

# The Linguo–Racial Complex

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## The Linguo–Racial Complex

The Linguo–Racial complex is a phenomenon that I (and many other people, I guess) discovered while learning foreign languages. It refers to how average people associate a language with people's racial characteristics and have confusing reactions to the speaker of the language if he/she does not have the appearance that a "normal" speaker of such language has. Here are some examples:

A White American took years of Spanish and is now fluent in it. He talks Spanish to some Mexican or Cuban immigrants in the US. They make a wry face and answer in broken English. He again speaks Spanish to them. They again answer in English (which is much worse than the white American's Spanish).

A Brit learns Japanese and speaks it very well now. He stops people on the streets of Tokyo and talks to them. They look at him like they have seen E.T. –with eyes wide–open and jaws dropped. Some smile sheepishly and walk on. Some look irritated and say in Japanese– "the language, I do not speak the language". Some answer in bad English, some walk by saying "I do not speak English", some asking him: "Do you speak Japanese?"(And what is he speaking now, Bantu?).

A European gentleman sits in a restaurant in an Arab country. He calls a waiter and asks for "thom"– garlic. The waiter looks shy and makes gestures at the customer– "One moment please, one moment please" and walks away. Thinking that he went to get garlic, the customer patiently awaits his food. Guess what? He brought another waiter who addresses the customer with "May I help you, sir?" "I asked for bloody garlic in Arabic, why are you here asking me again?" "Sorry sir, we did not realize you could speak Arabic". "But I was speaking Arabic to the first waiter!"

The first waiter's mind did not register the fact that in spite of the speaker's European appearance he was, in fact, speaking Arabic.

An American man who spent 15 years in the Philippines is with his girlfriend. He stops a taxi and talks to the driver in Tagalog. The driver ignores him like he does not exist and starts talking to his

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girlfriend about the taxi fare and all. People with high noses and white skin speak English. People with flat noses and brown skin speak Tagalog. People with high noses and white skin speaking Tagalog are absurd and probably unreal. Let's talk to the girl– her nose is flat and her skin is brown. She is a Tagalog speaker.

Here is another example: an Australian has spent half of his life in Thailand and speaks Thai fluently. He stops at a street stall. The hawkers look at him incredulously as he begins speaking Thai. One of them lights up and starts yelling out to others: "He can talk! He can talk!"

The Lingo–Racial complex can take ugly extremes such as people ignored at restaurants and not served. People not being rented apartments because the landlord is afraid that he cannot communicate with English speakers (who speak his language very well) and friendships and dates being denied because, you see, I can't speak English. "

"But I can speak your language!" A dull and incredulous look and silence are the answer.

In a place that has many tourists and foreigners of a particular "stock" people form a stereotypical reflex about how a person who looks like that should talk and behave.

In places that are excessively provincial and or/nationalistic people cannot even conceive of a person who is clearly of another race being able to speak their language.

In some Latin countries particularly in the Caribbean and Mexico the speakers see Spanish as "their" language and become shocked and even insulted if a person of "another (non–Latin) race" speaks it.

Anglo–Saxon countries such as the US , UK, etc. do not have that complex but the opposite of it– in their cultural view the whole world speaks English and if they don't they should and soon will. So there is no surprise if a Japanese person speaks English– he should.

Argentina, being an immigrant Spanish speaking society will have a similar attitude and will lack the Complex. So, I guess, would Brazil.

Good news? Well, not everyone has the complex. There are many people who are happy to see that you speak the language and many people who will not even be surprised that you do. Many will treat you as an equal especially after they got to know you. However, when one studies languages of nations where the majority of people do not look like you, one has to get ready to face the awkwardness of it.

It's all in the expat's day's work. What's to do?

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- *Follow-Ups:*
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◇ *From:* Seán O'Leathlóbhair
  - ◆ **Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex**  
◇ *From:* Padraic Brown
  - ◆ **Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex**  
◇ *From:* Neeraj Mathur
  - ◆ **Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex**  
◇ *From:* guciullo@xxxxxxxxx
  
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