

Yelena Rivera Vale: The late German psychoanalyst, philosopher and social critic Erich Fromm claims that “listening is an art like the understanding of poetry.” Fromm offers 6 guidelines for mastering the art of unselfish understanding. The first one states: “The basic rule for practicing this art is the complete concentration of the listener.” Although his focus is on helping therapists become better at their jobs, his guidelines can certainly help us all to better communicate with others, even if their accent is different than ours.

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.

Recha Reid: Hi! My name is Recha, and this is my accent story. I think the first time I realized I had accent was in Jamaica, where I grew up in the center, the capital city, which is Kingston, and I moved when I was small to a more rural part of the country. And when I was in Kingston, I talked, I thought, as how everyone else talked. You know nothing else was different from how I spoke, but then going into a different environment, everyone thought I sounded strange; I didn't sound like them. And so I had to assimilate in that environment. So what I ended up doing was try to sound as much as I can like everyone else that was around me. So I lost my accent and adopted this new environment that I was in, and so that was how I could fit in with everyone else. And then later on I moved back to Kingston. And then everyone in Kingston started remarking about how I sounded. I sounded with this heavy rural accent that they thought was very strange, and so then I had to do the same thing again. I had to assimilate into that environment. And so I tried again to adapt to those around me while living back in Kingston. I think, for me, that was when I kind of noticed that this was something that I had to adapt to actually make sure that I fit in with those around me.

When I first moved to the United States, I remember sitting at the front desk of one of my first jobs; I was an undergrad. And picking up the phone, somebody needed someone within the office, and me trying to help that person, and them pretty much responding to say I can't understand what you are saying. And I was very confused because I speak English. I've always spoke English, so I didn't understand why they couldn't understand what I was saying when I was speaking English. And so to be facetious after trying several times to actually indicate to the person that you know I can help them, I tried to do this valley girl, clueless kind of voice, you know like, “Hi! How are you doing!” Very, you know, upbeat. Very valley girl American from what I've been exposed to, and the person responded, I thought they would be actually taken aback off, you know, based on what I was doing, the impression that I was doing. And then she responded to say, “Oh! I finally understand what you are saying.” And I was a little bit hurt like that, because I'm like I was speaking English before, you know, but that was just not good enough, you know. I had to speak in this certain way for you then to understand what I was saying. So that was kind of like my first, one of my first introductions to accents in America.

When I first started to drive in America, I went for my driver's license, and this gentlemen — you know you have to basically, they sit in the car with you, and you drive, and they grade you based on what they see. And I remember he was trying to get me to do something. It was I think parallel parking or something, but he was trying to instruct me, but in a way that was pretty much confusing to me. So I finally said, “No, just let do it myself. I know how do it, you know.” And I finally did it, and then at the end of it, he said, “Oh you can speak English.” And I was, I didn't know what to say because I'm like, I've spoken English since I could talk you know. My accent is what's different from yours, nothing else. And so in certain situations, you almost feel like because you have an accent, people perceive you as being you know not as smart as they are or whatever they estimate your knowledge that is, or your level of intelligence; that's based on your accent. And then in other situations they're like, “Oh, you've traveled; you've been in different countries.” And so they go okay, so you're super smart. So it's kind of like this, you know, this spectrum, and you're either at one end of it, you know, based on what's going on.

And so it's dependent on situations, so sometimes, I go okay, there's an overestimation of what I can actually do based on my accent, and then in certain situations, like, I am not an idiot. You know, I can understand what you are saying, and usually in most

situations I can actually understand you better than you can understand me. And so it throws me off sometimes. And sometimes, I feel hurt like when I have to say, I understand what you're saying, I know what you're talking about, you don't have to explain to me slowly because I have an accent. I can understand [laughs].

It's kind of like a different — the emotions vary based on the day, and based on what's going on. But then living in England, living in Columbia, living back now, returning to America. The usual response when people hear how I speak, which I've, in the different countries that I've lived, I've actually adapted some of the environment that I'm in to make sure that I'm easily understood to I guess "natives". And so for me, it's now been an interesting journey because everyone says to me, "Oh! I love your accent." But it's not really an accent from any one location. It's a mixture of Jamaican, British, American. Just to fit in to those different environments to make sure that I am easily understood, and so yeah it's a strange experience, but this is how I talk now [laughs].

As an adult there is no need to necessary change to fit in terms of I am not going to try and strip away all my accent if possible — I don't really know how to do that — to fit in to this environment. But I do recognize the fact that every time I teach a class, I have to not necessary talk the same way that I would talk with friends or with family. I do like my accent a bit, and I usually walk in and let them know I have an accent, and so it's going to take a little while to understand what I am saying, but you will come around; you'll get it, because I know that you can adapt to what I'm saying. You can adapt to my accent. You just have to give it a chance. And so there is, I do recognize that there is a movement within me to actually lighten that accent up. And especially when I get into new situations, and even when I'm doing a presentation at conferences or anything like that, I don't talk in the same way. You know, I lighten it up, if possible a little bit, especially when I am very conscious of it. And it depends on the environment that I'm in as well, so if I see a group of people that seem that they haven't travel a bit or they haven't been outside of, you know the box of where they are, then I tend to then lighten up as much as possible to make sure I am easily understand. I always assume that it's on me to make sure that the person whom I'm speaking to or the persons that I'm speaking to understand what I'm saying and not necessarily on them. And I know it's not. I know it's a two-way street, but I feel like I have to do my part to actually make sure that I am being understood.

Most people who don't know me or they're not from where I am from or being around Jamaicans and everything, they don't actually know the true me. And you can't because when I get angry or when I get really super excited or whatever emotion that comes in between, you I can't necessary speak. We have different phrases back home that we say for different for different circumstances. And they encapsulate everything that you want to say in a situation, and it could be a one liner. And in certain situation, I am always, like I am saying it in my head, but I recognize that I can't say it out loud because no one around me would understand. So I would be in a conversation with someone and I know if it was back home, I could just say a one liner, and everyone in the room would get "Uh huh, that's what we're talking about." But here I can't do that because I know everyone would — then I would have to spend thirty minutes trying to explain what I'm trying to say in a way it makes sense. And so I can't necessarily be all of me. You know I can just be you know — it's a version of me, but it's not, you know, the entire thing. So you can't necessarily be your true self when you can't necessarily express yourself, you know, how you feel and, you know, across all levels. And so I think, yeah, I'm more real back home or at least in an environmental way I am surrounded by like kinds [laughs]. A way of saying that.

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