

What Is an Accent?

An accent, whether foreign or regional, is pronunciation that sets a speaker apart from others. A *foreign accent* sets a foreign-born speaker apart from native speakers of a language. Although there is nothing inherently negative about a foreign accent, it can work to a speaker's disadvantage when it impacts effective communication.

Sound substitution

An accent is a natural consequence of our ears being accustomed to the sounds, stress, rhythm, and intonation of our native language. When another language has a sound similar to one in our own language, our "default" sound is typically the sound we're accustomed to pronouncing. Although this alone may not make it difficult to understand our pronunciation, to the ear of a native speaker it sounds different. For example, English uses "th" sounds that are not used in every language. To a German speaker, the closest sound may be a [t] sound, so he may pronounce *thigh* like *tie*. In some cases, such as this one, another English word results. Context will often be in your favor, but regardless, some listeners may not understand what you intend to say.

Misplaced stress or intonation

Unfamiliarity with syllable and word stress in English can result in stress indicative of a different emotion or message than the one intended. Using upward or downward intonation when the reverse is appropriate can alter meaning. Changing the downward intonation in *You're going to town* to upward intonation forms the question *You're going to town?* Likewise, stressing a function word (e.g., article, preposition, conjunction) instead of a content word (e.g., noun, verb, adjective) can change the meaning of a sentence. For example, stressing *to* in the phrase *going to town*, where normally *going* and *town* would be stressed, emphasizes the direction instead of the destination.

Boiling it down

A "strong" or "thick" accent results when multiple substitutions occur. You may be able to gauge the strength of your accent by how often people ask you to repeat yourself. A young professional who participated in one of our training programs told of an instance when he had trouble communicating over the phone and needed to go to a colleague's office in an adjacent building in order to be understood. Imagine how his pronunciation affected his productivity.

There's nothing wrong with having an accent. In fact, many accents are considered charming, even romantic. But if your pronunciation hinders your ability to communicate with customer service personnel or colleagues and supervisors, you may wish to evaluate the consequences in both your personal and professional life.

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