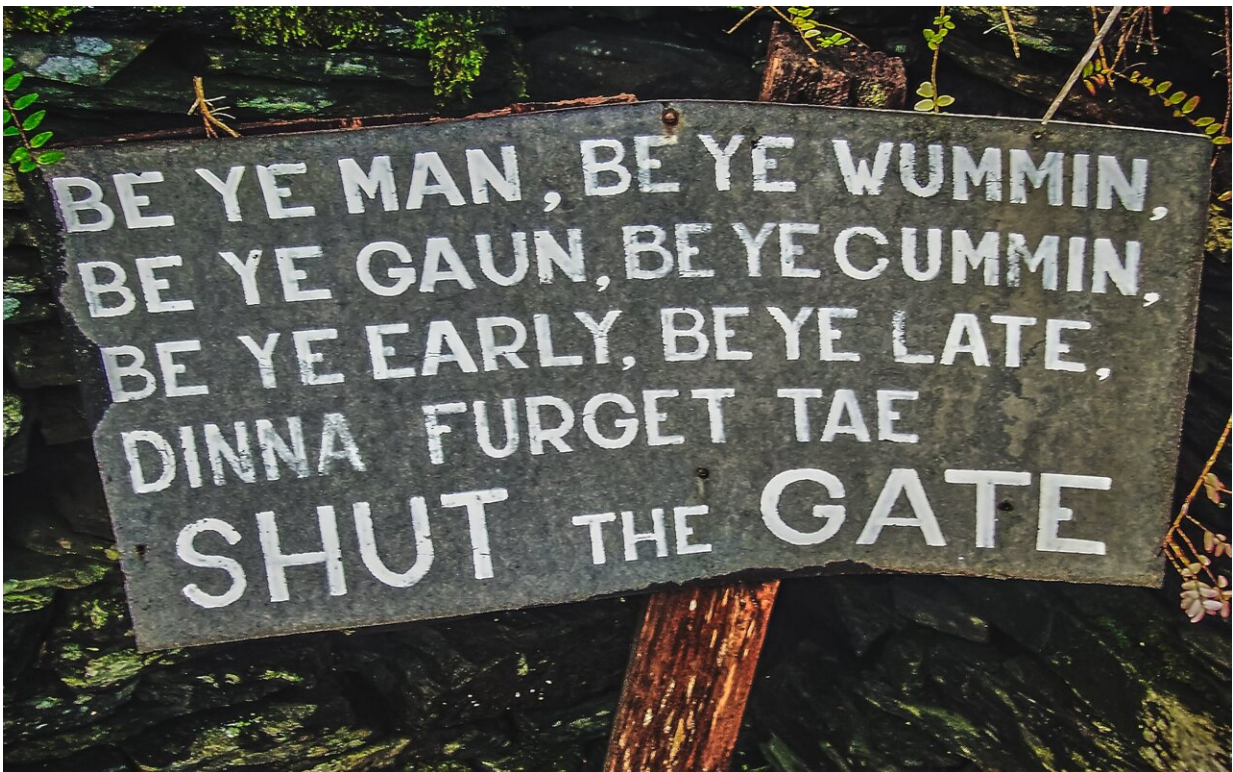


# Understanding all kinds of English accents can improve empathy and learning—and even be a matter of life and death

November 4 2023, by Alexander Baratta

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In a [2019 sketch](#) from the US late-night comedy show Saturday Night Live (SNL), the actor James McAvoy plays a Scottish air traffic controller attempting to help a US brand integration manager (Mikey

Day) land a plane in distress, because the pilot has been knocked unconscious. The fact that Day's character is not a pilot only partly explains why the mayday call is not a success. McAvoy lays on thick Glaswegian, in both accent and vocab, and none of the Americans on board understand a word he says.

Airline safety is just one area of work where hazards in miscommunication are important to recognize. Research has long shown that communication issues are a chief cause of [airline crashes](#). The SNL [sketch](#) neatly illustrates the potential problems that can arise when people don't understand each other's accents.

Such a lack of understanding can often lead to what linguists term "accentism," or accent-based prejudice. This typically sees the listener who doesn't understand effectively blame the speaker for their accent.

But my research [shows](#) there is no accent, whether used by a native speaker of English or a non-native speaker, that is inherently easy or difficult to comprehend. Rather, it is [the lack of exposure](#) people have to a variety of accents that can cause communication difficulties. This is relevant wherever safety, but also empathy and learning, are central.

## Miscommunications in the air

[Aviation English](#) refers to the variety of English used between those flying the plane and those on the ground: [air traffic control](#). Given its status as the global language, pilots are required to maintain a certain level of English to fly planes.

According to [SKYbrary](#), a website dedicated to providing information on air safety, 80% of airline incidents and accidents are caused by pilots and [air traffic controllers](#) not understanding each other.

The International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO) requires aviation personnel to "use an accent which is intelligible to the aeronautical community." This implies that accents which are more familiar to people, such as [Received Pronunciation](#) (RP), are broadly understood, whereas accents tied to Liverpool or Glasgow, for example, [are less so](#).

But I have shown that no combination of vowel and consonant sounds is inherently difficult to understand. Rather, the degree to which someone is familiar with an accent will dictate how much they understand. It is a matter of accent exposure.

Within aviation, there are specific guidelines that actually contravene the idea that pilots and air traffic controllers should use familiar accents such as RP. According to the [Aviation Accents](#) training program, which specializes in exposing airline personnel to audio clips of a vast array of accents, English contains sounds that do not exist in many other languages or that speakers of many other languages often find difficult.

The ICAO therefore recommends pilots say "tree" instead of "three," for example, because the English "th" sound does not exist in many other languages and can be difficult to pronounce. Similarly, people whose [native languages](#) do not differentiate between "l" and "r" sounds can have difficulty pronouncing English words such as "runway."

## **Exposure to accents in the wider world of work**

This potential for miscommunication has been shown to be [just as clear](#) among native English speakers too. The words "hot" and "hat" said in a strong Chicago accent sound, to a British-English ear, like "hat" and "he-yut," respectively. But if a British person spends a good amount of time in Chicago, they won't find this confusing.

RP and [General American](#) have long been perceived as "traditional"

accents. Historically—and still today—this kind of perception has led native English speakers to [change their accents](#) to improve their social mobility.

As a result, there is ample evidence that [accent](#) discrimination remains rife within the fields of teaching, banking, publishing and more. People are [judged](#) as not being "right" for the job.

However, [research increasingly shows](#) that, with greater exposure to other accents, people's perception can adapt. This in turn can lead to better understanding.

In professions where not only safety but empathy are central, native English speakers will benefit from widening their own linguistic nets and becoming more proficient with the [vast array](#) of non-standard English [accents](#) out there. A global language, after all, will have global accents.

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