

Yelena Rivera Vale: On May 2017, John Oliver, host of the American late-night talk and news television program Last Week Tonight shared at The Late Show with Stephen Colbert the fact that he used his accent to gain trust of strangers. He described it as tragically and slightly offensive since it all was because of “Kind of borrowed authority of the British accent.” He went on to say that people would remark “This man sounds very elegant,” even when being disrespectful.

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.

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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.

Sravanthi Meka: My name is Sravanthi Meka, and this is my accent story. I grew up with many accents; so I was born and raised in New Orleans and Mississippi. And my parents had Indian accents; my grandparents had Indian accents, but everyone around me had Southern accents. So I was kind of a mix depending on where I was, and the first time I became really aware of it and more self-conscious than ever was when we went to India. I've been multiple times, but when it really affected me was when I was seven, that age when you start realizing what other people are thinking of you and saying about you. And my grandmother in India said she couldn't understand my accent or what I was saying in Telugu, our native language, and she just asked me to speak in English because it was easier. So that's when I realized that my accent in English is different, and when I was speaking in Telugu, it was also with a Southern accent, and she couldn't understand that. So that was eye opening for me, that accents in different languages sound different.

I find that when — like the town that I grew up in after we moved to Georgia is considered rural. It's in the middle of nowhere of Georgia right on the Alabama state line. And I notice when I go visit my family there, I turn into more of a redneck accent, versus a refined Southern accent so to speak. So whereas when I am here in Atlanta, it's more of a distinct — my word endings are more distinct. I pronounce the G's at the end of writing and doing. I don't say “fixin” [laughs]. Like when I go home, I'm “goin” out instead of I'm going out, so I'll change how I speak. So you try to make yourself sound like everyone else that's around you depending on where you are.

And I find I have friends that do that as well. If they come and visit from New York or Chicago when I'm talking to them on the phone when they're at home, they have a different accent versus when they come home. So I thought that was very interesting. One of the first times after college that they went off into the real world and their accents started to change depending on where they were, but when they came home, they became Georgia again. So it depends on who I'm speaking with that my accent changes. But it also makes me change my speed of how quickly I speak. When I'm speaking to my grandmother — she has lived in the Deep South for four years after she came here from India — but she still comprehends at a slower rate than the rest of us do for her English. I think the first time I didn't care what people thought about my accent was when I was visiting my brother in New York in 2008, and somebody said I sounded Southern, and I said of course I do; I am from Georgia. I'm gonna sound Southern, and I realized — I didn't realize that I had a Southern accent as strongly as I did because it wasn't as strong as when I went back to my hometown. My accent wasn't as strong as what I thought it was, but when it's surrounded by accents that are different from mine, it definitely does stand out. And at that point, I said you know what I don't care that's part of my identity, so I'm going to embrace it now.

I think the biggest misconception is that because my family speaks with an Indian accent that English is not their first language. In a lot of other countries, English is taught at the same time that the main languages, so for my parent, they learned English in the four and five-year-old stage. Or it was spoken in their home as much as our native language was. So I think that's the biggest misconception that there is here in the United States. And then in the South, I think there's always a misconception, I am hoping that it's going away, that when you have a Southern accent, you're not educated. And I think that's starting to go away. I hope.

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