

Yelena Rivera Vale: Native English-speaking countries, or territories, are Anguilla, Antigua, and Barbuda, Australia, the Bahamas, Barbados, Belize, Bermuda, Botswana, British Virgin Islands, Cameroon, Canada, except Québec, Cayman Islands, Dominica, Fiji, Gambia, Ghana, Grenada, Guyana, Ireland, Jamaica, Kenya, Lesotho, Liberia, Malawi, Malta, Mauritius, Monserrat, Namibia, New Zealand, Nigeria, Papua New Guinea, Saint Kitts and Nevis, Saint Lucia, Saint Vincent and the Grenadines, Seychelles, Sierra Leone, Singapore, Solomon Islands, South Africa, Swaziland, Tanzania, Tonga, Trinidad and Tobago, Turks and Caicos Islands, Uganda, United Kingdom, United States of America, Vanuatu, Zambia, and Zimbabwe.

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.

Eugene Mangortey: My name is Eugene Mangortey and this is my accent story. The first time I realized that I had an accent was when I first arrived in the United States. That was my first trip to the United States. That was sometime in 2007. My mom and I went to McDonald's store and we had some difficulty trying to order a meal because the lady just couldn't understand what we were trying to say. That is the first time that I realized I had an accent or that people had challenges understanding what I was saying because of the way I sound.

Sometimes I feel like, hey, I wish I had an American accent. It makes life easier, you know? The question, "Oh, where are you from?" It's an interesting question but sometimes it gets annoying. Sometimes, you know, I wish I could just fit in, you know? But you know, that's life, you know? I've just got to deal with it. I just — at this point, I just go with it. People ask me where am I from, I answer the question genuinely. Sometimes what I try to do is play a guessing game. I say, "Where do you think I'm from?" You know, try to get people thinking and going just to sort of, in my opinion, just to make it a joke or something just to, you know, make it candid, jovial. But to be honest with you at this point in time in my life, I just do not pay attention to it anymore. I don't wish I could change my accent. I love it. It's unique because anytime I run into a fellow person from Ghana or West Africa, as soon as I hear someone speak like me or as soon as someone hears me speak, they turn around and we have a conversation. So it's perfect. I probably wouldn't be having those conversations if I had another accent, so.

I remember that I went to an engineering camp in 2012, sometime in high school, and I was speaking with one of the fellow high school kids who was there and he heard my accent and he was like, "Where are you from?" I said, "I'm from Ghana." And he asked me, "Oh, have you met Lion King?" And it was just one of those [laughing] it's one of those, you know, times where it's like, you know, it is what it is. I had to educate this young man [laughing] that Lion King is not real. But yes, my accent has led to conversations like that, you know? I've had situations where I am speaking and people misconstrue what I'm saying because of the way I say certain words, you know? So yeah, very interesting situations I find myself in. The main thing is definitely school-wise, I always try to practice before I present any work or anything just to make sure that what I'm trying to say is not taken the wrong way. So all I have to say is that as the years have gone by, the number of incidents have gradually decreased [laughing] so I'm happy with that.

A lot of people have asked me if English was my native language. People have assumed it was French for some reason. [laughing] But a lot of people have asked me if English is my native language and I'm like, "Yes. It is my first language." That is the first language I actually learned to speak, before I actually learned other local languages or tribal languages in Ghana. I've actually been asked, "Your English is pretty good, your English is pretty good." And I'm like, "OK, OK, thank you. It is my first language, but thank you."

Personally I've had the opportunity, I've been privileged to be able to visit different countries so I do realize that there's an accent. One thing I've realized is that a lot of people in the United States tend to not leave the country. A lot of people tend to stay here. A lot of people have not been abroad. So to them, this is how people should sound like, should speak like. So I think there is that

standard because maybe there's not that much exposure to different cultures to certain people in America, or the United States. So there's usually that, you know, difference or there's that difference because, in my opinion, people are not used to different cultures or different accents here. As I said earlier on, I feel like I've had the opportunity to visit different places and hear different people speak, so to me I honestly do not think about it. I hear someone with an accent, I just go with it. I don't have to think twice. I try my best to grasp as much as I can from what they are saying without making them feel bad about having an accent. I love my accent and I feel like that's what makes everyone unique—certain things make everyone unique. I've had people tell me, "Hey why don't you try to develop an American accent, OK, and try an American accent." And it's a part of me that I honestly do not want to lose. I could easily try to fake an American accent. People do it, but it's my identity and I don't want to lose it.

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