

## Re: [OT] Indian C programmers and "u"

**Source:** [http://coding.derkeiler.com/Archive/C\\_CPP/comp.lang.c/2003-11/4718.html](http://coding.derkeiler.com/Archive/C_CPP/comp.lang.c/2003-11/4718.html)

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Thomas Stegen wrote:

- > *People who have english as their second language often have a better*
- > *grasp of grammar and semantics of words than native speakers (if*
- > *they have been learning the language for some time). The reason is*
- > *that native speakers generally know very little outside colloquial*
- > *meanings of words unless these words happens to have formal meanings*
- > *in some area the person has some expertise in.*

I partly agree, in that (in my experience) non-native speakers often know more about supposed rules of English grammar. This is, I think, largely due to the inadequacy of the British[0] education system.

With regard to semantics, it's not so clear that non-native speakers have the upper hand. English is not a static, fixed thing that can be mastered once and for all (like C90, say). It is rather living, changing; its structure and semantics are determined by the community in which it is used. This is true in the obvious sense that new words and phrases are continually being added to the language while others fall out of use. It's true in a much deeper sense, though, because the meaning of individual words is determined not by a dictionary, but by use. A word is used for the first time in a particular context: the meaning shifts, the word acquires new associations[1]. If you are not a part of the community in which this takes place then you will fail to acquire these subtler, undocumented senses. At best, a dictionary describes a partial snapshot of the language at a given time, but the description of words is inevitably far cruder, although (indeed, because) more precisely expressed than their "actual" meaning.

It's not even necessary to look further than this august forum for examples. What associations do the words "Rule", "confused", "engage", "nasal", "chapter", etc. carry? Use of these, and other, words in this newsgroup will evoke certain associations in regular readers ("native speakers", if you like) that are not apparent to those outside the community. Similarly, members of the English-speaking community share a subtle understanding, perhaps largely unconscious, of words and phrases in current use that is not available to outsiders.

Non-native speakers are able to acquire knowledge of English as it is actually used only to the extent to which they participate in the English-speaking community – that is, only to the degree to which they become "native".

A non-native speaker may bring to the language an understanding of why things are structured as they are. He may be able to express himself with greater ease, elegance and even precision. However, if he claims a different knowledge of the meaning of certain words than that of (the mass of) native speakers in general then his understanding is simply wrong. His semantics may coincide with those of a dictionary, they may be etymologically justifiable, but (if they differ from those generally understood by native speakers) then they are not the semantics of English.

Jeremy.

[0] The language spoken by Americans and others bears only a superficial resemblance to English, so they're excluded from these comments.

[1] Marketing is essentially an attempt to abuse and control these changing meanings, to forcibly associate certain words and phrases with particular products in the minds of the public.