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Earwitnesses

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Abstract

Having an accent in spoken English is a common linguistic reality for many migrants and their subsequent generations. In reality, having a linguistic variation can result in "othering", prejudice, discrimination, and racism. I wanted to explore and respond to what it means to have an accent, for both speakers and listeners. This essay includes moments of the personal with cultural, critical, and contemporary responses; poetic interruptions and instances of first language loss; of how accented language *can* be used to exclude and identify, but *should* be used to include.

Keywords: Creative Writing, accents, racism, migrants, Latinx

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"I... wanted to put a person with an accent – i.e. me – in that space not as an object or even a subject but as an interpreter. Interpreter as a translator but also as someone who works at the level of meaning, not merely experience..." (Tumarkin)

I have been a long-time admirer of Maria Tumarkin as a person, as an academic, as a writer. I have worked with her, shared coffees and conversations. I've had the privilege of hearing her give powerful, boundary-pushing public talks and yet... I always find myself inwardly flinching whenever she has interrupted herself to apologise to her audience for speaking with an accent.

Aurally yours

-for Maria T and my mother-

*In another language I am matter's light.
 Shadow's light.
 The future, not the past.
 (Dominique Hecq, *Hush: A Fugue*, 2017)*

This is an aural apology
 for all you native English speakers in the house—
 for the mis-representation of my sounds
 for abusing my vowels and
 for the un-intentional
doblo sentido doblo sonido
 behind my words
 but most of all
 my sincerest of all dis-culpas
 to you dear listeners
 for your dis-comfort
 and the blatant audacity of
 my off-ending
acento.

I've often returned to these moments in Maria's speeches and wondered, who is this apology for? Why is there even a need to apologise? Is it for the listener's benefit or the speaker's? On Australian SBS (Special Broadcasting Service) TV, the use of accented English in its news, ads and shows has now become the norm. However, on Australian mainstream TV, apart from Miguel Maestre in *The Living Room* or Manu Feildel in *My Kitchen Rules*, or the stereotypical voices, like the no longer acceptable "softly-racist" Hank Azaria-voiced Indian-English accent of Apu, the convenience store owner from *The Simpsons*, hearing or having a pronounced "other/different" accent still doesn't seem to fit into the majority, dominant, Australian English-speaking norm.

See, I grew up surrounded by people speaking with accents, each with their own unique version of English. It's only when a speaker's accent is brought to my attention like this, that I truly begin to listen. I home in on it, note the particularities of their intonation, the lengthened or shortened vowel sounds, the final consonant stops that are cut off, the troublesome consonant clusters or blends. I note the interplay of their first language on the latter. I'll search for first-language traces, tonal inflections – accentuating, colouring, contouring, shaping and shadowing, the otherwise standardised and homogenised English language I have become so proficient in and attuned to.

In 2017, I was incredibly moved by poet Dominique Hecq at the launch of her book *Hush: A Fugue* held at The Alderman bar in the old migrant neighbourhood of Brunswick in inner-city Melbourne. Hecq introduced herself, her family and her many ties and linguistic complications. Now Melbourne-based, but originally French-speaking, Belgian-born. She spoke in accented English about writing, trauma, loss and death; her work is about her baby dying and being unable

to express this in her original mother tongue. The pain of hearing those words was audible, visceral and visible.

Mother's lost tongue

*All this is at the expense
of losing your mother tongue
and cracking your own voice...*
(Dominique Hecq, *Hush: A Fugue*, 2017)

... yo me llamo ...

What happens when
you lose your mother tongue?
Where does it go?

There are stages of learning a language, of having an accent and, if your age is right, you are fortunate and work hard enough, you can make it disappear. There's also losing one's mother tongue to gain another. For me, all I've ever felt is loss. Opening my mouth to speak my first tongue, only to find the words broken or gone. The pain. Sorrow. Knowing, I've done it to myself. My own hands reaching into my mouth, tearing that first tongue out to attach this one. I still bear the scars.

Who picks it up
and brushes it off?

I've seen people completely shut down when they hear someone speaking with an accent. They simply cannot or refuse to comprehend. Any variation to their spoken language, their body stiffens. Their face freezes. The lip curls: downwards sneer; or upwards into an in/outward, pained/strained smile.

Or once gone
does it stay hidden,
lost for
ever?

In her memoir *Unpolished Gem*, based on her Chinese-Cambodian childhood in the 1980s and 1990s, writer Alice Pung describes the kind of language spoken in the markets in her suburb of Footscray, Melbourne, where she grew up: "You wanna dis one?... 'How many you want hah?' To communicate... does not merely mean the strumming and humming of vocal cords, but much movement of hands and contortion of face" (2). Here, Pung already describes a more tolerant

youth in Australia, “where full sentences are not necessary” (2) and where her family’s broken-English was acceptable.

I grew up a generation earlier, in the 1970s and 1980s in pre-multicultural Brisbane at the tail end of the White Australia Policy and race-based immigration. Communication with Native English Speakers and people from my Non-English Speaking Background community was fraught with judgement, intolerance and humiliation. If Native English Speakers did respond, it was to mimic (us) the Non-English Speakers (badly). It was always us (Non) that would have to understand *them* (Native). The gesticulations. The extra vowels added at the end of words, “Ohkaay – ah. Yoouu (finger point) unn-der-staaaand?” The slowed down, choppy speech. The exaggerated mouthing. The ee-nuunn-cii-aa-tioonn. The nodding. Or fake smiling. Words said LOUDER. Or repeated. The under breath insults. “*Stupid wogs*.” The sounds of English splintering as it finally breaks you.

... tú te llamas ...

What happens
when you rip
your mother’s tongue
out of your bloody mouth
and replace it
with a new foreign tongue
a nice silky smooth one
a red white and blue one
a whitewashed wishy washed one?

Spanish was my first language then, code-switched Spanglish, before it was replaced with English. I say “was” because as a kid in pre-multicultural Brisbane, as soon as I opened my mouth, I was made to shut it — fast. Made to feel instantly ashamed of this “other” language. The openly racist “*bloody wog*” taunts spat at me, my siblings, my parents, our community. Ethnic shame forced me to stop speaking my language outside. Many migrant kids we knew, eventually refused to speak at all; this caused major conflicts at home. Some parents were unable to learn English and only able to speak their first language. Their kids had to translate for their “wog parents” on the phone, at the shops, at doctor’s appointments, at the dole office. At school, these kids were forced to assimilate and deliberately told to “forget” their first tongue; told by their indifferent teachers to only “speak English”. Imagine several generations living under the same roof, but no one understanding one another – the rifts, the tension, the mega-fights. The second-gen kids discriminated against, changing or having their given names changed to easier to pronounce, nick-namey Anglo ones; swapping their tongues, erasing their past and families from other countries. For their migrant (often traumatised refugee) parents, there was no further education. There were no English lessons, only hard lessons.

...él se llama...

I say,

What did you say
to those English-speaking natives
(strangers, adults who you didn't know) who spat their words at you
'What's that you f*ckin' wog? In this country, we speak English!'

In an interview on Channel Nine's *The Today Show*, responding to the outbreak of COVID in Melbourne public housing, One Nation Party leader, Pauline Hanson, retaliated to the suggestion of supplying the Non-English Speaking residents with special government announcements in their own languages: "Why should we put everything out in someone else's language when you come to Australia... Learn to speak English when you come here to this country. That's a big problem that we have in Australia... these people are from non-English speaking backgrounds, probably English is their second language..." (Mazzoni). If only "these people" had passed a dictation test.¹ It's never that simple. To escape trauma, poverty, disadvantage, then intolerance and discrimination, let alone flick on that language code-switch.

Words stuffed in a bottle,
fuelled and lit with hatred
hurled so hard and fast
that you s h a t t e r e d
when you first used your new tongue.

In 2016, *The New Yorker* ran a special series called "Childhood Reading". In his piece titled *Surrendering*, Vietnamese-American author and poet Ocean Vuong explained how learning the English language as a child was like "immigrating all over again... I had become fluent – but only in speech, not the written word." (Vuong). As kids, we too spoke Spanish, but couldn't write it. When my mother learnt they were giving Spanish lessons at the local high school, she signed us up. The classes were open, but were really meant to be an initiative for us kids and our migrant community. Until Kerry turned up, that is, with every right to be there, perhaps even more so than us.² She was a white Anglo-Aussie girl from a "good" suburb with well-educated, middle-class, Aussie parents.³ The teachers fell over themselves always praising how "good" Kerry's Spanish was. How great she was learning this language. Not us; we gringos were never told how "good" we spoke it. We could hear Kerry's English acento tainting every word she uttered. It was like banging on a tin can. Our Spanish was smooth like seda, like silk. We soon began to hate Kerry and the classes. Not because Kerry was a girl who wanted to learn Spanish; rather, because she took over a space that was meant to be ours. We migrant kids were all forced to make way; resigned once again to the back row; to become the secondary, café con leche-coloured students to her immediate, unearned white privilege.

*Say Nothing. Nothing. I said nothing. Not a thing.
Nada. Na-da.*

Kerry used us to practice her Spanish, then ignored us once she stepped beyond those gates. Outside, we became los invisibles again. One Saturday, some visiting Spanish teachers and a government official came to observe our classes. They awarded Kerry "the best student". They gave her a family block of Cadbury Dairy Milk. Kerry claimed her prize as she took our language, our teachers' admiration, our classes. After a term, these community classes ran out of funding. Kerry left. She never kept in touch. She never even shared her chocolate with us.

...ellos se llaman...

I say,
What didn't you say
to those Spanish-speaking natives,
(extranjeros, adultos who you didn't know) who often spoke
down to you and your little chico face?

Kerry, I heard, went on a language exchange to El Salvador for a year – to learn how they lived over there and to practice her Spanish. Travelling to Argentina was my linguistic dream. But that Spanish class was as close as I got. My parents came after the White Australia policy on the "merit-based" Migration Act of 1966. Categorised as "labour immigrants", they were classified unskilled (a) because their English language was poor, and (b) their previous profession was not recognised in Australia (they'd have to relearn it in English). Being low-skilled working class, they couldn't afford to take a day off work, let alone take us on holidays, not even to the Gold Coast. A return trip to the motherland was out of the question.

¡Ay nena, que feo que hablas el español!
[how bad/ugly you speak your first language!]

For a migrant not fully able to speak English, their lack of skill is considered a disability (tick the NESB box), but an educated white/Anglo, Native English Speaker (or Kerry) learning or attaining another's language – this is considered an advantage, a rewarded privilege.

How you went ahead and warped your little Spanish words
with English sounds
until they were all twisted around
and pierced to the tip of your old mother tongue.

Even in our Spanish speaking community there was tension. The superior (regardless of education) Spaniards (the colonisers) versus the lowly (regardless of education) Sudamericanos aka "Sudacas" (the colonised). Sudacas became a derogatory term used by the Spaniards to

describe those Latin American “wetback” economic migrants who went to Spain in the 80s, with the implication “they had come for their jobs”. Much like the ethnic slur “wog”, originally meant “to describe southern European Australians” (Cole 16), I was called wog as a kid, even though my father was Eastern European, and my mother was Latin American and I was born in Australia. The terms “wog” and “Sudaca”, much like J.K. Rowling’s “mudblood”, were and continue to be insults. Like Eltit and Ramsdell explain of its literary and Latinx use; to call someone a Sudaca is to “connot[e] that which is south, below, inferior, distasteful, backward, left open to exploitation” (118).

Still now, I’ll be reminded of this positionality by Spanish speakers (in their thick, textured accents), if I mention that my mother is from Argentina (I’ve learnt not to say this in Spanish anymore). “Oh, dey [*los Argentinos*] speak funny.” *What’s funny?* I want to ask. Instead, I’ll bite my tongue. *Is it my mother or her country?* If I do speak, they’ll remark about my Spanish or its brokenness. Worse, is witnessing when they correct my mother’s speech and her “funny” way of speaking Spanish.

Say Nothing

Nada Nada Na-da

Go Swim

Swim Away

I remember a few years ago, the culmination and implication behind an altercation at the Brisbane Spanish Club, between a Spanish neighbour we knew, *una conocida*, and an older, educated woman from Bolivia. The Spanish lady shouting at her, “You should be grateful that we (Spaniards) came along and ‘plucked’ that feather from your head.” The Bolivian lady responding fiercely, “That feather belonged to *us*. It was never yours to take.”

...ellos no se llaman...

And yet–

there are those who still say

you speak with un acento

when you know there isn’t one (there anymore)

Within the Latinx community, there’s also discord and discrimination. Free economic migrants versus later political refugees. Old migrants (Non-English Speakers) versus the new (skilled migrants). There’s a familiar scene in Idris Elba’s semi-autobiographical comedy, the TV show *In the Long Run*. Set in London in the mid-1980s, a well-meaning white colleague introduces Agnes from Sierra Leone to a fellow office worker from Jamaica, with the skin colour assumption they’ll “*you know...*”. Much like the point of this episode, just because to others you may “look” similar or speak the same language, (don’t get me started on different Argentinean barrios or South American countries), or that your mother countries are neighbours, this does not necessarily mean you’ll *get along*.

cos you deliberately lost it
 threw it away
 quietly mourned for it
 when you buried it
 (deep down underground)
 cos you know, *you know*
 your old mother's tongue is long
 gone.

I grew up listening to so many accents. I grew up immersed in so many variations of languages and "ishes". The standout ones being Hungspanglish (Hungarian + accented Spanish + broken English, which was how my father and many of our '56er family friends spoke) or Hunglish (Hungarian + English) and Ukrainish (our elderly neighbour's Ukrainian + broken English).

I'll notice an accent as someone else might admire another's dress, hairstyle, tattoo. But when a stranger questions *my* English or "hears" an accent, I am left speechless. It's a trigger. A verbal injury. An attack. I'll get defensive. I'll put on my best yeah-nah tonally-rising nasal Queensland whine and my broadest Paul Hogan, ocker-slang-laden-"Strine"-accented English. I'll retaliate by interrogating *them* to "please explain". I'll get them to describe what they think they heard.

Your accent

You speak with an accent.
 No, I don't.
 Yes, you do, I can hear it.
 But I was born here
 grew up here

Most listeners will probably not register the purpose behind Maria Tumarkin's apology about her accent, but I feel it's important to try and understand it in my own way. Perhaps by prefacing the accent, it's a way of asserting or pre-empting the remarks of "Oh, you speak so well" or "Where are you from?". In drawing attention to one's accent and how one speaks, it's asking listeners to take care, be aware, there may be problems ahead. This is a powerful stance of taking ownership; a stance of – this is how I speak, take it, and now focus on the content and meaning, leave my speech and me alone.

I swapped my old tongue
 at primary school
 for this new one,
 I only use this one now
 to speak

to write
 to think
 to dare
 to dream
 so how,
 how can that be?

Most likely, I had an accent as a child, but I swear I don't anymore. That, however, can still depend on who I am speaking to. If that someone happens to overhear me in conversation with my Latina mother, or has a closer look at my non-Anglo features or attempts to say my surname, then I do. The reaction goes something like this: *What's that?* – I don't hear anything. *Hang on... (cup hand to ear)... I hear something.* –What? What is it? *(cock head)... Yes, thought so. It sounds like good old racism.*

Notes

¹This is an indirect reference to the dictation test in the "Australian Government's Immigration Restriction Act 1901", which was: "An Act to place certain restrictions on Immigration and to provide for the removal from the Commonwealth of prohibited Immigrants." The Act could prohibit (under Section 3) "(a) Any person who when asked to do so by an officer fails to write out at dictation and sign in the presence of the officer a passage of fifty words in length in an European language directed by the officer." The racially motivated dictation test was applied to exclude non-white immigrants.

²Kerry is not her real name.

³American academic Robin Di Angelo is a leading researcher in the field of Whiteness Studies and Critical Discourse Analysis where, in her work, she explains "how whiteness is reproduced in everyday narratives" ("About Me"). In her article *White Fragility*, she discusses the use of the term "good" (58); when used to describe schools and neighbourhoods for white people; this is equated and related to the absence of people of colour. In my childhood experience of pre-multicultural Brisbane, this idea of "good" extended to preferential treatment of white-Anglo people who came from certain suburbs; people who came from working class suburbs with higher proportions of non-White or migrants, were "bad" (59) or inferior in comparison.

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