

The old man had dirty hair, dirty clothes, and only thirty-five cents in his pocket. In Washington, he got on a bus and went to the restroom at the back. He thought that if he hid in the restroom, he could go to New York without paying. But a passenger at the back of the bus had seen him. She hesitated at first, but finally made up her mind. She touched the shoulder of another person in front of her and said, "There's a bum in the restroom." That passenger touched the person who was sitting in front of him. "Tell the bus driver there's a bum in the restroom," he said.

The message was passed from person to person and reached the front of the bus. But somewhere along the way, the message had changed. When it reached the bus driver, it was not "There's a bum in the restroom" but "There's a bomb in the restroom." The driver quickly stopped the bus and called the police. When the police arrived, the passengers got off the bus and stayed away. Then they closed the highway. That soon caused a 25-kilometer-long traffic jam. With the help of a dog, the police looked for the bomb in the bus for two hours. Of course, they found nothing.

Two similar-sounding words also caused trouble for a man who wanted to fly from Los Angeles to Oakland, California. His problems began at the airport in Los Angeles. He thought that his flight was announced, so he walked to the gate, showed his ticket, and got on the plane. Twenty minutes after takeoff, the man began to worry. Oakland was north of Los Angeles, but the plane was going west, and when he looked out his window, he could only see the ocean. “This plane is going to Oakland, isn’t it?” he asked the flight attendant. The flight attendant was surprised. “No,” she said. “We’re going to Auckland — Auckland, New Zealand.”

Since so many English words sound similar, misunderstandings among English-speaking people are not unusual. Of course, not all misunderstandings are serious enough to close highways or move passengers to the wrong country. Every day, people who speak English ask each other questions like these: “Did you say seventy or seventeen?” “Did you say that you can come or that you can’t?”

Similar-sounding words can be especially confusing for people who speak English as a second language. When a Korean woman who lives in the United States arrived at work one morning, her boss asked her, “Did you get a plate?” “No...,” she answered, and wondered at his meaning. She worked in an office. Why did the boss ask her about a plate? All day she wondered about her boss’s strange question, but she was too shy to ask him about it. At five o’clock, when she was getting ready to go home, her boss said, “Please be on time tomorrow. You were fifteen minutes late this morning.” “Sorry,” she said. “I couldn’t start my car easily this morning. It took thirty minutes. And...” Suddenly she stopped talking and began to smile. Now she understood. Her boss hadn’t asked her, “Did you get a plate?” He had asked her, “Did you get up late?”

Bum and bomb. Auckland and Oakland. Probably, when similar-sounding words cause misunderstandings, the best thing to do is to just laugh and learn from the mistake. Of course, sometimes you think you can’t laugh. The man who traveled not to Oakland but to Auckland didn’t feel like laughing at all. But even that misunderstanding turned out all right in the end. The airline paid for the man’s hotel room and meals in New Zealand and for his flight back to California. “Oh, well,” the man later said, “I have wanted to see New Zealand for a long time!”