Accents can pose difficulty to interpreters and others working with nonnative (or even native) speakers of a language. A few years ago, members of the Michigan Translators/Interpreters Network, ATA’s Michigan chapter, began complaining to me that, while having no problem understanding most U.S.-born English speakers, and naturally no problem understanding people from their own countries, the accents of people from other countries posed a challenge. I prepared a talk on the topic for the group (also delivered at ATA’s Annual Conference in 2012). The following outlines a few of the principles presented there, but without most of the fun that occurs during a live presentation.

It is easier to understand unfamiliar foreign accents if you know something about the much-feared discipline of phonology. (Phonology is claimed to be the portion of general linguistics courses that students dislike the most.) The concepts discussed here are drawn from that field. Please note that most of the phonetic transcription is written using the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA).

**Sound Substitution**

It is common knowledge that some languages have sounds that others do not. It is also well known that speakers will replace “difficult” sounds with sounds that are easier for them to pronounce. When trying to understand an unfamiliar accent, the first thing you should ask is: Are any sounds being replaced with other sounds?

Students of mine from the Middle East all seem to know a story about an Arabic man who pulled into a parking lot in downtown Detroit and asked the attendant, “Can I bark here?” According to the tale, the attendant replied, “This is America! You can bark anywhere you want!” This story is popular among my Arabic-speaking students because most of their dialects of Arabic lack a /p/ sound, and if they are not paying attention, they might replace it with [b].

When trying to understand an unfamiliar accent, the first thing you should ask is: Are any sounds being replaced with other sounds?
Another problem (but not for most Arabs) is what in English are often called “the TH sounds,” phonetically represented as /θ/ (as in “thing”) and /ð/ (as in “there”). Most people are aware that these are commonly replaced with sounds like [t] or [s] (thing > “ting” or “sing”), and with [d] or [z] (there > “dere” or “zere”). However, it is less known that some speakers replace the sounds with [f] and [v]. The issue becomes noticeable when a Czech writes, “This is the _thirst_ time I have tried it,” or a Ukrainian student says, “I have to go before my graduate committee and defend my _thesis._” This replacement can cause confusion when it comes to numbers, such as whether the speaker is saying “thirty” or “forty,” or whether someone is talking about “three people” or “free people.”

Of course, such replacements are also made with vowels or even combinations of sounds. The English syllabic /r/ in words like “first” and “curb” is sometimes decomposed into a vowel plus /r/, such as when a Russian says [fyorst] and [kyorb] or a Bengali says [farst] and [karb].

**Rule-Based Sound Substitution or Deletion**

If you notice that someone is replacing one sound with another, or deleting one, ask yourself if this happens only in certain places. For instance, does it happen only next to other sounds, or only in certain parts of the word?

English speakers are aware that in certain dialects, such as varieties in England and some in the eastern U.S., “people drop their _R’s._” What most people do not contemplate, however, is that these _R’s_ are not deleted in every position. They are deleted before another consonant or at the end of a word. This is why all English dialects retain the /r/ sounds in words like “rent,” “break,” and “around” (where /r/ precedes vowels), while many delete it in words such as “pair” [pɛə] or “order” [ɔdə], because in those, /r/ precedes a consonant or word break.

Even if two languages have the same sounds, the sounds may not be allowed to line up in the same way. This same kind of deletion rule can be found in language after language, but with different sounds. For example, many dialects of Spanish delete the /s/ sound in exactly the same environment—before a consonant or a word break. Therefore, in a sentence like, _Estamos en el hospital_ (“We are in the hospital.”), _all_ the _S’s_ will be deleted because they are in one or another of those positions, giving us something like _Etamo en el hopital_. Some Spanish speakers will transfer this phonological rule to English and pronounce a sentence like “His sister was in the hospital” as something like “Hi sitter wa in da hopital.”

In English, many speakers of Vietnamese and other Southeast Asian languages will change the pronunciation of _/l/ _before a consonant or a word break, but which sound they replace _/l/ _with will vary depending on what the preceding vowel is. After front vowels, such as [i] (as in “peek”) or [ɛ] (as in “cake”), they may pronounce _/l/ _as [w]. Thus, “feel” will be pronounced [fiw] and “bell” will be [bew]. If _/l/_ comes after a back vowel ([u, ʊ, o, ɔ, a]), they may change it to [ŋ], so “fall” will be [fɔŋ] (pronounced like “fawn”), and “bowl” will be pronounced [bon] (like “bone”).

Many Chinese speakers have trouble with _/n/ _at the end of a word, replacing it with [ŋ], which is the final sound in words like “ring” or “bang.” Thus, when I ask Chinese students to repeat “You will go to hell if you sin,” it usually comes back “You will go to hell if you _sing._” Similarly, a Chinese priest I met began talking about sin, and it took a while for his American listeners to realize he was not talking about music. This sound replacement is confined to just that word—final environment.

**Phonotactics**

“Phono” means sound and “tactics” has to do with touching, so the term “phonotactics” refers to which sounds can “touch” each other in various languages. Even if two languages have the same sounds, the sounds may not be allowed to line up in the same way.

For example, English syllables can begin with no more than three consonants, unlike those in Slavic languages, which may start with as many as four. But in English, you cannot use just any three consonants. The first one has to be _/s/_, the second one has to be _/p/_, _/t/_, or _/k/_, and the choice for the third sound is limited to one of the following: _/l/ _, _/r/ _, or _/n/_.

Here is a summary of the deletion rule for English:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>English</th>
<th>Spanish speaker</th>
<th>Chaldean speaker</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>strong</em></td>
<td><em>estroŋ</em></td>
<td><em>satroŋ</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>squeeze</em></td>
<td><em>eskwiz</em></td>
<td><em>sakwiz</em></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
to /l/, /r/, /w/, or /y/. Thus, when a native English speaker confronts a foreign word starting with four consonants, such as the Czech word *pstruh* ("trout"), his impulse is to break up that cluster somehow. He might drop the initial /p/ and say [stru], or he might insert a vowel and say [postru]. Note that in both cases, he ignores the /h/ at the end, because no English word ends in an /h/ sound.

Speakers of other languages bring this principle to English, but in different ways. For example, many speakers of Spanish and Chaldean have trouble with English syllables starting with three consonants, so they may insert a vowel to break the word into more syllables. As Figure 1 on page 18 shows, though, they do not add the same vowel or add it in the same place.

In some languages, such as Japanese, barely any consonant can be next to another one or at the end of a word, which is why a Japanese aikido instructor once wished me, *Meri Kurisimasu* (Merry Christmas). He had inserted vowels between all of the consonants in the English word Christmas.

Speakers of some languages will even add consonants to the beginning of words to create a syllable structure with which they are comfortable. Telugu speakers, for example, might add a /y/ sound before some words to prevent them from starting with a vowel. A word like “any” may be pronounced as [yɛni], and “ooze” may be pronounced as [wuz]. Some Chinese speakers will pronounce “in” as [yɪŋ] for the similar reasons.

**Crucial Questions**

If you are having trouble with someone’s accent, here are some questions to ask yourself:

1. Are they replacing one sound with another? If so, where?
2. Are they deleting sounds? If so, where?
3. Are they inserting sounds? If so, where?

There are more useful principles, such as issues of hypercorrection and spelling pronunciation, though the issues discussed in this article should provide a good basis.