

## ACCENTS

Growing up, I was aware that different people spoke differently. My mother, and her friends who were born in Eastern Europe, and who spoke “Jewish,” spoke with a Jewish accent. Italians spoke with Italian accents. Irish spoke with Irish accent etc. Some had stronger accents than others. It may have depended on how long they were in the US, or how young they were when they came to the US, or how adept they were at losing their accent. Henry Kissinger and his brother came to the US at the same time. Henry has a heavy accent; his brother does not. When his brother was asked why, he replied, “I listened.”

A popular book in the late 1930's by Leo Rosten (whose nom de plume was Leo Q. Ross) was “The Education of H\*Y\*M\*A\*N K\*A\*P\*L\*A\*N.” It was about a night school English class. Whenever Mr. Kaplan spoke, (as well as some of the other students) it was with a Yiddish accent. The mispronunciation is apparently what made the book funny. First President George Washington was pronounced by Mr. Kaplan, “Foist Prazidant, Jawdge Vashington.” V's become w's, and vice versa. Th's become d's. Already is awreddy. Girl is goil. Fancy is fency. Letter is ladder.

To me, American-born grown-ups did not have an accent. My mother's friends' children and I, born here, did not have an accent. Many of us were embarrassed by our parents' accents. Some of the black and Puerto Rican kids in my junior high and high school, did speak with black and Spanish accents. I assumed it was because they may have been born in the southern US or Puerto Rico, and they lived in predominantly black and Puerto Rican neighborhoods (called ghettos, for blacks, and barrios, for Puerto Ricans.) Many of New York's Puerto Ricans, called Newyoricans, continued speaking Spanish, and would shuttle back and forth between New York and Puerto Rico. My Puerto Rican classmates, born here, spoke unaccented English, as did my friend, Frank Torres. His father was born in the US, and, in fact, was elected to the New York State Assembly from our neighborhood.

When I entered CCNY, and took “Public Speaking,” I was told that I spoke with an accent. Whaddiya know! It was evident to the instructor that I “dentalized” my t's and d's. I had no idea what he was talking about. He explained that students like myself (having grown up in a Yiddish speaking home) tended to place their tongues on their teeth, instead of their upper palate, when pronouncing t's and d's. That was wrong. I was told to change it, and like a good boy, I changed it. Non-New Yorkers insisted that New Yorkers spoke with a New York accent. We came from Noo Yawk, and would go to toidy-toid street. Just as Bostonians dropped their “r's” (Pack youa ca in Havad Yad), New Yorkers emphasized and hardened their g's. (Going gover Long Gisland), and tawked different with regard to sentence structure from WASPs and other “Real Americans.”

In the 1940's, there was a radio program featuring a speech expert who could listen to a person and tell where he or she grew up, just from the way the person spoke. I was told that eventually, he would no longer be able to do that because we will all have radios, and

it will wipe out regional speech. From listening to the radio, all native Americans will begin to speak like one another. In addition, with increased ease of travel, people will be moving around much more. The different regions will no longer be isolated, and regional accents will become lost or corrupted.

Hollywood both added to, and detracted from, this phenomenon. It spread American speech all across the country, but it also gave us movie stars who spoke wonderfully accented English: Charles Boyer, Akim Tamiroff, Hedy Lamarr, Marlene Dietrich, Ingrid Bergman, Greta Garbo, Katy Jurado, Boris Karloff, Bela Lugosi, as well as American born James Cagney, Will Rogers, John Wayne, Gary Cooper, Katharine Hepburn, John Garfield, Tallulah Bankhead etc.

A great play, which became a great movie, is “My Fair Lady,” from George Bernard Shaw’s Pygmalion. It is all about accents, and the fact that speech reflects class, and socio-economic status, as well as ethnicity. Cockney speech in England is much like New York speech in the US, but worse. And just like Public Speaking at CCNY, Henry Higgins undertook to get Eliza Doolittle to lose her cockney accent, to stop dropping h’s, and mispronouncing a’s. It was her newly acquired speech that transformed a flower girl into a lady.

In high school, we all had to learn a foreign language. Just as important as learning grammar and vocabulary, was learning how to pronounce the words, and how to speak with a proper accent. It was not easy. It required careful listening and repetition. It helped if you had an ear for languages. One of my all time favorite TV programs was Sid Caesar’s “Your Show of Shows.” He frequently played a foreign character and appeared to be speaking French or Russian or German or Italian. He was actually speaking gibberish, but with a perfect accent. He had an ear for languages.

As I noted earlier, my friends and I grew up in Yiddish-speaking homes. (The homes did not speak Yiddish; the people who lived in them did.) Yiddish was our first language. Perhaps that is why when we went to college, we had to be taught how to speak and form words in English somewhat differently from the way we did when we were children. These days, when we speak Yiddish, even though we have forgotten words, and never knew grammar, we still speak with good pronunciation. We learned the language at our mother’s knee. It is referred to as “mameloshn,” mother tongue.

There is a new generation who would like to learn Yiddish, but who did not have the same good fortune as my friends and myself. They did not hear native Yiddish speakers, and most of them have trouble pronouncing the words correctly. They are unable to make the proper guttural sounds, unable to roll the r’s. I suspect they will have to be taught to “dentalize” their t’s and d’s. (My son David is an exception.) My friend Bob has a good command of Yiddish, to such an extent, that he was once asked by a Russian born, native Yiddish speaker, “Vere vos you born?” He was astounded to learn that Bob was American born, an “Americaner goboiriner.”

I never know how to react when I am told that I do not have a New York accent. I tend to be annoyed. I certainly do not say thank you, or take it as a compliment. It is as if someone would say to me, “You don’t look Jewish.” I am a proud New Yorker (and a proud Jew). When anyone asks me these days where I am from, I respond: currently or originally. From my speech, it is clear that I am not a native Bostonian. But, thanks to my CCNY Public Speaking classes, I do not sound like a stereotypical New Yorker, whatever that is. I am pleased when a fellow New Yorker recognizes a connection. There are subtle differences across the city, but it is generally agreed that the best New York accent comes from Brooklyn. And to quote Lenny Bruce: If you are from New York and you’re Catholic, you are still Jewish.” We all have New York accents.

Just as we in America are aware of the different dialects across the country, it exists equally (or perhaps more so) among Yiddish speakers, the most prominent being the Galitzianers and the Litvaks. The academics describe three groupings: Western, which is where it all began—in Germany; Northern—Litvish, Lithuania (Litvaks); and Southern—Poland and Galicia (Galitzianers). The Litvaks say “kugel,” and the Galitzianers say “kigel.” They also have differences in taste.

Finally, speaking of taste, America was once called “the melting pot.” People came here from all over the world. They spoke different languages, and when they learned English, they spoke with different accents, and made different contributions. Eventually, they would all be melted down and be alike. Rather than melting pot, I like the designation I once heard: salad bowl. We are an American salad bowl. We maintain our identity, our different tastes, colors, origins. It is all right for each of us to have our own accent, dialect, or regional speech. I like that image. Don’t homogenize us. Whaddiya say?

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