

# Imitating someone's accent makes it easier to understand them

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In conversation, we often imitate each other's speech style and may even change our accent to fit that of the person we're talking to. A recent study in *Psychological Science*, a journal of the Association for Psychological Science, suggests that imitating someone who speaks with a regional or foreign accent may actually help you understand them better.

"If people are talking to each other, they tend to sort of move their speech toward each other," says Patti Adank, of the University of Manchester, who cowrote the study with Peter Hagoort and Harold Bekkering from Radboud University Nijmegen in the Netherlands. People don't only do this with speech, she says. "People have a tendency to imitate each other in [body posture](#), for instance in the way they cross their arms." She and her colleagues devised an experiment to test the effect of imitating and accent on subsequent [comprehension](#) of sentences spoken in that accent.

In the experiment, Dutch volunteers were first tested on how well they understood sentences spoken in an unfamiliar accent of Dutch. To make sure that all listeners were unfamiliar, a new accent was invented for the study, in which all the vowels were swapped (for instance 'ball' would become 'bale'). Next, each participant listened to 100 sentences in the unfamiliar accent. But first, they were given different instructions on how to respond to the sentences. Some were told to repeat the sentence, imitating the accent. Others were told either only to listen, to repeat the sentences in their own accent, or to transcribe the accented sentences as

they had heard them, complete with strange vowels. Finally, the participants were tested again on how well they could understand sentences spoken in the unfamiliar accent.

People who had imitated the accent did much better at understanding the [sentences](#) than the other people. "When listening to someone who has a really strong accent, if you talked to them in their accent, you would understand better," Adank says. Of course, she says, "it's obvious that you can't really do that." If you put on, say, a fake Southern [accent](#) when talking to someone from Georgia, they might not think your intention is friendly. But when your brain subtly and unconsciously shifts your voice to sound more like theirs, it appears to be deploying a useful strategy.

Provided by Association for Psychological Science

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