

Want to understand accented speakers better? Practice, practice, practice

April 3 2019, by Melissa Michaud Baese-Berk

If the goal is to communicate, why should the speaker bear all the burden?

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Conversation is at the heart of people's lives. We use language to communicate our hopes and dreams to our closest friends, to ask for help from colleagues at work and to describe our ailments to medical professionals. Typically this process of communication goes fairly smoothly.

But there are circumstances that can make communication even between two healthy adults more challenging – consider the native language

background of the two participants. It's commonly understood that [non-native speech is harder to understand](#) than native [speech](#), and this challenge [can result in communication failures](#).

As a [linguist and cognitive scientist](#), I'm interested in the half of the conversation equation that often gets overlooked: the native listener. Given that, worldwide, there are [more non-native speakers of English](#) than [native speakers](#), this is an especially interesting topic to consider here in the United States.

What did you say?

Communicative efficiency, or the time it takes to complete a task through conversation, is [delayed when speakers do not share](#) a language background.

There are several reasons why non-native speech is more challenging for a native listener to understand than speech from another [native speaker](#).

Researchers know, for example, that listeners are [better at understanding a familiar talker](#) than an unfamiliar talker, regardless of language background. It makes sense that people get to know the specific properties of those they interact with frequently and over time improve at understanding them.

It's also clear that non-native speech deviates from native speech on a variety of dimensions, ranging from [how single sounds are produced](#) to [speaking rate](#). All of these acoustic qualities can make non-native speech more challenging for native listeners to understand. It's similar to how other types of listening challenges can affect perception – think about the difficulties of listening to [speech at a noisy cocktail party](#).

Conversations have two participants

Typically, in conversations between native and non-native speakers, the burden of success of the conversation is placed on the non-native [speaker](#). But in conversation it takes two to tango.

Some studies suggest, in fact, that listeners are bringing more to the conversation you might assume. Yes, non-native speech is acoustically different than native speech, but a variety of other social factors can affect how non-native speech is understood.

For instance, expectations influence speech perception. Imagine hearing a word where part of the sound is covered up by some other noise – like "*ate" where the star represents a consonant sound covered up by the sound of a cough. You might have a challenging time figuring out what the word is. Is it gate? Date? Bait? Or something else all together?

But now, imagine you hear the same phrase in the sentence "Please check the latch on the *ate." As a listener, you'd logically fill that in with a "g" to complete the word "gate." However, if you hear the same acoustic signal in a sentence like "Please check the time and the *ate," you'd be more likely to hear that sound as a "d" to fill in the word "date."

In addition to linguistic expectations, social expectations also affect perception. That is, if you think the speaker is likely to be an accented speaker, your perception of the speech you hear may shift.

Using a technique called "matched-guise," researchers play the same speech [for listeners in two conditions](#) – one in which the speech is paired with a static image of an Asian face and another in which the speech is paired with a white face.

When the speech is paired with a Standard American English-accented voice, individuals perceive the speech to be more accented when paired

with the Asian face than the white face, and listeners are less able to accurately transcribe what the speaker says. Interestingly, when the speech is Chinese-accented, listeners show a benefit when the speech is paired with an Asian face – that is, listeners are better at perception [when the accent and the face "match."](#)

Taken together, these results suggest that individuals use their social expectations when listening to non-native speech. Some recent studies have even demonstrated that a good predictor of how well listeners feel they perform on the task of transcribing non-native speech is their [attitudes toward non-native speakers](#), rather than their actual transcription accuracy.

Beefing up your listening skills

Since listeners bring so much of their own experience to the table during communication, I suggest it's unfair to place the entire burden of communication on the non-native speaker. If that's the case, what can the native listener do to improve communication outcomes?

The answer is easy: Practice!

Recent research suggests that native listeners [can improve their ability to understand](#) speech with relatively little exposure. In lab-based studies, listeners practice transcribing non-native speech. Individuals who partake in this practice, improve their ability to understand a new accented talker as compared to listeners who did not.

This benefit exists [within individual accents and across accents](#), given sufficient exposure to a variety of talkers. If a native English [listener](#) spends some time listening to Mandarin- and French-accented English, not only will she get better at understanding speakers from China, France and Thailand, but the effect seems to extend to those from Guatamala,

Korea and Russia. Researchers, including me, are still investigating the exact mechanisms that underlie this adaptation. Psycholinguists are also working on deriving other cognitive science-driven tools to help native and non-native listeners communicate more successfully.

The number of non-native speakers of English is [growing in the United States](#); at the same time, their proficiency in English is also growing every year. Rather than placing the burden solely on the individuals who are already working to learn a language, native listeners can share this challenge, and work to improve their own perceptual abilities.

A little practice can go a long way toward making communications smoother and more pleasant for all parties, and improved communicative efficiency can have implications for business and political negotiations in addition to everyday personal interactions.

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