

## Different Interpretations

Even a Japanese person whose English is excellent may inadvertently phrase something in a way that offends a native speaker. Once, when I was working in Japan, I thought that I had received a tremendous insult when the deputy general manager of my department (an accomplished English speaker) told me that I was "not a professional." Our mild debate about whether or not I needed a bigger desk came to an abrupt halt as I excused myself, too shocked to continue talking. For the next hour or so I wondered what I had done to merit being called unprofessional. After all my hard work, was this what my superiors thought of me?

Finally, I reapproached the manager to ask exactly in what way I was "not a professional." "Why," I was told "it's because you don't have a graduate degree. You're not a lawyer or an MBA." My manager had no idea that he was insulting me – by telling me that I was not a professional, he thought that he was making a simple statement of fact about my qualifications rather than passing judgment on my job performance. Despite his thorough knowledge of English, he was unaware of why "not a professional" has negative associations to a native speaker.

If something a non-native speaker of English says sounds odd or insulting, take a moment to probe what they really meant – they may not have realized the nuance of what they said.

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