When an Accent Becomes an Issue;

Immigrants Turn to Speech Classes to Reduce Sting of Bias

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Body

When Carmen Friedman, an ***immigrant*** from Colombia, began dating the man who would ***become*** her husband, she felt embarrassed because she mispronounced his first name, Joseph, as "Yoseph."

When she started a job as a substitute teacher a year ago, she dreaded going to work, ***becoming*** nauseated at the thought of having to speak in front of a new ***class***.

Finally, when she realized that her ***accent*** had not diminished, even after nearly five years in the United States, she ***became*** so unnerved by the idea of not fitting in that she paid for lessons to eliminate her ***accent***.

"I don't want my ***accent*** to hurt my self-esteem anymore," said Mrs. Friedman, who is 31 years old and lives in Queens. "I know I can get my point across in English, but I don't want to feel uncomfortable every time I say something."

Still an Impediment

As the ethnic composition of New York City and the nation changes under a growing tide of immigration, ***accents*** are still an impediment, even a stigma, for millions of people in school, at work and in social settings.

Aside from the differences of comprehension that thick ***accents*** may create, ***immigrants*** say that their experiences often reflect an underlying ***bias*** against them. But they feel their choice is between ***speech*** lessons or exclusion.

Saying they face ridicule, condescension or hostility, many ***immigrants*** go to great lengths to ***reduce*** their ***accents*** and speak like natives, often seeking ***speech*** therapists and tutors for help.

And in a few isolated cases, people who have felt discriminated against because of their ***accents*** have ***turned*** to the courts, making formal complaints like those filed for years by victims of racial and ethnic discrimination.

"People still think that there is no problem with being intolerant over the way other people speak," said Charles Cairns, a professor of linguistics at Queens College and the City University of New York Graduate Center. "They feel that it's acceptable to criticize or discriminate against people with nonstandard ways of speaking English."

Turning to ***Speech*** Lessons

Even though experts say such sentiments amount to ***bias***, ***immigrants*** have ***turned*** to ***speech*** lessons offered by tutors, private companies and colleges. Although it is difficult to determine how many people have taken such courses, experts say they are ***becoming*** increasingly popular among ***immigrants***.

Pace University, for instance, offers about four voice and diction courses each semester that include lessons on ***accent reduction***, up from about two ***classes*** five years ago. At New York ***Speech*** Improvement Services in Manhattan, more than half of the 200 clients that come weekly are ***immigrants***.

At the same time, many ***immigrants*** who are fluent in English are debating whether they need such courses at all and whether by taking them they are surrendering their cultural identity.

"Sometimes native Americans act like they have never heard a person with an ***accent***," said Galo Conde, a New York City public-school teacher who arrived from Colombia 20 years ago and who says he has often been snubbed by others, including his students, because of his ***accent***. "But I think when you have an ***accent*** it gives you a certain originality, something that is singular, something that is yours."

Divisions Aren't New

The divisions and debate over ***accents*** and dialects have long been a part of American culture, from condescension toward a Southern drawl or Brooklynese to the question of whether black English is a legitimate dialect to the more recent ***issue*** of whether Caribbean schoolchildren in New York City who speak dialectal English should be entitled to lessons in English as a second language.

"***Speech*** has always been a popular indicator of education and intelligence," said Sam Chwat, a ***speech*** therapist and director of New York ***Speech*** Improvement Services who counts among his accomplishments teaching Robert De Niro to shed his New York ***accent*** for his role in "Cape Fear." "To me, it is cosmetic. It has nothing to do with your logic, fund of information or ability to problem-solve."

Yet remarks, gibes and ridicule about ***accents*** arouse anger, insecurity and shame among their targets, leaving many ***immigrants*** feeling cheated of the chance to assimilate.

Making ***Accent*** an ***Issue***

One such person, a Dominican woman from Queens, enrolled reluctantly in ***accent***-elimination ***classes*** last month after the corporation she worked for made an ***issue*** of her ***accent*** in her last two job reviews.

The woman, a 48-year-old senior accountant who spoke on the condition of anonymity because she feared losing her job, learned English within a few years of arriving in the United States in 1967 and later earned a master's degree in business at St. John's University.

But in otherwise positive job reviews recently, she said, her managers complained that they often could not understand her because of her thick ***accent***. She found the criticism absurd, particularly since no one had previously raised the ***issue*** during her more than 20 years of employment there, but she went to a ***speech***-evaluation clinic nonetheless.

"They said there was no problem understanding me," she said of the people at the clinic.

Now she is suspicious and angry, wondering if the criticism was concocted to keep her from being promoted, as she hopes to be. "I think this whole thing has been fabricated to keep me from advancing within the company," she said. With much bitterness, the woman said she chose to conform rather than complain.

"It's been a very sad experience for me," she added.

Attitudes Reflect ***Biases***

Experts who study the interaction between social behavior and language say that attitudes toward ***accents*** often reflect other ***biases***. Many people, for instance, view a French ***accent*** as romantic while they dismiss as incomprehensible the ***accents*** of ***immigrants*** from Asian or Latin American countries.

"Our linguistic perceptions fall along ***class*** and racial lines in the country," said Randolph Wills, managing attorney for New York City's Human Rights Commission, which in the last year investigated three cases in which people said they were denied jobs because of their ***accents***. One company settled with a complainant and the other cases are pending.

The ***bias*** arises daily in many ways and places. In a report last February, the United States Commission on Civil Rights identified discrimination against Asian-Americans in the workplace, citing, among other things, discrimination against those with ***accents***. In Westfield, Mass., hundreds signed a petition last summer to bar teachers with ***accents*** from teaching young children.

A Federal Lawsuit

Last year, the Federal Equal Employment Opportunity Commission filed its first lawsuit on the ***issue***, accusing a California company of discrimination after it dismissed an employee who was a native of India because the company felt his ***accent*** was not good for its image. Officials and experts predict that similar cases will arise as more ***immigrants*** arrive.

"The ***issue*** seems to have come of age," said Raj K. Gupta, executive assistant to the agency's commissioner, referring to a flurry of letters and telephone calls from people who, after having learned about the first lawsuit, described similar cases of ***bias*** to the agency.

Many more ***immigrants***, however, live silently amid what they describe as hostility toward them because of the way they speak.

Ten years ago, when Mari Santana was studying broadcasting at Montclair State College in Upper Montclair, N.J., a professor urged her to change her major, suggesting that her ***accent*** would be a liability, she said. " 'It's still not too late for you to change your major,' " she recalled him telling her each time she entered his ***class***. " 'You'll never get a job.' "

A Course She Didn't Need

Demoralized, Ms. Santana, a native of the Dominican Republic, enrolled in a ***speech*** course, but the instructor felt she did not need the lessons and asked her to leave to make room for someone who did.

Ms. Santana, whose ***accent*** is slight, felt desperate. "It ***became*** an obsession for me to graduate and move on," she said. In 1983, Ms. Santana finished college and has since worked as a reporter in both English- and Spanish-language television.

She is now an anchorwoman for the evening news at a local Spanish-language station, Channel 47, and acknowledges that during her career, she has met a few people who are put off by the way she speaks English. She has come to see character, however, even charm, in her ***accent***. "I have to be me," she said, although she adds that she is taking diction courses to broaden her job prospects.

Some linguists question the value of ***accent-reduction*** instruction, arguing that ***accents*** should not be treated as impairments, particularly when they do not hurt communication. Some even say the lessons prey on fears, while those who teach the courses maintain that they help bolster self-confidence.

"I question the need for an ***accent***-correction course when the person can already be understood," said Angela Parrino, an assistant professor of applied linguistics at Hunter College who teaches an ***accent reduction class*** at Queens College.

No Promises

The other morning, on the first day of her new ***class***, Ms. Parrino made no promises to her students about what they would sound like when the course ended in May. Instead, she stressed the importance of speaking clearly and carefully, while pointing out that among native Americans, there is a diversity of ***speech*** patterns and dialects.

One student in the ***class***, John Castillo, a 22-year-old from Colombia, feels that the course is critical to his future. "To tell you the truth," he said during a break, "this ***class*** is my last hope. If it doesn't work out, I'm going back to my country."

The problem, he said, is that he feels his ***accent*** sets him apart from others, even though he has lived in this country for nine years. He graduated from Newtown High School in Queens and is now a junior at Queens College.

"I was practically raised in this country," he said, speaking in a soft, lilting ***accent***. "But I have this ***accent***. Does that mean I'm not an American? I don't know."

Graphic

Photo: John Castillo, a 22-year-old from Colombia, feels his ***accent*** sets him apart even though he has lived in this country for nine years. "This ***class*** is my last hope," he said. "If it doesn't work out, I'm going back to my country." (Ozier Muhammad/The New York Times)

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