

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

Level 2: Intermediate

1 Warmer

- a. Five of these ten words are typically American and five are British. Which are which? What are their equivalents in the other variety of English?

sidewalk	tap (n)	appetizer	gas	postcode
the fall (n)	handbag	cashpoint	biscuit	potato chips

British English	American English



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2 Key words

a. Find the following words in the text. The paragraph numbers are given to help you.

1. (of an accent) an adjective meaning *sounding as if you are speaking through your nose*
_____ (paragraph 1)
2. a verb meaning *make something different* _____ (paragraph 2)
3. a noun meaning *one of several problems you must solve before you can do something successfully* _____ (paragraph 2)
4. an adjective meaning *feeling annoyed and impatient because you are prevented from achieving something* _____ (paragraph 5)
5. a verb meaning *see something happen* _____ (paragraph 8)
6. a verb meaning *stop something from having any effect* _____ (paragraph 8)
7. a verb meaning *copy someone's voice or behaviour* _____ (paragraph 8)
8. a verb meaning *speak to someone in an angry, offensive way* _____ (paragraph 10)
9. a verb meaning *make something less or smaller* _____ (paragraph 11)
10. an adjective meaning *spoken in a tone of voice that does not go up or down*
_____ (paragraph 12)

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- 1 “Hi, good morning. I’m calling from Bangalore, India.” I’m talking on the phone 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, like the accents of my friends in Brooklyn.
- 2 The man calling me was a product manager from Sanas, a company 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.
- 3 Sanas hopes its technology can provide a solution. Sanas’s software can transform a speaker’s accent into 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 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 the respect that they deserve right from the beginning. But if we can just change that, it becomes 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 been positive: Narayana says agents feel more confident on the phone when using the software.
- 7 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 the hard work involved in changing people’s accents. “The goal is to be understood by the Americans,” he said. 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 is hard work.”
- 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.
- 10 He has mixed feelings about Sanas. “On the one hand, 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 on the other hand, in the long view, as a sociologist, it’s a problem.”
- 11 The danger, Aneesh said, was that artificially neutralizing accents 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. It’s pointing to a lonelier future.”
- 12 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. Are these statements True (T) or False (F) according to the article? Correct any that are false.

1. The accent-translation software changes the speaker's accent.
2. The Sanas software makes call-centre workers sound American.
3. Sharath Narayana's real name is Nathan.
4. Call-centre workers in India and the Philippines are already using this software.
5. Feedback from users has been mostly negative.
6. A Aneesh used to work in a call centre.
7. Workers in the call centre where he worked had to pronounce certain words with a British accent.
8. Aneesh says that the time difference between India and the USA made life difficult for the workers.
9. He doesn't like Sanas at all.
10. He thinks that Sanas makes the speaker sound more polite.

4 Key language

a. Match the words in the left-hand column with those in the right-hand column to make expressions from the text.

- | | |
|------------|-------------|
| 1. product | a. centre |
| 2. call | b. reality |
| 3. real | c. feedback |
| 4. user | d. feelings |
| 5. social | e. manager |
| 6. mixed | f. time |

5 Discussion

a. Discuss these statements.

- "A foreign accent is a good thing. It means you speak at least two languages."
- "The most important thing is to be understood."

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6 In your own words

- a. The article refers to the pronunciation of *laboratory*, pronounced differently in British English and American English. However, even within the UK and the US there are many English accents. Additionally, there are many countries with first-language English speakers, e.g., Jamaica, Barbados, Nigeria, India, Australia, New Zealand, Trinidad and Tobago, Republic of South Africa, etc.. Pick one of those accents. Use an internet search engine to find out some differences between this accent and the Received Pronunciation (or 'standard British English') that is the phonemic script used in all British English dictionaries. Find examples of the same words pronounced differently.
- b. Report your findings to the class.