

Female Speaker: The modern history of the United States of America began with waves of immigrants bringing their own cultures and traditions which, of course, includes their native languages. Americans with Italian, Chinese, German, French, Russian, or Indian last names, to name a few, most likely will not know how to speak the language of their ancestors, even in they're as close as their parents. But for some, learning that language that connects them to a personal family history becomes an important part of their identity, and getting rid of their English accent is part of it.

My name is Yelena Rivera Vale. I am 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.

Male Speaker: My name is Sebastian and this is my accent story. As you can hear, I am born and raised in the U.S. and I have like a very, let's say, like a pretty standard accent I would say, especially, I'm from California so I have a bit of that Californian, laidback accent, let's say.

I think the strongest way that accent affects me is through my parents. And so both my parents are German immigrants. And so — and they're — and so not only are they native German speakers, but they are people that, despite being in the U.S. for by now 22 years, 23, never really managed to lose their accents. And so that means when I was growing up I was surrounded with this kind of, maybe a little bit of "half-English." We always talk about speaking "Germish" at home, or that German-English combination. And so that meant that even from a very young age, I was encouraged to treat English a little bit more flexibly than most people would, right? So there's like a little bit of wiggle room that you find at the corners of any language that, specifically, coming in as a non-native speaker, you tend to find those edges. And I think that's one of the things that really makes me enjoy English as a language and kind of story telling in itself is recognizing how much space there is to play around with words and to like actually have that kind of looseness. There is another kind of interesting aspect of how accent affects me in that, because my parents are German and I was raised in the U.S., I speak German fluently, but I speak it only — or I learned to speak German only from speaking with my parents. So the way that accent affects me the most is actually in my German in that — so when I was in high school, I spoke German with a very thick American accent. To the point where it was like yeah, you almost couldn't understand me. And at around high school — even though I had been speaking German since I was quite young — at about high school age I decided that I needed to get rid of that accent. And in fact, so my grandparents on my father's side are from South Germany, specifically Baden-Württemberg right on the Swiss border is where their town is, and so they speak with a very thick dialect as well, but it is their own dialect, right, so it's an acceptable German dialect as opposed to the, let's say, American dialect that I was speaking. And so at around that time, when I decided that I really needed to get rid of my accent, I started trying to speak with as thick a dialect as possible primarily because the sounds of the dialect are much easier than the sounds of High German. So I went and I really like tried to really like thicken it up. And as part of that process of like almost making these absurd sounds in my German, it got me to the point where now, of course provided that I speak enough of it to begin with, I can get away, let's say, for the first — I'd say for the first like minute or two of a conversation, I can typically get away with people thinking that I'm German. Unfortunately, after about two minutes you get to the point where my grammar starts to show and the fact that I never studied it formally and that instead I have just horrible German grammar. But it was, yeah, it was like a concerted effort that I made when I was younger that if I spoke like a German, I would be closer to kind of my German heritage.

Yeah, I definitely paid a lot of attention to pronunciation of things. I mean even now my sister and I like make a lot of fun of my mother, of her pronunciation of things. So the classic example — she refers to the thing on her jaw as her "shin" and that the thing on the front side of your calf is the "chin." So I bang my "chin" [chuckles] on the table this morning. Yeah, so we did pay attention to pronunciation a little bit. I think it's something that grew over time, let's say. And especially — I mean I think it's pretty standard for children to find whatever surrounds them in their home, standard, right? You know if you're raised with one — like one parent — you somehow assume that everyone has one parent or et cetera. So I feel like it's something that I only really only appreciated when I came back. So like I went, you know, I went to college and then I came back and kind of really had the full

feeling for it. And so definitely, let's say, my appreciation of it now is very different than my appreciation of it when I was younger primarily just because, yeah, I think especially when you are very young, you look at such things as kind of a hindrance. It's like something like, why would you say it like that? That's so stupid! But I feel like by now it's a gift, right? Like I think having that flexibility is quite a nice thing. Just in the same way that speaking two languages gives you just like completely different frames of reference for the world. There are certain thoughts that are easier to think in a certain language. And so, you know having both of those frameworks even, you know, kind of the challenging process of discovering where the thoughts don't match up well where you're trying to say something in the other language and you realize it just isn't the right thing, isn't the right language to say it in. So those are all things that are, at the time, quite frustrating, and then you—like you realize later that, yeah, I mean I feel like it's also kind of a larger statement about life, right? It's the points of friction and frustration that actually encourage you to like grow and learn. And so like having even those small daily ones can be quite frustrating because they are points of friction, but over the long term they are kind of gifts.

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