

Indo-Aryan Accents In English



Peggy Tharpe

Indo-Aryan Accents In English



If you speak an [Indo-Aryan language](#) like Hindi, Urdu, Bengali, Nepali, Sinhala, or Divehi, you may be using its “sound system” when you speak English. There are some English consonants that you must learn to pronounce and remember to use. Most of your work will be on stress patterns and rhythms. Stress patterns and rhythms don’t mean much in Indo-Aryan languages, but are hugely important in English.

Each language has a unique sound system

You may not realize that each language has a unique sound basis, and applying one language’s sound system to a second language doesn’t always work. Some of these differences won’t have great impact; some may give you a charming accent; others can interfere with your ability to communicate or your effectiveness as a speaker.

You may get feedback that listeners can’t follow you, or you talk too fast, or that you sound too direct. Perhaps you’ve gotten feedback at work that your presentation style needs some work, or people in the audience ask you to repeat yourself. You may understand that you don’t sound “natural” enough in English. These and other problems result from applying what you know and use successfully in your first language, to English where it doesn’t work as well.

You are applying a set of “sound rules” to English that don’t belong there—English has its own sound rules.

Indo-Aryan Accents In English

Some common interference points between this group of languages, and English, are:

Vowel system differences

The good news is...we have similar sets of vowels, so you don't have to learn to make a lot of new sounds you are unfamiliar with. The bad news is, you may be using them in the wrong places when you switch to English. Vowel misuse might result in a change of meaning, since vowels make a difference in the meaning of many common one-syllable English words, e.g. [bad, bed] and [sit, set]. In addition, English vowels have varying lengths, so making a short vowel sound when it should be a long vowel sound may change the expected sound of the word.

Gaining control over English vowels will help your comprehensibility.

Consonant system differences

There are consonants in American English that are hard for you to say—/th/ for instance—so you substitute the nearest familiar sound from your first language. This leads to a very distinctive South Asian accent in English, saying *tink* for *think*, *den* for *then*, and *pit* for *fit*.

Also, /t/ and /d/ are often formed, in your first language, in a retroflex fashion, far back in the mouth. American and British English create these in a different manner, and the sound is noticeably different. In American English, your tongue must be much more relaxed.

Indo-Aryan Accents In English

Here's another example of consonant confusion. English does not differentiate between /p/ and /pʰ/=[p with more air], as Hindi does, but we do use both forms, for example /pʰ/ in the word [pin], and /p/ in the word [spin]. You'll have to learn these word patterns or you will be using them indiscriminately, and it will be a noticeable part of your accent. Another example can be found in words like "pin" versus "bin"; if the "p" is under-pronounced, it will sound like "bin", but if it is over-pronounced, it will be hard to recognize also.

Consonant clusters

South Asian speakers may inadvertently add vowels between consonant clusters or add a vowel to the beginning of a word that has an initial cluster. For example, [steps] becomes [isteps], with the result that a one-syllable word has now become a two-syllable word. A word that should have one beat now has two beats, and may confuse listeners who don't anticipate your accent patterns. Final consonant clusters may also have vowels inserted, causing the same effect: [kiln] becomes [kilun].

Rhythm

South Asian languages are syllable-timed, but English is not. English is stress-timed, which means that stressing a specific rhythm for syllables and words is critical. This is of secondary importance in your language, so you may not pay much attention to it, but if you are going to use English as a public speaker, or communicate often with native speakers, you *must* work on syllable and word stress.

Indo-Aryan Accents In English

Intonation

In Indo-Aryan languages, intonation follows a short, repetitive, structural pattern, causing rolling waves of sound that often contradicts what a native English speaker expects to hear. In English, we use pitch change, duration (length of sound), and energy to create varying patterns that structure each word, phrase and statement. Intonation is not tied to grammar or syntax. It is used to focus an acoustic “spotlight” onto those words and phrases that are most important to our message.

In English, intonation and pitch change coordinate your statement and establishes the relationships between them as you speak. If you aren't doing this, your listeners will find it hard work to connect your ideas and follow your longer, complex statements. You must learn to control and adjust your intonation so listeners are able to follow the coordination and subordination of your statements.

NOTE: This group covers many, many languages and most of them share these interference points with English. Some of the languages have their origins in Hindi, some in Arabic, some can understand each other, some cannot. So these are just generalizations that hold true, for the most part, for many but certainly not all of language speakers from this area of the world.

Peggy Tharpe teaches, coaches, and publishes about English pronunciation and intonation. She believes that if you understand why something is happening, you're better able to address it and change it. She teaches the "why" of pronunciation as well as the "what" and "how".

Teaching or learning English?

If you'd like to receive American Pronunciation Coach's weekly news and resources right in your inbox, click on the button below and we'll sign you up.

[Learn more](#)