



Speaking in Accents

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Indian Summers is a British television miniseries set in India in the 1930s. It presents a fictionalized version of true events in the waning years of British rule. Several characters are Indians who play leading roles in the story. They all speak English fluently, but with a strong Indian accent. This accent was a defining characteristic of the many Indians who migrated to Britain after the Second World War.

When I read up on the miniseries, I learned that those Indian characters were played by English actors of Indian descent who were born in the UK or had lived there for many years and who spoke perfect English with no Indian accent at all. They looked Indian but sounded English, a common disconnect that happens in migrant communities of all races all over the world. I was reminded of a man I once stood next to in a pub in Hampstead in the mid-1960s. His skin was black and his features suggested he might be from central Africa. But when he opened his mouth, he spoke with a most beautiful Scottish accent. I was new to the sort of melting pot experience that Britain was going through at the time, and it took me a moment to understand the cultural phenomenon I was witnessing. Something similar happened to me many years later in a small town in central Mexico. A woman at a stall in the market was amazed to hear me speaking fluent Spanish and said, “But you look like a gringo!”

In the performance of their roles as Indians in this miniseries, the actors were imitating the accent they had probably heard from their parents or grandparents while growing up in English neighbourhoods and attending English schools. The Indian migrants’ distinctive way of speaking English was considered amusing by the Brits and was mimicked for comic effect by entertainers such as Peter Sellers. I once witnessed another incident that gave me insight into the cultural ramifications of this linguistic twist. I was on a train in the late 1990s traveling from London to Birmingham. As we arrived at each stop along the way, a message was played over the public address system in

every carriage, announcing the name of the station and other relevant details. The messages had, for reasons best known to British Rail, been recorded by a man who spoke with a marked Indian accent. The carriage I was riding in was empty except for myself and four teenagers, all of whom were wearing the uniform of a private school. Like the actors mentioned above, they looked Indian but sounded English, and I assumed they were all British born. They were clearly friends and were engaged in animated conversation. But when the announcements were played, they all burst out laughing. They did so at every station and obviously thought the announcer’s way of speaking was very funny. They were not mocking it, not being unkind; they were just highly amused. I surmised that it reminded them of their grandfathers or someone in their family or community who had migrated to England at some point and spoke English as Indians usually did when they first arrived.

Like other countries, England is a patchwork of accents. Every region, every county—every valley in some cases—has its own particular way of speaking. People are identified by their accent and can be placed to within a few miles of their home by someone with a discerning ear. Regional rivalries of different kinds can create divisions between people from one part of the country and those from another, and accents can play a part in these competitive relationships. In the musical *My Fair Lady* there is a line that makes that very point: “An Englishman’s way of speaking absolutely classifies him. The moment he talks, he makes some other Englishman despise him.”

We all speak with an accent of some kind, and the more obscure examples provide valuable clues to linguistic anthropologists. In most languages, after a time, the version spoken in the major urban centre is accepted as the standard for the rest of the country. In England, that means the King’s English as spoken on the BBC. Fair enough, but for those who have a playful relationship with language, accents of all kinds are a joy to the ear.