

Speaker: Dr. Christina Schelletter, head of English Language and Communication at the University of Hertfordshire explained to the online based publication Medical Daily that musicality may explain why some people are better able to lose their accents than others, since learning a new speech accent requires “tuning in to the sounds, stress and intonation of the other language.” Some say that there’s something to be gained from losing. But when it comes to losing your native accent, perhaps a loss is just a loss.

My name is Yelena Rivera Vale. I’m fully bilingual. I learned English and Spanish at the same time and I speak both with my Puerto Rican accent. I’ve created a series of podcasts to share stories about accents. This is one of them.

[rhythmic percussion]

Interposed Speakers: My name is — My name is Isabel Altamirano — Recha — Halcyon Lawrence — Eugene Mangortey — My name is Mazlum Kosma — Carol Subiño Sullivan — Sravanthi Meka — Yelena Rivera Vale — Sebastian — Alba Gutierrez — and this is — my accent — my accent — my accent story.

Alba Gutierrez: My name is Alba Gutierrez, and this is my accent story. I think when I was probably in elementary school, maybe, probably about nine. And then I had actually some neighbors that moved in from the coast from Colombia because I’m originally from Bolivar. And they moved from the coast, and they actually started talking very differently, very fast. And then I realized that I didn’t speak the same way they did, nor did they speak the same way I did. So it was very interesting hearing our conversations, because sometimes it was hard to understand them, especially if they went on speaking really fast and cutting of the S’s and cutting off—so it was really interesting, I think, on that end. So I think I realized I had an accent then, but even more, I think has been more, I guess, on an emphasis when I moved to the US, and I didn’t speak English. So when I was 14, I moved to the US, and I started learning English. And I think I became very aware now the fact that now it was speaking another language; I was learning another language. And how my English ended up being very strong, and I had a very definite accent. And I think after a while I started losing it a little bit. So my accent kind of started...not diminishing in a sense, but I guess—yeah, I guess in a sense, it would be diminishing. But it’s just changing to—I don’t even know what it is, actually now. But it definitely has changed over the years, and now I can—I probably have a lot of different pronunciation and words, where I think people can pick up more of my accent. Of course, English is definitely my second language; it is not my first. I’ve actually had people who asked me where I’m from, because they’re really good, or they have been accustomed to hearing accents. So they still can hear an accent on me, I guess, when I speak. And especially, as I said, on certain words, that I might pronounce differently. So usually do people pick it up? I guess, in that sense, and they have asked me. But then I also have had other people who I’ve gone to meetings and things with and had conversations with, and never even knew I was Colombian or never really guessed, I guess, in that sense. Because I never—I guess I spoke well enough and, you know, I guess fluently enough that I could actually try to, like, I guess get away with it. I don’t know [laughs], getting in a certain thing. And I’ve actually, which is funny, I actually met some people from another state, from Washington area one time when I was in youth, like in a youth group at our church, and one of them thought that actually my southern accent is more predominant than my Colombian accent, which was kind of interesting because of the fact—and even my husband when I met him, and he’s from New York, he actually thought I had more of a southern accent than I had actually a Colombian accent. So it’s really interesting, even though I don’t say “y’all,” I still will get away with certain things that I think make me sound more like, you know, southern in a sense. But I’ve been living in Georgia for so long that I think it makes—I think it just has stuck to me, some things [laughs] and the way that I say certain things.

So I didn’t want to—well, when I came to the US, as I said, I didn’t speak English at all, so I went to an area predominantly—so I went to New Mexico first, which was predominantly mostly Mexican. I was the only Colombian, so I definitely felt out of place, and also because they make fun of my accent and the words that I used and certain things that I—my mannerisms and my sayings, so it was interesting. But when I moved to Georgia, I went to an area where it was predominantly white. And there were a handful of, you know, African-Americans was definitely, but it was a minority. So I went to an area where I felt very self-conscious about my accent, especially being an immigrant, being new to the country, being at a difficult age. So I was 15 when I moved here to Georgia, so I think I realized that some people kind of picked up on my accent and would tease me about it, so I think in a sense, which is, sadly enough I ended up actually mimicking a lot. So I’m really good at learning languages, and I figured that out through my life’s journey, that I can actually mimic well enough that I can actually how to pronounce—enunciate really well. And so I would actually watch my friends, you know, how they move and, you know, mimic their language skills. I’m actually a very good observer of mouth. So actually when I’m talking to a person, I see the way that they move their

mouth and their intonation, and I pay very close attention to that. And so I think in a sense, I started practicing even more to make sure I would get it in more—it felt more Americanized per se. Because I didn't like that stigma of having an accent, which is sadly enough, now that I look back on it. But because I was 15, I was at that age where I was, by my peers, I was peer-pressured in a sense to feeling like I needed to fit in more per se, and so I did. But I think when I went to college, I realized, like—I went to college and felt more at home, like I'm okay to be a Latin-American. I'm okay to being who I am. And I had a lot of friends who were from Puerto Rico, from Antigua, Colombia, you know, from everywhere. So it made me feel more at home, and to embrace who I was. So yeah, it definitely has been a journey, where now I feel much more comfortable.

I haven't actually traveled to Colombia but once since I came here to the US, so I've only visited my family, my extended family once. And when I went back, this was, like, nine years, almost ten years ago, I actually felt very uncomfortable, because I have lost my accent in a sense from Colombia. Even though here in the US, people can still see me as a Colombian or, like, they can still hear my accent and kind of point me to that I'm Colombian, when I went to Colombia, I actually did not feel—I felt like I did not belong anymore there. Because even my own cousins made fun of me and said that I was more American, that I was speaking more Americanized that I was using certain words that were not part of their usual dialect, I think, of region in our area. And I'm from Bogota, so the capital city, and that was very interesting to me. And then here in the US, even when certain people will pick up my accent and will tell me, so I will never be a true in a sense of my accent being true from an American perspective. Because I will always still have a little bit of an accent, and people can still figure it out. But it's also with a Colombian, so I could never be, I think, one or the other anymore. It seems like blended in a sense. And that becomes a lot, and I think people identify a lot with that, especially a lot of immigrants. Because when they go back, they are too Americanized, now, for their native culture. And even with their dialect changing and their accent changing, and there's a lot of different things that happen. Also happens also on the other sense when you are living here and you still will be always the outsider.

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