

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

Level 3: Advanced

1 Warmer

a. These words normally have a different syllable stress in British and American English. Decide whether the pronunciation indicated by the bold, underlined syllable in each case is the British or the American pronunciation. How is each word stressed in the other variety of English?

1. laboratory
2. brochure
3. address
4. vaccine
5. garage
6. advertisement

2 Key words

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

| | | | | |
|-------|----------------|----------|--------|-------|
| abuse | brunt | diminish | hurdle | mimic |
| nasal | neutralization | shortcut | taxing | thick |

1. If someone has a _____ accent, it sounds as if they are speaking through their nose.
2. A _____ is one of several problems you must solve before you can do something successfully.
3. _____ is the process of stopping something from having any effect.
4. A _____ is a way of doing something that is quicker and shorter than the usual way.
5. The _____ is the worst part of something that has a bad effect.
6. If something is _____, it is difficult and needs a lot of physical or mental effort.
7. A _____ accent shows very clearly that the speaker comes from a particular place because of the way their words sound.

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8. If you _____ someone's voice or behaviour, you try to copy it.
9. If you _____ someone, you speak to them in an angry, offensive way.
10. To _____ means *to make something become less*.

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A Silicon Valley start-up offers voice-altering tech to call-centre workers

Wilfred Chan

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- 1 “Hi, good morning. I’m calling in from Bangalore, India.” I’m talking on speakerphone to a man with an obvious Indian accent. He pauses. “Now I have enabled the accent translation,” he says. It’s the same person, but he sounds completely different: loud and slightly nasal, impossible to distinguish from the accents of my friends in Brooklyn.
- 2 The man calling me was a product manager from Sanas, a Silicon Valley start-up that’s building real-time voice-altering technology that aims to help call-centre workers around the world sound like Westerners. Accents are a constant hurdle for millions of call-centre workers, especially in countries like the Philippines and India, where an entire “accent neutralization” industry tries to train workers to sound more like the western customers they’re calling – often unsuccessfully.
- 3 Sanas hopes its technology can provide a shortcut. Using data about the sounds of different accents and how they correspond to each other, Sanas’s AI engine can transform a speaker’s accent into what passes for another one – and right now, the focus is on making non-Americans sound like white Americans.
- 4 Sharath Keshava Narayana, a Sanas co-founder, told me his motivation for the software dated back to 2003, when he started working at a call centre in Bangalore, faced discrimination for his Indian accent and was forced to call himself “Nathan”.
- 5 “If a customer is upset about their bill being high or their cable not working or their phone not working or whatever, they’re generally going to be frustrated as soon as they hear an accent. They’re going to say, ‘I want to talk to somebody in America.’ The call centres don’t route calls back to America, so now the brunt of that is being handled by the agent. They just don’t get the respect that they deserve right from the beginning. But if we can just eliminate the fact that there’s that bias, now it’s a conversation – and people both leave the call feeling better.”
- 6 Narayana said their software is already being used every day by about 1,000 call-centre workers in the Philippines and India. User feedback has apparently been positive: Narayana claims agents have said they feel more confident on the phone when using the software.
- 7 A Aneesh, a sociologist, has spent years studying call centres and accent neutralization. In 2007, as part of his research, he worked as a telemarketer in India.
- 8 At the call centre, he witnessed how his colleagues were put through a taxing process to change their accents. “The goal is to be comprehensible to the other side,” he said. “The neutralization training that they were doing was just reducing slightly the thickness of regional accents within India to allow this thing to happen.” Workers had to relearn pronunciations of words such as “laboratory”, which Indians pronounce with the British stress on the second syllable. They also had to eliminate parts of Indian English and learn uniquely American words. “They have to mimic the culture as well as neutralize their own culture,” Aneesh said. “Training takes a lot out of you.”
- 9 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. It also isolated workers from the rest of society.
- 10 These are all inequalities that call-centre employers hope to conceal. Even the way callers are connected to each other is completely computerized and designed to maximize profit.
- 11 The sociologist has mixed feelings about Sanas. “In a sense, it’s a good thing for the trainee: they don’t have to be trained as much. It’s not very easy for an immigrant or foreigner sitting somewhere else in the world to be not understood because of their accent. And they sometimes get abused. But in the long view, as a sociologist, it’s a problem.”

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- 12 The danger, Aneesh said, was that artificially neutralizing accents represented a kind of “indifference to difference”, which diminishes the humanity of the person on the other end of the phone. “It allows us to avoid social reality, which is that you are two human beings on the same planet, that you have obligations to each other. It’s pointing to a lonelier future.”
- 13 I emailed a sound demo of Sanas’s technology to Aneesh to get his reaction. “Hearing it closely, I realized that there was a hint of emotion and politeness in the original caller’s voice,” he replied. That was gone in the digitally transformed version, “which 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 kind of technology has Sanas developed?
2. Why are accents a problem for millions of call-centre workers?
3. Why did Sharath Narayana have to call himself “Nathan”?
4. What happens when some American callers hear an accent?
5. According to user feedback, how do some agents feel when they use the software?
6. What, according to A Aneesh, was the goal of the neutralization training?
7. Apart from the low salary, what other problem do Indian call-centre workers face?
8. What is the problem for Indian English speakers with the word ‘laboratory’?
9. What does A Aneesh think of Sanas?
10. How did he react to the sound demo the author of the article emailed to him?

4 Key language

a. Match the verbs in the left-hand column with the nouns or noun phrases in the right-hand column.

- | | |
|-------------|---------------------------|
| 1. maximize | a. the brunt of something |
| 2. enable | b. discrimination |
| 3. bear | c. profit |
| 4. deserve | d. your accent |
| 5. face | e. a software program |
| 6. change | f. respect |

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5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- “An American accent is easier to understand and imitate than a British accent.”
- “Working in a call centre must be the worst job in the world.”
- “It is important to be comprehensible, not to sound American or British.”

6 In your own words

- a. Open an internet search engine. Find information about different varieties of English in the UK, particularly the different accents. Find out which are the most popular, which the least popular, and why. How does the number of accents in the UK compare with the number of different accents in your language?
- b. Report your findings to the class.