

## The AI start-up erasing call-centre-worker accents: is it fighting bias – or perpetuating it?

Level 1: Elementary / Pre-Intermediate

### 1 Warmer

a. Complete the table. The first letters of the missing words are given.

American	British
1. gas	p_____
2. s_____	football
3. fall	a_____
4. c_____	biscuit
5. elevator	l_____

### 2 Key words

a. Fill the gaps in the sentences using these key words from the text.

software      frustrated      call centre      Westerner      transform

1. A \_\_\_\_\_ is a place where a large number of people talk to customers by telephone, either to sell something or to answer questions.
2. A \_\_\_\_\_ is someone from Western Europe or the United States.
3. \_\_\_\_\_ is a program used by computers for doing a particular job.
4. If you \_\_\_\_\_ something, you make it completely different.
5. A \_\_\_\_\_ person is annoyed and impatient.

abuse      training      flat      mimic      salary

6. If you \_\_\_\_\_ someone, you copy the way they speak or move.
7. \_\_\_\_\_ is when you teach someone to do any activity as part of their job.
8. Your \_\_\_\_\_ is the pay you receive for your work.
9. If people \_\_\_\_\_ someone, they speak to them in an angry, rude way.
10. A \_\_\_\_\_ tone of voice does not go up or down.

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- 1 “Hi, good morning. I’m calling from Bangalore, India.” I’m talking on the phone to a man with a strong Indian accent. He pauses. “Now I have turned on the accent translation,” he says. It’s the same person, but he sounds completely different: like the accents of my friends in New York.
- 2 The man calling me was a manager from Sanas, a company that’s building technology to help call-centre workers around the world sound like Westerners. Accents are a constant problem for millions of call-centre workers, especially in the Philippines and India.
- 3 Sanas hopes its software can provide a solution. It can transform a speaker’s accent into another one – and make non-Americans sound like white Americans.
- 4 Sharath Narayana of Sanas said “If a customer is upset about a high bill or their phone not working, they’re going to be frustrated when they hear an accent. They’re going to say, I want to talk to somebody in America. The agents just don’t get respect from the beginning. But if we can just change that, it’s a conversation – and people both leave the call feeling better.”
- 5 Narayana said about 1,000 call centre workers in the Philippines and India are using their software every day. Feedback has been positive: Narayana says agents feel more confident on the phone when using the software.
- 6 Aneesh has spent years studying call centres and accents. In 2007, he worked at a call centre in India. “They want Americans to understand them,” he said. Workers had to relearn the pronunciation of words such as “laboratory”, which Indians pronounce with stress on the second syllable. They also had to learn American words. “They have to mimic the culture,” Aneesh said. “Training is very hard.”
- 7 In addition to the low salary, Aneesh said one of the most difficult parts of the job was being forced to sleep all day and work all night to adapt to times in the United States.
- 8 He has mixed feelings about Sanas. “In a sense, it’s a good thing for the trainee: there is less training. It’s not very easy when people don’t understand you because of your accent. And people sometimes abuse you. But, as a sociologist, I think it’s a problem.”
- 9 I emailed a sound demo of Sanas’s technology to Aneesh. “Hearing it, I realized that there was a bit of emotion and politeness in the original caller’s voice,” he replied. The digital version sounds a bit robotic, flat and neutral”.

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### 3 Comprehension check

a. Answer the questions using information from the article.

1. What happened to the man's accent when he turned on the accent translation?
2. What are a constant problem for millions of call-centre workers?
3. What does the Sanas software do?
4. What often happens on call-centre calls when a customer hears a foreign accent?
5. How many call-centre workers are using the Sanas software?
6. In which countries do these call-centre workers work?
7. Why did the workers in Aneesh's call centre have to relearn the word *laboratory*?
8. Apart from the low salary, what, according to Aneesh, was one of the most difficult parts of the call-centre job?
9. What does he think about Sanas?
10. How did the digital version sound to Aneesh?

### 4 Key language

a. Put these words from the text into two groups according to their syllable stress.

accent      constant      upset (adj)      agent      pronounce      trainee  
abuse      demo      mimic      transform      respect      feedback (n)

A      0 o	B      o 0

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### 5 Discussion

- a. Do you agree with this statement? Why? Why not?
- “Good pronunciation is really important.”

### 6 In your own words

- a. Enter ‘English words that are difficult to pronounce’ into an internet search engine. Find five interesting (and useful) words that are difficult to pronounce. Check the meaning of the words in an online dictionary.
- b. Share your words and their pronunciation with the class.