

Teresa Aziz

Professor Nagales

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The Perception of Language

As a teenage girl, my perception of myself and how others perceived me was something that I have always struggled with. Mostly, my insecurities about myself weren't based on my communication skills but how I looked physically. I never really paid attention to the way I speak until I came to a realization on how the relationship between communication and culture impacted the life of my family. The most important thing regarding communication is not what you are trying to convey but how. This realization is something that occurred during small interactions between my my parents and the public over years.

My parents do not speak conventional or "proper" English. They are immigrants from Guyana that came here at the age of 40. In Guyana, they do speak English but with a very heavy accent, close to "Patois." Although they've been here for around 20 years, the accent was something that stuck with them. I've never discouraged them from speaking in this way. This was something that was normal for me because I've heard it since birth.

My dad was sitting at the table on the phone with his medical insurance company. The table was filled with a bunch of documents and his hand was resting on his forehead, eyebrows furrowed with his phone to his ear. I asked him, "is everything okay?" He then asked me to take

a look at his medical insurance plan. He explained to me that he felt was being overcharged and that the insurance was supposed to cover his expenses.

As I've looked through and stayed on the phone with the medical insurance company, I was able to sort through the situation in two minutes, whereas my dad was sitting there for triple that. It turned out that he was right, and that they were overcharging him. Moments like these may seem normal. Most will think that there may be some sort of mistake or that he did not read the plan carefully enough. But these moments happen more often than they should.

For example, every time we go to the bank, I am the one who deals with the receptionist. Every time we go to the doctors office, I check in and explain the reason as to why we're here. If my mother and I are at the mall and she wants to know about a product or deal, she asks me to converse with the sales person. It wasn't that my parents weren't capable of doing these simple tasks. They were well educated people in Guyana who came here at an older age. School wasn't an option for them because my sister was already born. Their goal was to make money as soon as possible, save, and buy a house.

So, if they were perfectly capable of doing these things, why is it that when these certain social situations occur, they freeze up and depend on my sister and myself to do them? It should also be noted that my sister and I do not have accents.

I've concluded that it's because of their fear of being judged by the way that they speak. Based on the responses and body language of others when my parents speak with their accent, I realized that language played a larger role in our appearances. In this case, there is a fear of being taken advantage of because they feel that once someone hears it, they'll deem them as someone that cannot understand or comprehend. This was not true, they simply just had an accent.

This conclusion isn't only based on the situations that I've previously explained, but the way that they hesitate in public to reply to someone and the way that my dad tries to speak more "American" and it sounds forced. The way that sometimes, in the middle of a conversation, they might say, "Me have been there before," and the person replies with, "What? I can't understand you," and I can see the facial expression of my parents change so I repeat the sentence in "proper" English, "I have been there before."

From coming to this understanding of how language influences others' perception of us. I questioned how other people would see me. What if I went to Guyana with an American accent, would they treat me differently? I do not believe that it is fair that my parents should have to live with this fear. Why are people with accents deemed as uneducated or not capable? Linguistic style is something that we all may switch from time to time like speaking with your professors compared to your best friend. The underlying human instinct to immediately judge someone based on their perception isn't necessarily right or wrong. Nevertheless, I do think that linguistic style is something that we should not put someone down for.