

Opinion **Work & Careers**

How native English speakers can stop confusing everyone else

Do not beat about the bush with idioms when it comes to making your meaning clear

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A character played by Doon Mackichan signs up to English as a foreign language classes in Channel 4's 'Smack the Pony' © Channel 4

Michael Skapinker DECEMBER 3 2019

From 1999 until 2003, the UK's Channel 4 screened an Emmy award-winning female-led comedy series called *Smack the Pony*. In one sketch a woman called Jackie O'Farrell (played by Doon Mackichan) marches into an adult education centre somewhere in England, sits down and tries to register for a course in speaking English as a foreign language.

But you already speak English, the puzzled course organiser (played by Sally Phillips) says. "I only speak English English," Jackie replies. "I don't know how to speak it as a foreign language." She travels a lot, she says. "Foreign people can't understand a word I'm saying."

Hilarious, except that Jackie was ahead of her time. It is now widely recognised that many people don't understand what native English speakers are saying. Widely recognised by non-native English speakers that is. The Brits, Americans, Australians and others who have been speaking English all their lives are largely oblivious to the incomprehension they leave behind at conferences, business meetings and on conference calls.

"The CEO gave me the most almighty bollocking," I heard a British speaker tell a conference in Berlin a few years back. "I spent time at London Business School cutting my teeth," I heard another Brit tell a room full of Dutch, French and German speakers in Amsterdam this year. "From the horse's mouth," yet another UK speaker proclaimed to a conference I went to in Dubai last month.

I don't know what the audiences made of all this. A 2015 survey of a Nato working group tactfully observed that “native speakers of English are not always good at adjusting their English to the manner and level that is used”.

Regular readers of this column know that I have been exercised by native English speaker ignorance on this issue for years. There are thousands of courses, books and videos on how to be a better communicator, but almost nothing on how native speakers should speak English to foreigners, largely because, like the *Smack the Pony* course organiser, most native anglophones don't realise they have a problem.

So I was pleased to be sent a pocket book (where I found the Nato study) called *Is That Clear: Effective Communications in a Multilingual World* by Zanne Gaynor and Kathryn Alevizos, two teachers of business English. They describe the book as “easy-to-follow tips for adapting your English”.

As well as telling native speakers to slow down when they speak to international audiences, Gaynor and Alevizos have advice on two issues I have addressed before: [avoiding idiomatic language](#) and being careful with the use of [phrasal verbs](#) — a verb plus a preposition — which many non-native speakers find hard to understand.

Different prepositions can change the verb's meaning — break in, break up, break down. The authors also point out that the same phrasal verb can have different meanings: put someone down, put down a deposit, put down the cat, put the baby down.

They add other pieces of advice. I have written about the problems that [colloquial language](#) can cause non-native speakers: “shall we crack on then?” But the authors point to the confusion that polite language can cause too — “to be honest, I was a bit upset he arrived so late” sounds convoluted to a non-native speaker. “I was angry he was late” is clearer.

Another issue is the phrasing of questions. “You don't have time for a quick chat, do you?” is tough for a non-native speaker because it starts with a negative. “Do you have time for a chat?” is clearer.

The authors advise cutting down on “filler words” such as “as it were”, “actually” and “basically” because they cloud the central message. I am not sure about this. I find filler words helpful when I hear them used in other languages, such as *finalement* in French. Not only do they slow the speaker down; having heard them often I can also use them myself when I speak, which gives me more time to think of what to say next.

But the authors do have sound advice on slides. Don't fill slides with words. Native speakers find them hard enough to read; second language speakers find them even harder. But do put numbers on slides, they say. Numbers can be hard to understand in your second language and seeing the figures on a slide makes it easier.

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Letter in response to this article:

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