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Dialetto et Acento:

Life-Altering Capabilities of Dialects and Accents

When you think of a stereotypical proper, and intelligent gentleman, what does he sound like? I want you to take thirty seconds and think about that. What has been instilled in my head since I was a child was that of a British man. More specifically a man from London, England. If you were to ask this to someone from Medellín, Colombia, they might say a man from Madrid, Spain. Now, why is that? Years of the British and Spanish ruling the world is most likely to blame. What interests me the most, is how their colonial rule still affects the minds of men, women, and children all over the world.

Lera Boroditsky is one of the leading minds in the ever-changing world of cognitive science. In 2011 she was named one of the "25 Visionaries Who Are Changing Your World" (Utne Reader). For years, she has researched how the human mind can change concerning the language it uses.

Using Lera Boroditsky's past works this essay attempts to discuss and analyze how dialects, accents, and languages, in general, can shift minor aspects of life like how appealing or proper people say you are to having a better understanding of our world and our position in it to the possible lack of Healthcare or being unable to testify in court.

Received Pronunciation, or RP, is the official term for what might be called "The Queen's English"(Howley). You might also associate this with class and societal ranking. It is often considered one of the nicest sounding accents in the world. To millions of men and women, this is the "proper" way to speak English. In 1979, a study was conducted to see what 25 students from Bristol University thought of some accents. They showed them 11 different voice samples and asked them to rate them from one through seven in many categories. These included, but were not limited to intelligence, self-confidence, independence, ego, and job status (Giles and Marsh 306). I was not shocked when the results demonstrated that RP speakers are more trusted and are perceived to be more intelligent than those with a Welsh and Bristol accent. These ratings could also shift dramatically depending on who is rating them. It has been proven time and time again, that regional accent perception goes equally in both directions. For example, if you are a non-native(non-British) English speaker, you might find an accent like the Brummie or Birmingham accent to be sexy or attractive. Ask that same question to someone from London, and they might tell you that it is an ugly accent (Howley). Our perception of these accents being sexy or ugly is outstanding to me. The fact that we humans have taken to language so much that we now use it as a way to describe language itself. It is in the same series of thoughts of the brain named itself.

Now, these are relatively minor ways in which an accent can shift other people's perspective on you. Sadly, dialect has proven a major part of infamous trial cases in the 21st century. Take for example the case of Trayvon Martin's death, Zimmerman v State of Florida. It can not be proven that a witness's accent had a major impact on the jury's decision to acquit George Zimmerman. In The impact of different British accents on perceptions of eyewitness statements, Lara Frakuman and Amanda Thompson state that the "way a witness speaks may

have an impact on case outcome" (Frumkin and Thompson 120). In this case, Rachel Jeantel was a major witness to the crime. She was on the phone with Trayvon Martin when he was shot and killed. She, an African American woman, speaks in a dialect different from the one spoken and used by many of the jury members. Linguists call her dialect AAVE or African-American Vernacular English. Possibly because of her dialect, she was seen to be untrustworthy (Frumkin and Thompson 121). Even if it is untrue, there is a gigantic seed of doubt planted into the US justice system. To back that up, it has been found that official court stenographers have sometimes misinterpreted what was being said by men and women when speaking in AAVE. These are official court documents that can cast a shadow of doubt into many court rulings. Imagine that you are an African American man for a moment. What would be your response if you were unjustly handed a sentence for a crime you did not commit solely because the judge or jury did not truly understand what you were saying. Even though it sounds preposterous, it might very well have happened. That is possibly one of the biggest ways in which your accent can shape your life.

Another giant aspect of your life is healthcare. In the United States, right now more than ever, healthcare is a gigantic humanitarian and political issue. Providers can decline your healthcare for several different reasons. In the Dominican Republic, most major businesses are in the capital of Santo Domingo. Because of that the biggest and most "proper" accent is that of Santo Domingo. Healthcare providers, like in the United States, are private entities and companies. They, of course, have the right to deny service to whomever they see fit. One of these reasons could be because of who you are. It could be because of what you look like, or how you speak Spanish. Many Dominicans consider accents from the northern Dominican Republic to be uglier than that of the capital. In the north, most people slur their words and have a certain

way of pronouncing every word differently. They tend to start at a neutral pitch and increase it at the end of the sentence. This accent is tragically connected in the minds of many with a plethora of negatives. Some of these include poverty, stupidity, brash. The Dominican Republic is notoriously terrible at keeping documents for many different reasons. Because of that, it is almost impossible to find documents for topics like healthcare that prove that this is still happening. I am sorry but you are just going to have to trust me and my family, who have a combined one hundred and thirty-four years of living in this country.

Depending on our main language, our brain could be extremely flexible in different aspects of life. The main inspiration to write this essay came to me from Lera Boroditsky's incredible TED Women talk. When I saw it, I immediately felt a connection to it. I, a speaker of both Spanish and English, feel that my outlook on life is quite different depending on which language I am thinking with. Lera manages to say a lot of fascinating information about her research in a compact and fun video. A great example she uses is that of the Kuuk Thayore people in Australia. They are far better than the average human at telling the cardinal directions apart. That is because, in their language, they do not say left or right, they instead say north or south (Boroditsky). Even though they do not have some special magnetism that attracts them to a pole and allows them to have a compass, they are almost always oriented. That is fascinating to me. If I were to ask you what direction you are facing right now, I am extremely sure that you could not tell me a confident answer. This likely leads to a better sense of orientation in general. I imagine they would be able to know how to get back to their home as long as they know where they came from. That is a skill that most of the younger generation, including myself, no longer have at our disposal. One of Lera's biggest claims to fame was of course her TED talk. If you look her up on a search engine it is one of the first links to appear. Despite that, she has

published articles from as far back as nineteen ninety-two. One of her most interesting being Does Language Shape Thought?: Mandarin and English Speakers' Conceptions of Time. In it, she discusses the variation in the thought of native mandarin and english speakers (Boroditsky Abstract). Mandarin speakers tend to think of time as a vertical construct while english speakers think of it in a horizontal line. This leads to mandarin speakers being quicker to answer when asked to recall the order of different months. The study also showed that bilingual users of both mandarin and english will usually think about time in whichever language they learned first. To some, being faster at something so small like recalling months might seem trivial. In that sense, I agree with them. But we can not underestimate the consequences that could have on the human brain. Since the dawn of the human era, time has been a vital and somewhat mythical concept. Some civilizations even went so far as to attach a God or Goddess to it. If someone could have a different framework from which to look at a concept as complex as time, who knows what could come of it. It could spark a major shift in the way we all think of time.

Lastly, I'd like to mention how I serve as a piece in this puzzle. I am a bilingual speaker of both english and spanish. My native language is spanish, despite that I would go as far as to say I no longer have a dominant tongue. I hold equal mastery in both of them. The language with which I think changes on a regular basis. That is tied closely with what I'm doing and what I'm thinking of. If I am thinking of work or a video game I will think in english. That changes as soon as I start thinking of my social life. This leads to me being more relaxed when talking and thinking in spanish. I might not have a different understanding of a concept such as time, but I still have an incredibly flexible mind. I find that My english accent is closely tied to a general American english accent while my spanish accent is clearly that of a Dominican. Somewhat

deplorably, because of my english accent, I have also experienced better treatment in many countries, one of them being the United States.

In this world complete strangers can and will most likely treat you differently depending on your accent. It is one of the most obvious traits that changes between each person. Yet for some reason, we do not associate accent with a change in treatment or a change in life quality. I hope that this essay has persuaded you and made you think about the world around you. Specifically the hidden and magnificent world of the mind and its connection to accents. If not I hope you could understand where I'm coming from.

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