

ANGLOPHONE FRIEND OR FOE?

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I watched a World War II program about how the Germans recruited a group of soldiers who could speak English (or thought that they could) to infiltrate American lines and cause havoc. Even though dressed in U.S. uniforms, they soon ran into difficulties as a result of their English language knowledge and usage; for example, some of them were only familiar with British English. This situation transported me in my mind back to the Revolutionary war. I doubt that there was a great deal of language difference in those days between the speech of the British and the Colonials, but in this proposed time warp and flight of fancy let's pretend that the linguistic situation was as it is today.

How difficult would it be for the British or the Americans to determine definitively that the suspects were friend or foe? By having the potential spies or infiltrators read these half-dozen sentences it could be clearly established to which side they owed their true allegiance. This shibboleth type of test would be equally effective for both antagonistic groups. The only needed directive would be "Read these sentences out loud."

1. It was stupid of the lieutenant to post the schedule of the Patriot missile launch
2. The duke saw it as his duty to perpetuate the Derbyshire family dynasty
3. In the laboratory the biology student investigated the vitamin content of tomatoes and herbs
4. There aren't many words like zebra that begin with a Z
5. The clerk arranged for the transfer of the Van Goghs from Syracuse to New York City
6. In the garage the mechanic was working on the carburetor so as to tune up the car

To see how these sentences distinguish between British and Americans, see Answers and Solutions at the end of the issue.