

I Don't Know What I'm Saying

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WHEN I SAY THAT I DON'T speak the language of my home region, I at least partly mean that I don't have much of an accent. There's no good reason I didn't develop one, as I didn't consciously avoid it. I wasn't that person who hated my hometown or the South, ready to rid myself of all vestiges of where I came from. Both of my parents had accents, though they were different in that my father had grown up around Chattanooga, while my mother was from a much smaller town in northeast Tennessee, closer to Kentucky. My father's was a rounder accent, which made his pronunciation of "Hawai'i" sound much closer to "how are you." My mother has a flatter accent, one she refers to as a hill accent.

My mother's accent is one of my main pieces of evidence for my struggles with speaking the language. On one trip home—during the year I lived in Indiana—there were two occasions when I honestly couldn't understand what she was saying. By

that point, I had been around my mother for all twenty-seven years of my life, yet I couldn't understand a couple of simple sentences. She was asking me about clothing, and she suggested I buy what I heard as Era shirts, which I had never heard of. So I asked her, "Era shirts? Like E-R-A?" She responded, "No. Arrow shirts. A-R-R-O-W." She was changing the "-ow" ending into an "-a" ending, a change that was common enough for her and people around her area. Similarly, when she was suggesting a musician I might like, she said what I heard as "Bob Wheels." Again, I spelled out the last name, and she corrected it to "Bob Wills," who, for the record, I had never heard of.

I was more surprised than aghast at the fact that I couldn't understand my own mother, but even so, I realized that something was greatly wrong with that situation. I was used to the fact that people from the South didn't think I was from the area because of my lack of an accent. In fact, when I was working at a grocery store during high school and college, a woman in my checkout line once asked me if I was from Illinois. I've always been intrigued by the specificity of her question. She didn't ask if I was from the Midwest, but she chose that particular state for some reason.

However, not understanding my mother marked a new development in my thinking about my lack of a southern accent. I grew up surrounded

by it in the school I attended, as I went to a public county high school. My best friend, who would later become our valedictorian, spent his summers helping his grandfather harvest tobacco. I am ashamed to now say that I mocked him for his pronunciation of the word "yellow," which he pronounced "yellar." I would make a comment every time he pronounced the word in what I saw as an incorrect manner until he changed his pronunciation. Similarly, while working on a writing exercise in my Honors English class during my senior year, Lisa, a girl in the back of the room, raised her hand and asked Mrs. Clayton, "How do you spell 'hollar?'" Mrs. Clayton spelled it, which was surprising as most of our teachers would have told us to take out the dictionary and look it up. Scott, a boy sitting next to her, leaned over to look at her paper and said, "No, that's the wrong word. You mean hollow," referring to where somebody lives. Of course, many of the people I went to school with referred to those places as "hollars," as did I at various times in my childhood.

In fact, the one exception to my lack of an accent is with the word "heathen." That word shouldn't be surprising given that I grew up in the Bible Belt, but I spent almost all of my childhood pronouncing it incorrectly. I said it as I almost always heard it pronounced, which was "heathern," with the additional "r" sound. It was

only when I was a teenager and reading a Bible verse every day that I saw the word spelled out. I'm sure I had seen it before, given my church attendance, but it must have never registered. I distinctly remember standing in my bedroom with that little card with the verse on it, then going to a dictionary to look it up. I thought it was a typo, as I knew it had an "r" in it. I was wrong.

It's not just the accent, though. I don't fit the southern language stereotype in any other way. I don't use the supposedly colorful southern idioms, especially "y'all." For some reason, I've always said "you all" instead. It was never a conscious choice, but it always sounded better to me. That becomes a problem when I try to make it possessive, as I often say to a class, "Pass your all's papers to the front." I know that's not grammatically correct, but nothing else sounds right to my ear. I will occasionally slip in a "yonder," and I often greet people with "howdy," but that's more because "hi" sounds too formal, especially when I'm caught off guard in the school hallways. I chalk that up to my awkwardness more than any regional dialect.

I also don't possess the overripe metaphors many Southerners use, nor do I take long digressions when I tell stories. I grew up with television, not the pastime of sitting with friends and family members and sharing stories, and it shows. While I love conversation, the stereotypical Southerner who takes

forty-five minutes to answer a question about going to the grocery store bothers me as much as it does anybody who's not from the South. I'm at least prepared for such a response, given my background, but even I struggle in such cross-cultural conversations.

Perhaps television is the main culprit here, though I hate to blame a medium that has long since come in for its fair share of abuse, even when it comes to accents and language. Both my parents worked, so I spent solid chunks of my childhood watching television. I did grow up in a neighborhood with plenty of other children, so I also spent significant amounts of time outside with them, but I've often wondered if television negated much of the southern accent I would have picked up otherwise. From what anybody in my family can tell, I learned to read by watching *Sesame Street* and *The Electric Company*, so perhaps they also taught me how to speak.



When I was in college, around the same time that customers at Kroger were wondering if I was from Illinois, one of my classmates laughed at me because of my pronunciation. Thanks to the influence of *Dead Poets Society*, I had chosen to do a presentation on "To the Virgins, to Make Much of Time," by Robert Herrick. In case you've forgotten, it's the one that begins:

*Gather ye rose-buds while ye may,
Old Time is still a-flying;
And this same flower that smiles
today
Tomorrow will be dying.*

Chipper, no? Mr. Keating's words to the boys in *Dead Poets Society* were, "Why did the poet write these lines? Because we are food for worms, lads! Because we're only going to experience a limited number of springs, summers, and falls. One day, hard as it is to believe, each and every one of us is going to stop breathing, turn cold, and die!" Given that Robin Williams didn't go past the first stanza, I hadn't given the poem any more thought than what Williams provided. I certainly didn't hear the second stanza read aloud, and that's where my problem came in.

My job was to read the poem, then analyze it for the class. I did fine through the first stanza, but when I got to the second one, Edwin Tait* started laughing. Here's the second stanza:

*The glorious lamp of heaven, the sun,
The higher he's a-getting,
The sooner will his race be run,
And nearer he's to setting.*

There shouldn't be any problem there, but my Tennessee upbringing

* Yes, that's really his name. He was a sixteen-year-old home-schooled student who was attending college with his mother in the early 1990s. That's all I really need to say, I think.



taught me to pronounce "a-getting" like "a-gitting," which definitely doesn't rhyme with setting. He even had to explain why he was laughing.

Similarly, if I hit words with "-ow" endings, I have a tendency to change those to "-a" endings, so "tomorrow" becomes "tomorra." So, I could conceivably turn "arrow" into "arra" if I wasn't paying attention—just like my mother. But I do it so infrequently that people from the South think I'm from the North (or the Midwest, at least). When I'm in the North, though, people can often tell I'm from the South. And so we're right back to where I don't fit. ♦