

Are the French lousy at languages? Not if there's noise!

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It is often said that the French have poor English skills. But according to a study conducted by a CNRS researcher (along with colleagues in the Netherlands, Finland and UK), when it comes to processing English

spoken in a noisy environment like a café or a restaurant, the French have nothing to be ashamed of.

For their investigation, the researchers asked people with good English skills to listen for certain sounds at the beginning of words heard against a noisy background. With their 90 percent success rate, the French did not disappoint, closely tailing native English speakers (92 percent).

They came in ahead of the Finnish (89 percent) and the Dutch (85 percent), though their languages are more similar to English. How well participants performed reveals their ability to detect sentence accent, relying on cues that are either "local" (energy and duration of sounds) or "distributed" (sentence melody). The study data show that the participants mostly used the type of cue typical of their mother tongues—namely, local cues for English and Dutch speakers and distributed cues for speakers of Finnish. In contrast, the French, who have a reputation for being numb to accentuation, seem to make use of both kinds of cues.

More information: Odette Scharenborg et al. Cross-linguistic Influences on Sentence Accent Detection in Background Noise, *Language and Speech* (2019). [DOI: 10.1177/0023830918819573](https://doi.org/10.1177/0023830918819573)

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