

Dear English Speakers: Please Drop the Dialects

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Paris—It is incontestable that English is the world's most accepted working language. Several centuries of Anglo-American economic and cultural predominance have contributed considerably to the language's status today. Young French people are willing to speak English with foreigners. Even their president did an interview in English. Worldwide computer networks reinforce this predominance.

Whether English should be the only official language of the United States is a matter for Americans to decide. We foreigners just wish that Americans—who have the privilege of choosing the world's most powerful leader—had a broader perspective, a better understanding of the socio-economic and cultural situation of other countries, and would approach the world with a more cosmopolitan spirit. Learning foreign languages may help.

I work in an international organization where English is a main working language. Native English speakers have a double advantage at such organizations: even though they are required to speak a language other than English, that other language is frequently French. And compared with the remoteness of English from my native language—Japanese—the difference between English and French is negligible.

I have to live with this unfortunate fate. My native tongue is remote from European languages. Yet I believe I have the right to request that my Anglo-American friends who are involved in international activities not abuse their privilege, even though they do not do so intentionally.

First of all, I would like them to know that the English they speak at home is not always internationally accepted English.

Nowadays, nonnatives learn English through worldwide media such as CNN or BBC World Service. Whether CNN's English is a good model is arguable. My point is that most nonatives do not learn dialects such as Scottish or Australian.

Dialects have their charms and represents their speakers' cultural identities. I don't deny their value; I myself come from Osaka, where a special Japanese dialect is spoken,

and I am proud of it. However, I try to speak in as standard a Japanese as possible when nonnative talk to me in Japanese. Accordingly, I strongly request that staff members of Anglo-American international organizations not stick to their home-town's brand of English.

(You may point out the difficulty of understanding English spoken by Japanese. Please remember that we are making tremendous efforts to distinguish "L" from "R" or "S" from "Th.")

Native English speakers who are international civil servants cannot fulfill their responsibilities if they speak as if they were addressing only fellow natives.

I could make a similar point about written English. I have encountered many compositions that were written in plain English yet were still intellectually impressive. Avoiding unusual words also attests to the writer's effort to convey his or her message to nonnatives.

I sincerely believe there exists a cosmopolitan English—a lingua franca, written or spoken—that is clearly different from what native English speakers uses unconsciously in their daily life.

There are also good manners that go along with a cosmopolitan English: not monopolizing the floor, giving equal opportunity to usually silent nonnatives and refraining from interrupting nonnatives when they do speak.

We nonnatives are desperately learning English; each word pronounced by us represents our blood, sweat and tears. Our English proficiency is tangible evidence of our achievement of will, not an accident of birth. Dear Anglo-Americans, please show us you are also taking pains to make yourself understood in an international setting.

These days, I repeatedly listen to "My Fair Lady" on my CD player, trying to better understand some of my colleagues' parochial English. But why should I, a Japanese, make such efforts? I almost want to shout like Professor Higgins: "Why can't the English teach their children how to speak? The Scottish and Irish leave you close to tears! In America, they haven't used it for years!"