

Yelena Rivera Vale: On March 20, 2017, the digital magazine, “Backchannel,” published a story with the thought-provoking title “Voice Is the Next Big Platform, Unless You Have an Accent.” The writer, Sonia Paul, explains how Siri, Alexa, or basically any device that uses speech technology, will struggle to recognize her Philippine mother’s and Indian father’s commands. While now this can be considered as a minor inconvenience, it will become a more serious issue in a few years when voice-driven devices will be the norm.

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.

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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.

My name is Halcyon Lawrence and this is my accent story.

I am from the island of Trinidad and Tobago. It’s the southern, the most southerly of the all the Caribbean islands, just of the coast of Venezuela. And it’s just about an island of 1.5 million people. The first time that I, the first time that I recognized that I had accent was when I started going to high school, and we sort of gather for these different events with different other high schools and people. We talk about the fact that the school that I went to that we spoke with an accent. I guess it was the first time that it occurred to me that an accent wasn’t just about being in a foreign place or speaking with a foreign accent. It was simply about the way that you spoke or the way that you pronounced your words and that having an accent sort of distinguished you. It told people where you are from and how you grew up. It’s almost like putting up dots on a map and, you know, that your accent can tell you exactly where you are from. I thought that was fascinating. The second time I was very aware that I had an accent was also in Trinidad. I volunteered to teach. We wouldn’t call them inner-city kids, but I guess that’s what most people would say here and in the U.S. And I had a class. It was like an Introduction to Computing class. They could not have been more than 12 years old. I remember starting to teach, and they were all giggling and I couldn’t figure out what was wrong! [laughs] And I finally like, “What is going on?” And they said, “You speak funny!” [laughs] I mean they didn’t know to use the word “accent.” I knew that’s what they would, you know, to them, they were hearing something very different to what they were accustomed hearing. So I’ve been living in the U.S. for the last ten years. I moved to the U.S. as an adult, so my accent really hasn’t changed the way that, perhaps, somebody who has moved here a lot younger would have seen a change in their accent. I’d say for the last ten years that my accent has sort of been the most defining thing about me. It’s — I just took Uber over here and, you know, it’s always a question, “Where you are from?” Or, you know, “Where’s that accent from?”

People are just sort of always curious. So I cannot say, personally, that I’ve ever had or experienced negative — had a negative experience or any negative fallout because of my accent. But because I study accents, I am well aware that people are persecuted because of their accents, that there’s bias because of accents, that people are refused housing. They receive different kinds of judgements in courts because of their accent. It’s one of those really subtle ways in which we can practice prejudice and bias that has absolutely nothing to do with color or race. And I think that’s what I think is particularly challenging and problematic about accents, that sometimes we aren’t even aware of sort of our attraction to one or rejection of another because what we understand it to be is that we are attracted to that which is similar, and so we like hearing our mother tongue and other accents might seem a little jarring to us or annoying to us and that we treat people differently based on what we hear. I can’t completely say that I had that experience. I think people are sort of curious about where I am from, and they like my accent. But also I am aware that is not the experience of everybody who has a foreign accent. It certainly is an experience working with Siri or Cortana or Alexa. [laughs]

So yeah, they don’t listen to me, either. [laughs]

So what I find interesting about voice technology is that it really has sort of been touted as a tool that is supposed to help, be helpful, encourage interactions, allow you to do things faster and more efficiently, and that I shouldn’t have to at all alter the way I

speak, ideally, that the language that I speak should be sufficient. And I think that's all well and good as an ideal, but the practice of it is very different. So these devices have really sort of been modeled on standard accents. And that is an accent of a region that has sort of been standardized—a standard American accent, a standard British, a standard Australian accent. But anybody who sort of fall out of that space of what would be considered to be a standard accent, then it's a problem.

There's so many videos on YouTube of Irish people trying to communicate with Siri or, you know. And it's not just—I think Siri sort of brought it to our doorsteps, but I think any sort of voice-activated commands, you know. Ten years ago if you were sort of dialing into a bank or dialing in to any voice-automated system, these systems would shut down on us, or just sort of route us back to an operator because our accents weren't considered to be standard and there were issues with voice recognition. I am the first to say that that has improved significantly. But, right now, for example, as the research suggests that one in five words are still not recognized. I mean that's every fifth word that I said to you! [laughing] It's like, "What did she say?" So yes, 20 percent recognition is amazing, but it's still, you know, we sort of have an expectation that if we're going to speak with somebody that they understand what we say.

I think the other challenge, of course, that voice technology sort of brings to the fore is that, in the cases of human-human interaction, human-human communication, we always negotiate meaning, and we negotiate understanding. And so if I said something, and as I said, if I see a nodding, so I know you are in an agreement with me. Or maybe if I see you frown, I begin to start adjusting the way that I speak—maybe I need slow things down or, maybe, I need to say in a different way or, maybe, I am using local term to me you're not familiar with. Well, I don't have that opportunity to negotiate with technology. And so quite often in these interaction, as a non—I am a native speaker of English, but I am a standard speaker of the English, with an English accent. And as a result, I have to begin making adjustments that I find particularly problematic because our accents is about who we are. It's about our identity. And that if I'm going to be—I feel like what technology does is force me into an assimilation that I have to begin to adjust my accent to be understood by the technology in ways that I don't have to when I speak with another human being.

So the example that I used, and I have been talking about it more and more, is my recent visit to Trinidad. I was at a friend's home, and she had an iPhone and she took out her phone and she spoke to Siri in an American accent. And I was just flabbergasted! And I said, "Is that how you talk to Siri?" And she said, "Yes, that's the only way that Siri will understand me," and we laughed. And it's not the first time that I have seen it happen, but I think what has been so striking to me is that in Trinidad, we have a term called "freshwater Yankee," and that term is actually very derogatory. It was—I don't know that it is in uses much anymore, but the idea of you sort of going to the States and coming back with an accent, and so that was sort of frowned upon, like you came back talking with this foreign accent. And so we use the term "freshwater Yankee" to describe that phenomenon.

But I find it interesting is that the devices like Siri and Cortana and Alexa sort of brought that phenomenon to our doorstep, that we no longer have to take a plea and then go spend any significant amount of time abroad to have to adjust the accents to be understood. And I think what is lost in the process, and why it is important that we start having a conversation about the bias that exists in technology and the lack of neutrality, is that identities are lost. There is something really inauthentic about speaking in an accent not of your own. While I understand that we do that for different reasons, which we code-switch all the time, there is something about this forced assimilation that I think is particularly problematic. Right now, large companies are sort of determining what the next accent is going to be.

So I think that in Denmark it's, for example, are going to be on the, you know, you see that kind of the Korean market was addressed in terms of language and accent, but I don't think that I'm going to see Trinidadian accent anytime soon! [laughs] I think it's problematic. I think that when we have to sort of change the way that we speak to be understood, it goes to the core of who we are. The technology, that's not we have sort of heralded technology. It needed to be allow me to be who I am, you know.

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