

# Mind Your Language

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Dear readers, welcome to this column!

The title of this column brings to my mind the BBC farcical but informative serial by that name, which I used to watch as a young man. The BBC serial highlighted, and even had a dig at, the genuine problems non-native speakers of English across the world have in understanding British English and in communicating in it.

What does the word 'Mind' in the title mean? According to the *Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary*, "Mind your language" actually means "Don't speak in a rude or offensive way." The word "mind" here suggests a spoken warning used to tell somebody to be careful about something or to warn somebody about a danger.

When a tall person enters a house with a short archway or entrance, we ask him to mind his head. Oh, some of you may wonder why I say 'him', not 'her', or 'him' or her'. Let me assure you that I am not a male chauvinist. I'm using the singular pronoun 'him' in a generic sense, to refer to *any* tall person.

If you are tall, you should also mind your head in a room with a low ceiling. Mind your head when you get up from your aisle seat in an aircraft – you might hit it on the overhead locker.

When someone lashes out at another verbally, using rude and abusive language,

we ask him to mind his tongue. If he doesn't, his outburst may land him in deep trouble. There are other examples of using the word in a similar sense. Mind that last step on the staircase – you may trip on it.

So much for the name! In this column, we shall see how we must be careful about the language we use, in speech and in writing. We will look at some of the problems our learners have in using English as a second or foreign language.

The other day, a friend of mine narrated what happened when an Arab speaker of English went to a new town in England. He had a car and couldn't find a parking place. He said to a bystander, "I want to bark" (pronouncing 'p' as 'b' – the influence of Arabic on his English pronunciation). The bystander looked at him curiously for a few seconds before he said. "This is a free country and you can do it anywhere you please as long as you don't disturb others."

You might have heard some of our Arabic-speaking students ask for a 'Beebsi' in a cafeteria or a shop. You know what they want – yes, a 'Pepsi'. Sometimes, the replacement of 'p' by 'b' leads to embarrassing moments. We should understand that the 'p' sound does not exist in Arabic.

Speakers of English as a second or foreign language also attempt to pronounce English

words using the same method they follow in their mother tongue. Some initial clusters or groups of consonants in English have no corresponding equivalents in their mother tongue. So, you will encounter pronunciation problems, such as “istobbid” for “stopped”, “forigen” for “foreign”, “perice” or “pirice” for “price”, “ispring” or “sipring” for “spring”, “monthiz” for “months”, and “nexist” for “next”. You will see that they have problems in pronouncing the groups of consonants at the beginning or end of the words. You will also see a tendency to insert short vowels to handle this challenge.

Teachers of English to students whose mother tongue is not English will often encounter examples of such pronunciations, which also may carry over into spelling.

Students also tend to read some English words differently. For instance, you will find some students read “biscuit” as “basket” or “biskut”, “hair” as “higher”, “stupid” as “stopped”, “blew” as “below”, “grill” as “girl” with the ‘r’ pronounced, “thorough” as “throw”, and “spade” as “speed”.

Students in another Arab country where I had taught for a few years used to ask me for the “table time” (instead of “timetable”) and “paper exam” (instead of “exam paper”). Once a student stopped me in the street and asked, “Teacher, did you learn Shakespeare in my class?” I was nonplussed for a few seconds and said, “No.” He wouldn’t leave me. He said, “No teacher, you learn for me Shakespeare, I know.” Then I realized what he meant – *teach*.

Don’t get me wrong. These examples go to show that non-native speakers of English may experience problems in speaking and writing English based on the influence of their respective mother tongues.

We will meet again soon to discuss such problems in using English. Till then, Goodbye!

**[Note:** An earlier version of this introductory piece was published in the *Campus* magazine of *Oman Tribune* as part of a series a few years ago.]