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Accentuating the Wrong Accent

A lucky few people are born with truly majestic voices. Not singing voices, I'm simply talking about those rare, awe-inspiring speaking voices that leave you so enchanted that you're left paralyzed and clinging to each word spoken, no matter how juvenile the content. Morgan Freeman comes to mind, David Attenborough, Matthew McConaughey, Emily Blunt, I could go on; all sensational voices. Now, remember the first time you heard your voice in a recording? There's a slim chance you have an irrational amount of self-confidence and/or are plain delusional, but I'd be willing to bet that your reaction was similar to mine in that you spiraled down a path of self-hatred and began researching whether or not mute life is the one for you.¹ Eventually you simply crossed out ~~narrator~~ on your career choices list and grew to accept there was little you could change, if you were lucky puberty may have even hooked you up with an upgrade and you moved onwards with life. This is where I was at nine months ago.

Say you spent the first 18 years of your life in one country, and then decided, on only slightly more than a whim, to pack your bags and take everything you have to a new country,

¹ Already bored with this paper and want a laugh? Google "I want to be a mute" and read some of the random forum threads that pop up. An all-time perfect example of how truly a bizarre

and start over. Whoosh. Everything's different. Only it's not.² There's only one issue that arises; you don't talk like you did for your first 18 years. Instinctively, you begin to talk like the people around you. It's not an overnight change, it's more of a freight train that you can see from miles away but have no power to stop. Your jaw feels stiff at the end of the day because you're using it in a different way than you ever have before. It takes a conscious effort for you to speak in your native tongue. How do you interpret this? Are you just fitting in *really* well? Do you fear not being understood? Are you self-conscious and afraid of being different? Regardless of what it is, something seems off. For better or worse, that voice that you so strongly despised at first but grew to accept as an appropriate reflection of your upbringing and identity, it was gone.³

You probably have a couple questions at this point. Like, "where are you even from, dude?" [Chur bro](#), absolute ripper of a question. I'm from New Zealand. "Why should I care that your stupid voice that you didn't even like in the first place changed, mate?"⁴ Fair question. You should care because over the past nine months since I arrived in America, I've begun to appreciate how large of a role our voice and accent plays in our identity. Without an accent, what easily identifiable connection do we have to our country of origin? With the exception of wearing clothing emblazoned in your native country's flag,⁵ an accent is the easiest and least obnoxious way to be identified and for someone to know where you're from.

² Pro-tip for when you inevitably go abroad, especially if it's to another developed country that speaks English: nothing's different. Literally, humans are the same everywhere, you weak-ass-conforming-unoriginal-ask-the-same-shitty-questions-I'm-also-talking-about-me people.

³ Worst part of losing the accent is I've had to learn to make small talk again. Literally for the entire first quarter I would go up to people, introduce myself in the strongest New Zealand accent possible, answer like one stupid question about my major and boom, I'd get asked about the accent. I'd whip out my perfectly scripted, well-refined spiel about how foreign and interesting I was, and voila, I'm the most interesting guy in the room. We have a serious exigence on our hands here, folks.

⁴ 'Cause you have a stupid voice too and one day you might lose it and feel real feelings of loss and whatnot, pal.

⁵ Looking at you, every single upper-middle class American male aged 18-24 who may enjoy a

Before I continue to unload my personal fears and anxieties about my accent's current state of affairs, allow me to first explain precisely what an accent is, and address a few of the myths that exist surrounding them.

The most important distinction to make when defining accent is that it refers solely to pronunciation. As pointed out in the [Dictionary of Linguistics and Phonetics](#) definition of "accent," it's easy to confuse accent with dialect, which refers to a person's grammar and vocabulary as well. For example, you can say "chuck another shrimp on the barbeque, mate," all day long, but you're not necessarily impersonating an Australian accent, you're simply employing their dialect. Another important nugget [of information](#), this time from Anthea Fraser Gupta at the University of Leeds: it is genuinely impossible to not have an accent. Regardless of how high-society British you may be, if you speak, you have an accent. This, understandably, can be a somewhat difficult concept to grasp. Naturally, especially when younger and not exposed to different accents, we are easily inclined to believe that our voice is the default option, after-all, it is probably pretty much a perfect combination of the accents that we have been exposed to. Our accent is sitting perfectly in the middle of the circle, and anything otherwise is some kind of a deviation, whether minimal or drastic, from the norm.

So there might not be "neutral" accent, but does a "correct" version of the English accent exist? This could very easily derail into an argumentative paper at this point, so to keep this simple, I'm going to drop my ego and simply compare the two most common and well-known English accents: General American (GenAm), and Received Pronunciation (RP). In case you're wondering what these accents sound like, here is an example of [General](#)

[American](#), and here, [Received Pronunciation](#).⁶ Each accent brings with it certain connotations, speak with RP, and you'll find yourself being called snobby and out-of-touch. Use GenAM, and there'll be a select portion of the population who consider you to be on a mission to destroy the English language. Truthfully, the only right answer here is that there isn't any one accent that is better than others.⁷ The most correct accent is going to be the one that is most easily understandable, thus, probably the one that is most similar to the norm depending on your location.

Obviously, you're not born with an accent; every newborn child is a blank slate. Patricia Kuhl, the director of the Center for Mind, Brain, and Learning at the University of Washington, [has found that](#) our accent and ability to interpret sounds is largely formed between six months and one year old, often before babies even say their first word. Kuhl's study involved having a baby sit on their mother's lap, and having a loud speaker projecting into the room, "la la la la la" at one-second intervals. Eventually, the speaker will say "la la ra," at this exact moment, a toy bear jumps out of a plastic box and starts dancing and beating on a drum, thus sending the baby the message that when the sound changes, they should turn to watch the bear perform and get their reward. At 6 months old, both two thirds of Japanese and American children know to look when they hear the "ra" sound, however by the time the children are one-year-olds, 80 percent of American and only 59 percent of Japanese children recognize the difference between "la" and "ra" and know to turn their heads to see the performing bear. These findings shouldn't infer that by the age of one people's accent's are already set in stone, our ability to pick up intricacies from different dialects is a constant

⁶ If you couldn't be bothered using the hyperlinks or are reading a printed version, just imagine an American news anchor or NPR broadcaster for General American, and the British equivalent for Received Pronunciation.

⁷ Though there is a rant to be had about how America went out of their way to consciously

process, however it should simply prove that from a very young age, human's are very good at picking up noises and adjusting to our current environment.⁸

Richard Cauldwell, an English teacher, wrote [an interesting piece](#) in 2013 where he gives himself the perspective of "Lord Rant," a grumpy old man who sees himself as an authoritative source on the English language, and believes that any accent that deviates from his own must be policed. Throughout the process, Cauldwell realized that many of his own prejudices about accents didn't stem from his opinions of the dialect, but instead from his dislike of the people that carried that particular accent, this dislike then becoming synonymous with the accent and becoming latched to each other. This example shows why we may see other accents and types of voices as inferior to ours, or even that we simply are capable of prejudice based on voice. Don't believe me? Let's play a quick game. I'm going to list out a couple of different types of people and I want you to think about how you imagine their accent would sound.

1. A stupid person
2. A posh person
3. A racist person
4. A nerdy person
5. A really high person

Allow me to have a guess. You went something like, 1) Homer Simpson, 2) British Royalty, 3) A Southern drawl, 4) Super nasally, 5) Seth Rogen. Was I close? My point is that voice and accents bring with them certain prejudice. This isn't a paper on stereotypes,⁹ however I hope that it proves that accents are as much a part of your identity and easily judged as any other trait, we just often tend to forget about them, as we spend most of our time around

⁸ Or maybe it simply proves that Japanese toddlers just don't like performing toys as much.

people with one very similar to our own. Only once we find ourselves in an environment where our accent is perceived as foreign and different, are you exposed to the prejudice that this brings with it.¹⁰

Now, hopefully equipped with a greater understanding and appreciation of the importance of accents on us as people, I plan to investigate why mine changed so rapidly, and what can be inferred from this change.

To conduct this investigation, I must identify all the possible variables that affect accent strength. Thankfully, my dilemma is not entirely unique and research exists that has already identified key variables that affect accent strength. In 2011, Agata Gluszek and colleagues from Yale University performed a key study on accent strength and its relationship with our personal sense of belonging in a new place of living titled “Social Psychological Orientations and Accent Strength.” The study, while focused on non-native English speakers, so not perfectly relevant to my own research as I look into the troubles faced by native English speakers who have travelled to other English speaking countries, provides a solid outline of the different variables that can affect accent strength. These variables include the length of time spent in “host” country, the age when the subject arrived in America, the level of identification that the subject has with both their home and host country, and finally their level of “social belonging” and comfort toward assimilating to American culture. This specific outline of the most important factors is very helpful for my study, as I can take these variables and consider how I stack up next to each one. Allow me to run through the variables quickly.

¹⁰ Worth noting that prejudice's are not exclusively negative, in fact I could confidently say that the vast majority of prejudice I've experienced is very positive. Thanks for never rocking the

- Time spent in USA = 9 months
- Age upon arrival = 19
- Identification with NZ = Fairly neutral¹¹
- Identification with USA = Slightly less so than NZ
- Feelings of “social belonging” in the USA = Hard to say, maybe a 7/10?

Looking at these different variables, I’m able to identify the potential “problem areas” and what aspects I should focus on in my research. Nine months is a very short amount of time for an accent to change so heavily, so I can rule out “time spent” as a major factor. 19 years old is likely not young enough that age is a big factor either. However, what do jump out as potential factors are my level of identification with my home country, New Zealand, which I don’t consider to be particularly high, and my feeling of “social belonging” here in America. In the following two paragraphs I’m going to dive deeper into these two variables to find whether or not therein lies the answer to my mystery.

Feelings of nationalism and pride in one’s home country was confirmed as a relevant factor in accent strength in a 2008 study called “Language and Identity on the Scottish-English Border,” completed by five researchers from the University of York led by Dr. Gerard Docherty. The researchers found that among Scottish participants “there was a strong correlation between those who said they’d vote ‘yes’ for independence and those with a very identifiably Scottish accent.” These findings support my theory that a lack of identification and pride for New Zealand culture could be a factor affecting my accent strength. It’s probably worth clarifying this in case you have the impression that I look down at New Zealand with complete contempt. It’s not that I feel zero pride for New Zealand, I’m just not

¹¹ Directly translates to “I can do the haka, but require a certain level of inebriation first,” or “Rugby’s my favorite sport! But I’ve only watched one and a half games in the past nine months

so nationalistic that I've ever considered it a big part of my personal identity or something that defines me.¹² I suppose that it could just be summarized as a general sense of apathy towards my home, which makes sense considering I opted to leave and come here for University.¹³

The second variable that I identified was a lack of “social belonging” and a desire to better assimilate to my peers and new country. Sam Parker, a writer for *Esquire* wrote a piece about [“the ever-changing accent”](#) in December 2014, that I believe addresses this variable nicely. Parker, with the help of linguistics expert Dr. Damien Hall from Newcastle University, concluded that accent change is largely the result of an effort to be understood. “Subconsciously, you always have the impulse to adapt to your surroundings, wherever you are.” Hall goes on to say that we adapt our accent in an effort to be understood by the “lowest common denominator,” in other words we attempt to speak in an accent with as few regional peculiarities as possible. Even though I never felt truly “misunderstood” with my New Zealand accent, given that I'm not the type of person to try and attract attention and stand out in the crowd, I think that it's very possible that I was more willing than most to adapt my accent in order to fit-in with the crowd. This is comforting, if one of the primary causes of my accent change is that I feel compelled to simply alter my voice to join the masses, then logic would hold that upon return to New Zealand, almost immediately, my accent should return back to its previous state.

¹² As an example, I've never taken any interest in New Zealand's history, and the parts I have I'm not terribly proud of (see: every British colonization story ever).

¹³ A contrarian argument here is that if I were really so unenthused about all-things New Zealand, why do I feel so compelled to write about losing the accent? I guess my answer would be that upon losing the accent and my strongest and most obvious outward connection to home, I realized that potentially the connection, or desire for a connection, to New Zealand that I had

Unlike the majority of student written papers that are written in a caffeine-induced state the night before the due date, this project, from start-to-finish, has been written over the course of about six weeks.¹⁴ Over the course of these six weeks, I've been afforded the time to ponder the true consequences of my previous accent's disappearance. Is it really the traumatic change that I've made it out to be at certain times over the course of this paper? In Dora Joseph's 2010 [article](#), "The Loss of a Culture with an Accent," finds herself eventually coming to accept her British accent, even if it doesn't accurately reflect her French heritage. Joseph cited the fact that her accent need not be a reflection of her identity, and that ultimately she "did not lose [her] French culture at all." I find this important, and something that I've come to realize over the past six weeks. Even if my accent has permanently changed,¹⁵ how big of a problem is it really? My upbringing and culture will continue to show through my personality, and no change in accent can affect the memories that I formed while growing up in New Zealand.¹⁶ If the biggest inconvenience I have to deal with is coming up with creative methods to drop the "I'm from New Zealand," line on people during conversation, then perhaps this is less of an issue than I anticipated six weeks ago.

¹⁴ Albeit, basically a series of three or four different late night caffeine-induced states, but nevertheless an important distinction.

¹⁵ Which, again, I don't think is the case at all.

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