

# SPEAKING IN ENGLISHES

By Rev Dev Anandarajan

Have people commented on the way you speak English? I thought this was very much a migrant experience, but I may be wrong.

I have lived in Australia for 19 years and have observed that English is spoken with many different accents and dialects, not only by the migrants from non-Western countries, but also those who have come from the West, including the US and the UK.

During my first visit to the UK in September 2021, it was evident English was spoken in different ways among the British. The UK is now made up of many cultures and obviously each culture may have its own way of speaking English. But what was noticeable was that, even among the Anglo-Celtic in the UK, there were many accents.

I have heard it said, “English should be spoken like an Englishman” or that proper English is the Queen’s English, which means the English language should be spoken the way English is spoken by the upper class in England.

The Welsh and the Scots have their respective accents too, which I have heard being commented on as not being “proper English”. But do all the English speak English the “proper” way?

Is there a right way of speaking English? In my observation, even in the English countryside (among the English) you can discern a diversity of accents. I have heard it said that by listening to a person’s accent you can guess from which part of England he or she grew up.

This is similar to Tamil, which is my linguistic background. Tamil is spoken in Tamil Nadu (India), Sri Lanka, Singapore and Malaysia, and, due to migration and globalisation in many parts of the world, the spoken Tamil differs from region to region.

I can identify an Indian Tamil accent from a Sri Lanka Northern Tamil accent. Because I studied in India, in some ways I have learnt to speak the Indian Tamil.

My friends from India have commented on my Sri Lankan Tamil accent. In my many interactions with my fellow Tamils in India, I have learnt how to understand the Indian dialects of Tamil. Even in India, Tamil is spoken differently in different regions. Some of my friends from Tamil Nadu said that from how the Tamil is spoken they could identify which region a person comes from within Tamil Nadu.

However Tamil is spoken, each region thinks their Tamil is better than the other regions. There is a saying those from Jaffna (the north of Sri Lanka) hold on to, which is “Tamil was born in Madurai, nurtured in Jaffna and murdered in Madras (Chennai)”. But what we never did was to teach the other to speak our way. My Indian friends at the University College would make fun of my accent, but also were most amused and interested in imitating it. At times they would try and imitate my Tamil, but never tried to correct me or coerce me to speak their way. Even if they did, which Indian accent would they want me to speak with? The most important thing is that we are able to communicate with each other. As long as we understood each other that was sufficient.

In the post-modern globalised world, English has become a universal language. It is the language of commerce, education (in most countries) and trade. Many countries and cultures have to learn the language both in its spoken and written form to communicate, transact business and numerous other activities. A one-time cultural language has now become a global language of communication. On one side, there is a cultural element to the language with its many art forms and its evolution in the history of civilisation.

But it is more than that now. With British colonisation it ceased to be a cultural language and imposed itself on other cultures which had to learn the language to communicate with their British masters. These cultures, in adapting the English language, have evolved a way of speaking which has added to the many expressions/accents of English that was already there. Even within a culture English can be spoken with different accents.

How do we then define English proficiency in this globalised world where English is spoken in its vast diversity?

I want to bring the Pentecost experience. Was the miracle in the speaking or the hearing? What would a definition of spoken English look like if it was defined not from the perspective of speaking, but from the perspective of hearing and

understanding? In the globalised world, speaking English needs to be defined as the ability of a person to understand and work with many different expressions of English.

This is important for the Church to grapple with. It is the experience of many Ministers from Culturally and Linguistically Diverse backgrounds, where their accent has been an impediment in their placements or even to find a placement. Even people within a culture can be judged by their accent by that cultural group who believe they hold the truth to what is a correct way to pronounce the language.

This calls for a change of mindset to re-orient ourselves in order to give equal status to the diversity of expressions to the spoken English the global language of communication.

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**Rev Dev Anandarajan is the Synod's Intercultural Leadership  
Development Coordinator**