

I'LL NEVER GET USED TO THE INDIAN ACCENT

It's common for US software types (and most Americans, for that matter) to struggle with the Indian accent. There are three reasons for this:

1. Indians speak British English. Actually, they speak Indian English, but it's closer to British English than to American. So even if you did understand the accent, you still wouldn't understand a lot of the expressions (just as you wouldn't if you went to London). So it's not *just* the accent.
2. Indians speak with an Indian accent (actually, with one of *several* Indian accents, depending in what their native dialect is). Many Americans can actually understand British English fairly well—when it's spoken by someone from Great Britain. But the combination of the Indian accent and some unfamiliar expressions makes Indian speakers hard to follow.
3. Indians speak fast. A LOT of Indians in the software world are natives of Tamil Nadu (Madras/Chennai is the capital city) who speak the local language (Tamil) as their mother tongue. Tamil is spoken VERY FAST and has in fact been clocked as one of the world's fastest languages. So when native Tamil speakers speak in another language, such as English, they are inclined to speak very fast.

The combination of British English, the Indian accent, and fast talkers makes Indians hard for a lot of Americans to understand. And it's worse if the conversation is taking place over the telephone and you can't see the other person.

What can Americans and Indians do about this? First of all, Americans should relax: it will get better. The first few times you hear another accent, you can't imagine you'll ever get used to it. But over time, some of these strange sounds actually do resolve themselves into words, and you begin to understand more and more. How long should this take? It depends on how often you hear Indian English, but after one or two months of once- or twice-a-day contact you will see an improvement.

Meanwhile, ask Indians to slow down and repeat what they have said. You may be reluctant for fear of offending, but you can always say: "You probably don't understand me when I talk fast either." Which is quite true, by the way. If it's appropriate, have the person write down or spell out the word or phrase you're having trouble understanding.

If it's a phone conversation and you're not sure what was said, ask the person to send a follow-up email summarizing the discussion (though this won't help you much with the conversation as it's unfolding).

What can Indians do? First of all, you can consciously try to speak more slowly. You can also ask Americans if they understood what you said or if the listener would like you to repeat. Americans may be embarrassed to ask you to repeat,

for fear of causing offense, but if you offer to repeat, they may gratefully accept.

If you're an Indian living in America and want to improve your accent, the best thing you can do is listen more to the radio (but not TV, by the way) to expose yourself to American English and the American accent as much as possible. If you're *very* serious about losing your Indian accent, tape radio broadcasts, play the tape back, and practice imitating the announcer.

In the end, both sides need to be patient: Americans do get used to the Indian accent over time, and Indians living in America do begin to lose their accent. Meanwhile, Americans should remember that Indians also have a hard time understanding them and may want to slow down their speech and use fewer idioms.

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