people from Germany, Singapore, South Korea, Nigeria and France. They're having a great time speaking to each other in English, and communication is smooth.

And then an American walks into the room. The American speaks quickly, using esoteric jargon ("let's take a holistic approach") and sports idioms ("you hit it out of the park!"). [And the conversation trickles to a halt.](#)

Decades of research show that when a native English speaker enters a conversation among nonnative speakers, understanding goes down. Global communication specialist [Heather Hansen](#) tells us that's because the native speaker doesn't know how to do what nonnative speakers do naturally: speak in ways that are accessible to everyone, using simple words and phrases.

And yet, as Hansen points out, this more accessible way of speaking is often called "bad English." There are whole industries devoted to "correcting" English that doesn't sound like it came from a native British or American speaker. Try Googling "how to get rid of my accent," and see how many ads pop up. It turns out that these definitions of "good" and "bad" English may be counterproductive if our goal is to communicate as effectively as possible.

### Dreams dashed by the English proficiency test

Daiva Repečkaitė, a Lithuanian journalist based in Malta, started learning English in primary school and used it daily for a semester abroad in Sweden. Despite her wide English-language experience — articles, talks, a radio show she co-hosted and more — she says, "There are countless jobs I didn't apply for because they required native English [speakers]."

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"Proper" English can be used to shut people out of spaces and opportunities, Repečkaitė says. While volunteering at the African Refugee Development Center in Tel Aviv, Israel, she helped a Sudanese refugee prepare for the TOEFL (Test of English as a Foreign Language) — an English-proficiency standardized exam that stood between him and his dream to go to an Israeli university.

According to Repečkaitė, the student was fluent (English was his country's colonial language), but he didn't pass on his first attempt. How can a person fluent in English fail TOEFL? There are a few reasons, she says.

One, the test requires writing an argumentative essay — "a very specific genre," Repečkaitė explained, that requires knowledge of specific writing conventions and linking words like "moreover" that are rare in other contexts.

The test also requires making a clear choice between British and American spelling and vocabulary. That "can trip up people whose English comes from various sources" — say, a third from British textbooks and two-thirds from American movies, Repečkaitė said.

Ultimately, Repečkaitė said, the test does not simply measure communication skills. "I knew and made it very clear to him that TOEFL is not about English. It is a gatekeeping tool to enter middle-class spaces." "Good English" (and the educational resources, like tutoring, needed to acquire it) is tied to class status; it functions as a barrier to success that not everyone can pass.

Repečkaitė's story might help us understand why it's important to rethink how we judge English. She fears that obstacles like the English-proficiency test keep competent students and professionals from opportunities they deserve — to the detriment of everyone.

"As the pandemic rages," she said, "I worry that there might be countless refugee doctors and nurses who just haven't read enough Shakespeare or haven't practiced enough multiple-choice, fill-in exercises to pass these tests in English-speaking countries." Especially at a time when the burden of COVID-19 weighs heavily on the world, Repečkaitė says, we all suffer when skilled professionals like doctors are prevented from helping people.

### **The good, the bad and the judgy**

As for those who do make it into the professional English-speaking world, they can expect a fairly steady line of corrections, criticisms and sometimes downright mockery of how they speak.

Néstor Rodríguez, a professor of Latin American literature at the University of Toronto, says he struggled with English when he first came to the U.S. to study. Originally from the Dominican Republic and having lived for some time in Puerto Rico, Rodríguez says English-as-a-second-language lessons along with a survival instinct helped him eventually be "able to communicate with a certain degree of fluency and spontaneity."

When he started as a professor in Toronto, he faced criticism and ridicule from his colleagues. "I remember quite vividly," he said, "when about 10 years ago, I had to chair the dissertation defense of a student from the department of English." At one point, Rodríguez asked the group, "Does anybody else want to intervene?"

"Professor C leaned back in his chair and repeated in a dramatic mock British accent, '*Intervene!*'" The professor was drawing attention to Rodríguez's way of pronouncing the word.

Rodríguez says he "had an utopian idea of the university as a space for constructive debates and respect among peers" and was disappointed and shocked to be mocked by a colleague in this setting. When he looks back, Rodríguez says, he sees this moment as "another example of microaggression based on my accent."

In the moment, he didn't react. "I was young and still believed in the redemptive power of nonviolent goodwill."

"Nowadays," Rodríguez notes, "I would have filed a grievance against [this professor] so heavy that he would have had to sell his soul to remain employed."

There's a line between being a language bully (as in the case of Professor C) and being a native English speaker who is an ally. Many nonnative speakers report feeling supported when they are corrected in the spirit of friendship by co-workers.

Sophia Krasikov, who came to the United States from Russia at age 38, was in the position of learning much of her English on the job when she started working at IBM.

She recalls one moment when she made an English mistake in front of her colleagues: "We were rolling out a new software, and in a big development meeting I kept referring to it as 'Virgin 1.1.' A colleague came to my office and said, 'Sophia, it's 'Version 1.1.' "

She says that she felt grateful for this correction, which was made with respect and helpfulness in mind. "The fact that my American colleague took the time to help me express my ideas made me feel that what I had to say was valued and that they wanted to include me in the conversation." Here, tone, purpose and, importantly, whether corrections are welcome make all the difference.

### **Filing a (language) complaint**

Research shows that it's not just judgment and ridicule from native English speakers that impede communication. It's also their unconscious use of esoteric idioms and unnecessarily confusing vocabulary that makes language less accessible.

Ting Gong is a management consultant in Washington, D.C., who grew up in Shanghai and moved to the U.S. in her 20s. She ran up against this issue of confusing vocabulary at the dermatologist one day. "The receptionist gave me a sheet and asked me to write down my complaint," she said. "I told her that I did not have any complaint, and she looked kind of irritated and then she insisted that I wrote down anything that I can think of."

Only later that day did Gong understand what the receptionist had meant. "After I got home, I realized that 'complaints' here refer to symptoms I have. And because I only realized this after I spoke to my husband, when I got home, I actually wrote down 'the receptionist was not friendly' as one of my complaints."

### **A guide for native speakers**

So what can we do to improve communication between native and nonnative English speakers?

Hansen, who has spent years as a communication specialist studying this question, says the onus shouldn't be on nonnative speakers but rather on native English speakers to improve their comprehension of accents different from their own.

Take a page out of nonnative speakers' book, says Hansen, by modifying your English to be more inclusive. That means no more confusing idioms, jargon and sports references, so no "touching base on improving synergy with your teammates."

Another suggestion from Hansen: Instead of policing others' accents, native English speakers can focus on changing their own enunciation to be more understandable. For example, [research shows](#) that clearly enunciating hard "t" and "r" sounds in your speech makes it easier for nonnative English speakers to understand you.

If you're a native English speaker who's up to the task, small adjustments like these might allow you to join in on conversations with nonnative speakers instead of inhibiting them. Take Joseph Issam Harb, the son of two

immigrants who was raised in the United States and Abu Dhabi, United Arab Emirates. Having lived, at different points in his life, in the U.S., the U.K. and the UAE, he says, "I am still learning about English from nonnative speakers."

"In email, I've discovered the phrase [commonly used by some nonnative speakers] 'please do the needful,' " Harb said. "For years I have been fascinated by this phrase and its use in formal work environment emails." Discovering the phrase and wondering about the origins of the phrase, which means "please do what needs to be done," has been a joy for Harb. "I haven't yet encountered a person who can tell me, 'Yeah, if you translate that directly, it's a common phrase in my language.' "

English cultivated among nonnative speakers can include useful modifications and creative new turns of phrase. Harb referred to the greeting "Hello, mamsir," often used by English-speaking Philippine service workers, which is the literal repetition of the scripted "Hello, ma'am/sir" — a quick, respectful and gender-neutral way to address someone.

According to Hansen, if we'd like to facilitate better global communication, then supposedly "bad" English — that's more universally understandable to more people — is a valuable tool. Respecting the value that nonnative English brings to conversation, instead of treating it as a thing to be corrected, could help us all become better communicators.

*This article was written in collaboration with Rough Translation, a podcast from NPR whose mission is to "follow familiar conversations into unfamiliar territory." Rough Translation's episode, "How to Speak Bad English," is out now. The podcast is available from [NPR One](#), [Apple Podcasts](#), [Google Podcasts](#), [Pocket Casts](#), [Spotify](#) and [RSS](#).*