

# Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex

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- *From:* [larrysulky@xxxxxxxxxx](mailto:larrysulky@xxxxxxxxxx)
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I've had similar experiences, but none that could be considered racial. The most striking ones have all been in the Netherlands — and I look like any typical northern European:

1) I order pancakes in a restaurant, in Dutch. The waitress stares at me blankly. I ask again. She frowns. I ask again, this time in English. "Oh! Pancakes!" she says in Dutch (I've forgotten the Dutch words). She uses the same words I used, pronounced the same way as far as I can tell. Now, my one talent in life is that I do an excellent job of pronouncing foreign words — I've been told this so often and with such sincerity by native speakers of said languages that I have to believe it. I'm sure I had some accent, but it couldn't have been all that strong...but this woman absolutely could not understand me. It was as though any accent at all was enough to throw her completely off. But she could understand her Indonesian coworkers just fine.

2) At Schiphol airport, I thank a rental car agent, in Dutch, for her help (the preceding conversation was in English). She stares at me. I thank her again. With much consternation, she stammers, in English (which she speaks beautifully), "You're welcome, Sir."

3) I go to a job interview in Appeldoorn. My host invites some other employees to join us. I greet them in Dutch. One fellow responded automatically (in Dutch) then did — no lie — a triple take. "You speak Dutch?!?" I think he hurt his neck.

4) I'm in a bookstore in Rotterdam and checking out more Dutch language learning materials. I wonder aloud, in frustration (in English), if there is any earthly reason for me to keep trying to learn Dutch. Two people nearby start laughing, and one says, "As a scholarly pursuit, perhaps. But practically speaking, none at all. We're always going to speak English to you."

(I don't know that this last vignette has any bearing, but it seemed like a revealing experience to share.)

So there are expectations, but they aren't necessarily racially–based. I suspect that the Dutch speakers I interacted with were so unprepared to hear Dutch in a foreign accent, even a very slight one, that they

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literally couldn't understand me. As if a visitor had said to me, "Tank you very much, Sir", and, because it was "Tank" not "Thank", I was utterly at a loss. That's my theory, anyway.

In Quebec, my reception in French depends on whether the person I'm addressing just wants to get on with business, in which case she'll switch to English and refuse to leave it, or sees me as a tourist whose whims are to be indulged, in which case we talk in whichever language I want. (The third option, which certainly does occur, is that her English is so poor that we must speak in French...which is okay with me.)

--larry

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- ***Follow-Ups:***

- ◆ ***Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex***  
◇ *From:* Ruud Harmsen

- ***References:***

- ◆ ***The Linguo–Racial Complex***  
◇ *From:* InspiredPoet
- ◆ ***Re: The Linguo–Racial Complex***  
◇ *From:* Padraic Brown

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