

A dialect is a variety of language differing in vocabulary and grammar as well as pronunciation. Dialects are usually spoken by a group united by geography or class.

When a standard language and pronunciation are defined by a group, an accent may be any pronunciation that deviates from that standard.

Groups sharing an identifiable accent may be defined by any of a wide variety of common traits. An accent may be associated with the region in which its speakers reside (a geographical accent), the socio-economic status of its speakers, their ethnicity, their caste or social class, their first language (when the language in which the accent is heard is not their native language), and so on.

Yelena Rivera Vale is fully bilingual. She learned English and Spanish at the same time and speaks both with her “Puerto Rican” accent. She created a series of podcasts to share stories about accents. This one is hers.

[music]

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.

Yelena Rivera: My name is Yelena Rivera Vale and this is my accent story.

Although I didn’t know at the time what it was called, I was aware that there were different ways to speak Spanish when I started to talk. Both my parents are Puerto Ricans but while my father lived all his formative years on the Island my mother was raised on military bases around the United States. And, in fact she lived her early childhood in Panama but they mainly spoke English, even there. My father did not want me to imitate my mother’s accent which had the intonations of the English language.

I grew up being careful on how I spoke my Spanish and practiced my diction singing and reciting poetry. In some ways I didn’t speak like my peers. I still had the usual inflections of us Puerto Ricans, but, quote, unquote, my proper accent was the one that those who wanted to be broadcasters and language professors aspired to. It turned out this was both good and bad for me. Growing up I was sometimes mocked as sounding too much as a teacher and although as an adult it served me well in my career as a communicator, I’ve still heard those comments. I wasn’t nor am I the only one that speaks like I do, but for some reason some people hear it and think of me as too serious or stuck-up.

I lived in Mexico as a young adult for a couple of years and when they heard my accent they didn’t recognize it as Puerto Rican since they had the common misconception that we don’t pronounce any of our “rs”. They would say: “But, you don’t say Puelto Lico.” [Sighing] First, I would sigh and tell them that no Puerto Rican will say it that way, although some might say “Puelto Rico.” Then I would patiently explain the nuances of our accent. That our intonation and pronouncing “l” instead of “r” in syllable-final position is because of our Corsican heritage, and that the seseo, which means that we don’t differentiate between the “s”, the “c” and the “z”, like other Hispanic speaking countries do; the “s” an “j” aspiration, like when we say “joven;” the guttural “r”, like “carrro,” instead of carro; and saying “deo” instead of “dedo,” are derivations of Canarian and Andalusian Spanish. In fact, depending from what part of Puerto Rico you’re from, you will have a slightly different Puerto Rican accent, and have different ways of calling the same thing. What bothered me and hurt me the most was that other Spanish speakers would criticize our way of talking and label it as incorrect.

The truth is that there’s no such thing as a bad accent, ask any linguist, not even when like me your English has a tinge, or more than a tinge, of the place you’ll always call home. That’s why when people in the USA ask me to repeat what I’ve said to understand me, or when they look at me like I don’t understand them because I speak “funny”, or when they say that they like how I roll my “rs” (making me conscious of our differences), or when they make incorrect assumptions of where I’m from, my citizenship or my education by my accent, I smile, and tell them that I’m from Puerto Rico. Sometimes I tell them that they also have an accent, and wow, they look surprised. But, usually I don’t say much more nor explain anything else. Thinking about it, maybe I should let them know, that my accent and my dialect are the gifts of my ancestors and those who make the fabric of the culture of where I was born and raised. Taínos, Africans, Spaniards, Italians, Corsicans, Lebanese, Germans, Scottish, Irish, and also, the United States of America, to name just a few. And, that I will always cherish their gift and I will never give it away. It’s part of my DNA!

“Accent Stories” was produced as part of Yelena Rivera Vale 2017 Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship. The male narrator for this piece is Alexander McIntyre. His accent can be described as mid-Atlantic. At the time of this recording, Alexander was a second year master student in Industrial Design at Georgia Tech.

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.

Yelena Rivera Vale: This broadcast series Accent Stories was produced as part of Yelena Rivera Vale, Georgia Tech 2017 Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship.