

Yelena Rivera Vale: When Juan Manuel “John” Quiñones visited Georgia Tech on September 6, 2017 as a keynote speaker for the Ninth Annual Diversity Symposium, he spoke about his accent. For 35 years, the anchor of ABC’s “What Would You Do?” has reported extensively for all programs and platforms with his perfect, neutral broadcasting accent. But Mr. Quiñones’ native language is Spanish. He learned English at school. And to be taken seriously, and to achieve his dreams of becoming a journalist, he had to get rid of his Mexican accent—and he did.

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.

[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.

Isabel Altamirano: I am Isabel Altamirano, and this my accent story. I was born in New Orleans, Louisiana. My father is from Honduras, and my mom is from Peru. My father was a merchant seaman, so he traveled up and down the west coast of South America a lot and Central America, and that’s how we meet my mom at a baptism in Peru. After they were married two years, they decided that she should come to New Orleans to live.

So when I was born, my parents had decided that they would not speak English to us and to my sister, also, because they didn’t want us to have English tinged with a heavy Spanish accent. So I spoke Spanish all the way. I still do. Even speaking to my parents today, or my sister, speaking to them in English feels unnatural to me. So we all spoke Spanish with each other. I picked up more of the South American Peruvian Spanish from my mom because my dad wasn’t home a lot. His typical journeys lasted four to six months, sometimes eight months at a time.

So when he was home, we spoke and I could pick up some words that were more Central American. But a lot of people, at that time in New Orleans, were from Central America so I picked up the Spanish from them. Also, I started picking up the Cuban Spanish because when I was really small, the first wave of Cubans came over in the mid-1960’s. So I started—had classmates when I went to school, the few Hispanics that were there were either from Honduras or from Cuba. I didn’t learn how to speak English until I went to kindergarten. Even though I had playmate neighbor who was a little Texan boy, Lamar, that’s all I could say—his name. [chuckles] My sister and I really didn’t communicate. I don’t how did we played with each other. We spend hours playing with each other, but we didn’t communicate. He couldn’t speak Spanish. We couldn’t speak English, but somehow we got along and played together. When I went to the first day of kindergarten, I had my teacher, Ms. López, I think she was Mexican-American, but she did not know one word of Spanish. From what I understand, people who were brought up in Texas who were Mexican descendent, they were not encouraged to speak Spanish at all. And my pediatrician was Dr. Dias, another Mexican-Spanish descent, but he didn’t speak any Spanish either. He would call me “muchacho” or “boy” when he sawed me!
[laughs]

So I knew nothing of English. I was — Ms. López put me next to Miguel thinking that we could talk to each other and help each other out. But Miguel didn’t want to talk to me because I was a girl. So pretty much, I was on my own. Pretty much, picked it up here and there. At that time, there were only a few television stations, no cable, no Spanish-language TVs, so the only thing I would watch in English was Saturday morning cartoons. I did remember giving my sister a heads up when she went to kindergarten—I was in second grade at that time—I told her, “You have to learn these two phrases — ‘Will you be my friend?’ and ‘Where’s the bathroom?’ If you know those two, you’ll be fine.”

When I was in third grade, the ESL, or English as a Second Language, theory started coming to our schools, and my sister and I didn’t last long. We knew too much English and we were kicked out of the class. The only thing that I remember learning was a difference between a glove and a mitten. They threw me out after that.

When I figured that there was a different accent in English is when I would watch the television news with my dad. We would

watch Walter Cronkite. I had no idea what was going on. It was the Vietnam War era. I had no idea who was at war. I don't what war meant. But my father, after he came back from one of his long voyages, he relaxed by watching TV and catching up with the news. This is the day before internets. Newspapers were not delivered to his ship, so he really didn't know what was going on for months. So he'd asked me to sit there with him and watch the news. At first, I didn't understand what they were saying because I didn't have enough English. But as I started listening, I could hear that Walter Cronkite spoke English differently from my classmates.

I went to school in a neighborhood called the Irish Channel. At that time, there were many descendants of the German and Irish immigrants that built New Orleans' levees, roads, railroads, and other things like that in the 1800s, and they stayed in that neighborhood. But their English was strange. It had a tinge of a Brooklyn accent, and they pronounce words differently. For example, oil was "earl," orange was "ernge," [laughs] four was "fowah," [chuckles] and I started noticing that—maybe I was in third or fourth grade—and Walter Cronkite never pronounced those words like that. So I started paying more attention to how he pronounced words. I still don't know what he was talking about, but I'd sit there either with a book or with a doll or something and just play and be silent while my father watched the news. He was my role model. I figured if everyone could understand him, if I could learn how to speak like him, people would also be able to understand me.

When I was in seventh and eighth grade, I knew I was going to another high school from classmates. I didn't tell them until at almost eighth grade graduation I was going to that school because they knew my ambitions for going to college, and they didn't want to do that. They thought I was a little crazy. [laughs] They wanted— they had other things in their lives that they wanted to do. And when I told them that— "Oh, you going more uptown." That's more posh, I guess, was more posh. Once I got there, I didn't have any problems. No one knew that I was from the Irish Channel till I told them, or I went to school in the Irish Channel. Louisiana has three or four distinct accents—the Cajuns who are living in the Lafayette, southwest area, the northern Louisiana people, Shreveport, Monroe, the middle of the state, Alexandria, and New Orleans, and Baton Rouge also has another accent. That's five accents in Louisiana. And so my boss who was originally from Baton Rouge asked me, "What happened to your English?" You don't speak like someone from New Orleans, and I deal with a lot of people from New Orleans a lot." And I told her my story. She was shocked that I realized that. Later on, I went to work at an international telecom company. I met people from all over the world. They were recruiting a lot of engineers at that time before the bust, before the dot-com bust, then the telecom bust in the early part of this century.

And one time, a Chinese engineer told me, "I like talking to you. It's not the English that I learned because I learn more British English, but I understand what you're saying. You speak slowly, and you enunciate your words and you take the time to listen to me, and not rush away." So I was happy about that. When they hear my name, they know I'm not from here. Altamirano is one of the more common Hispanic last names. It's only found in southern Mexico and mostly Central America. So that's just weird. I'm happy to tell people where I am from. They're curious. I don't get insulted, and I tell them the story and they're saying, "Wow!" [laughs]

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