



Unlearning Indian English

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I grew up in India, so I was used to speaking English the way it's spoken in India. Initially it caused me trouble at work because people at work were not used to Indian diction and phraseology. It took me years to get read of my old locution.

Once I wrote a memo to the entire department informing that the scheduled meeting date was preponed. That caused a stir at the workplace, so my boss called me and asked me what I meant by preponed. When I explained to him that actually I meant that the meeting was moved to an earlier date, he recommended that I take a basic English course which I did.

My English teacher was a grim looking older lady. On the first day she asked me to recite English alphabet. She corrected me and asked me to pronounce zee instead of zed. I insisted that zed was correct.

"In India we pronounce zed like this only," I insisted.

"Don't add only. Like this is the right way to say." She corrected me again.



Once while revising my resume, I wrote that I passed out in 1981. The interviewer asked me what made me pass out in 1981. To me that was an absurd question. Later I realized that in American way of speaking pass out meant to become unconscious.

Another problem area was the use of a couple of. I used it to mean two but, in the USA, this may mean several. For example, "it took me a couple of hours to get here which could also mean 3 or 4 hours.

In the old country cousins are addressed as brothers and sisters to show intimacy. To explain to a strangers Indians usually say cousin sister or cousin brother. This was confusing to my friends because here all the cousins are simply referred to as cousins.

We Indians are not used to saying switch on the light or fan. For many years I simply used to ask people to

“on the switch.” That was considered very funny. Similarly, I used to call blisters caused by tight shoes a shoe bite. That used to cause a good laugh.

I remember ending my memos at work with “do the needful.” Some of the other oddities were “revert back to you” and “which school did you go to” instead of asking “what school did you attend?”

My boss used to be annoyed with me for my use of “same to same.” Whenever I found similarity in our actions, I’d shake my head and utter, “same to same.”

Well folks, that’s all for now.”