

Yelena Rivera Vale: One of the definitions of accent found in the Meriam-Webster dictionary is “a distinctive manner of expression such as A. a way of speaking typical of a particular group of people and especially of the natives or residents of a region.” For example, “spoke with a Russian accent.” B. “An individual’s, or characteristic inflection, tone, or choice of words usually, used in plural.” Hence, by definition, everyone who speaks has an accent even when it’s hard to tell which region, country, or ethnic group this person belongs to.

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.

Female Speaker: My name is Carol Subiño Sullivan and this is my accent story. I grew up in Tampa, Florida, on the coast. And like many places in coastal Florida, the accent is not recognizably Southern. In fact, many times you hear people say, “Florida is not the South.” When people say that, they mean coastal Florida. If you go to central Florida, on the other hand, you’re back in the South even though you may have just driven east-west and the accents noticeably change. My mother is Puerto Rican and my dad is from Spain. So in my home, we spoke Spanish until it was time for me to go to school. And we — we also had in my house, my grandmother also lived with us — my father’s mother.

I was aware of accents from basically the very beginning because not only did we speak Spanish inside my house, my father and my grandmother are from a region of Spain where they even speak a different language, Catalan. They would speak that to each other. So I was hearing Spanish in my house, Catalan in my house, and if I left my house, then I would hear English or listen to television. So I was always surrounded by a diversity of languages. And even my parents had very different accents from each other both in Spanish and in English. [laughing] It’s just two very ways to speak Spanish being from those two countries. In Florida, all of my mother’s family — my grandparents, aunts and uncles — were all there so I had a lot of exposure to a Puerto Rican accent, but then I had the Spanish sound from my father and grandmother.

And my mother, being from Puerto Rico, she learned to speak English from a young age so, actually, you have to listen close to her English to detect an accent, a Spanish accent. It’s there, but you have to listen for it whereas my dad didn’t come to the United States until he was in his 30s so he has a very strong accent when you listen to his English. It’s interesting to think about accent as a choice because I don’t know that I’d ever thought about it in that way. I remember having conversations like with my grandmother specifically. She shared with me that when she was young, her parents were very insistent that she pronounce her “S’s” well and she insisted that for me and I had no idea what she meant. But later on, I realized that in Spain it’s very common for “S’s” in certain words to be pronounced with your tongue between your teeth basically. [hiss] The “S’s” are pronounced with a very different way in Spain than in the Caribbean.

But my grandmother’s parents and great grandparents had actually spent time in Cuba and they liked the Caribbean accent. So they imposed that on her and she was reinforcing that with me. So, but I would say that’s like the one — the one moment where I was like consciously thinking about what should my accent be in Spanish? I had many friends growing up — in Tampa, there’s many people from Cuba so that accent was also always around. And I think it’s just my accent evolved I think from being surrounded by all of these different types and then, you know, being educated in the United States. You know eventually the majority of your time you spend speaking in English. So there’s — when you listen to my Spanish, you definitely hear that accent in there as well.

So again, not a choice, but it’s just sort of what happened as a result to being exposed. In English, I remember I was always very concerned with being correct [laughing] when I was in school. When I first started to go to school, as I said, I didn’t really speak English in my home and it wasn’t until I went to school that really I needed to speak English. So my first — my parents put me in a preschool about a year before Kindergarten and they put me in the group of children a year younger than me because they

were concerned that I would have difficulty with language. But either from my own memory or from what people have told me, that lasted just a couple of weeks and I instantly was able to communicate just like the other kids. So I got put back into the regular level that I was supposed to be at because of my age.

When I chose my academic path, I became an anthropologist. I don't think it's an accident given what I experienced living growing up. You know just constantly from the very beginning being aware of different cultures and crossing the cultural boundaries between one and the other and having to be able to adapt depending on the group of people I'm surrounded with. And so I think that somehow, even though I didn't know what anthropology was until I got to college, somehow those perspectives came into my life from a very early age and I've always been attracted to cultural difference and learning about, you know, where different people are from and that includes, you know, if they have a different way of speaking. I think that one of my qualities is that I'm a good listener. Whether somebody has an accent that I'm not familiar with, even if I encounter an accent I'm not familiar with, I will put an effort in to understand what it is the person is trying to communicate.

I've seen, like my father, people I love, have difficulty with other people understanding them, and I think that's made me more sensitive to it. To the point that if I notice that something like that is going on and I think that the person speaks Spanish, I'll probably offer if you know, I can be of help and somehow being a go-between in the conversation. I've done this on planes [laughing]. I've done this, you know, just in random public spaces. [laughing] So it's— I usually end up making a friend at the end of the conversation rather than being a nuisance. But yeah, just really attuned that sometimes an accent can be a barrier to communication and, you know, give the wrong impression that the person with an accent somehow is not intelligent or doesn't have as much to say when really it's just the communication isn't happening. So if I can do something to, you know, help facilitate that, then I guess that's one small way that my sort of stealth language skills can come into service.

Occasionally, you know, wished I had an accent that identified me stronger with my ethnic background, which I'm Latina— I'm half Puerto Rican and half Spanish— because many times people don't recognize me as such or they even question me or they'll say, "You know, you're not really Latina. You're just, you know, normal" is what they say, whatever that means. [laughing] Maybe if I didn't have such an unmarked accent then I could feel like I had some kind of visible marker of belonging

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