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Adapting to Accents

That day was hot and humid, with the sun blazing in the sky - a typical day in Malaysia. But it was not a typical day in my life. It was the first day of my college life - the first day that I would be free from secondary school rules and uniforms. I was supposed to be thrilled and excited, just like the crowd of noisy parents and students surrounding me in the packed hallway, but I was not. I was feeling lonely and gloomy. A drop of sweat crept on my face as I lifted my heavy bags into my new room, making me feel more irritated. I hate this. I hate crowded places. I hate meeting strangers. I had no idea how I'm going to fit in.

"Aku Mirza. Name kau ape?" My new roommate asked in southern Malay accent, holding out his hand. "I'm Mirza, what's your name?" A sinking feeling crept into my heart. I had not spoken in southern accent for almost six years, and I had come to detest the speakers this accent. I feel that they are arrogant townspeople who did not even know how to pronounce their A's correctly. I was really hoping to meet some northern people, so that I can feel more at home and be myself. *"Aku Sayyid,"* I said, shaking his hand and putting on a fake smile. I turned around and pretended to tidy my stuff. I didn't want to start a conversation with him. I didn't want him to hear the hint of northern accent I have when I try to mimic the southern accent. I loathe the stares, smiles and even outright imitation that come in response to speaking the northern accent here. I knew I would have to talk to my roommate soon, just not now.

I was at INTEC, a preparation college located in Kuala Lumpur for Malaysian students

planning to study overseas. Most of the students in the college are from southern Malaysia and speak the southern accent, the "standard" Malay accent. Putting it in Lippi-Green's words, most of the students have the southern accent as their L1 accent, which is "the native variety of [the language] spoken" (43). Despite my inability to talk in the southern accent, I am, ironically, a Malaysian southerner too. I grew up in Johor, the southernmost state in Malaysia, and I had been using the southern accent for most of my life. It's just that for the previous six years, I had gone to a boarding school in Perlis, the northernmost state in Malaysia, where I started picking up the northern accent.

"Hang ni mai sini buat apa? Hang tau ada beghatuih sekolah hang lalu nak datang sini, jauh lagi elok daghi sekolah hang tu?" I remember my uncle asking bluntly in his thick northern accent almost six years ago. "Why on earth did you come here? You know, on your way here, you passed hundreds of school far better than yours?" I just shrugged. It was a few days after I entered MATRI, the secondary school in Perlis that my father wanted me to go to. I was asking the question myself. Why on earth did my father send me to a school, twelve hours away from home, in the middle of nowhere? It was supposed to be the other way around. The Perlis people, who only plant paddy for a living, have only one shopping mall in their whole state, and have water supply only at night, should send their children south, so that they can learn from us.

My first few weeks of high school were dreadful. I cried almost every minute I was alone. I felt gloomy each morning I woke up and realized where I was. The food was horrible - every bite I took made me feel like vomiting. The weather was terrible - it was even hotter than the already hot Johor. But the food and weather would be tolerable if you don't add one more problem to the equation - the loneliness was unbearable. I felt that I was the only student, among the hundreds of noisy and happy school students, who had nobody to talk to. I often felt like

running away from the school, back to the comfort of my home, and back to my primary school friends.

One of the reasons for my loneliness, among many others, was the different accent my peers used. At that time, I had been living in Johor for almost twelve years, and I had the southern accent as my L1 accent. Most of my peers came from northern Malaysia and had the northern accent as their L1 accent. I had a hard time making friends with my peers, partly because it was hard to understand their accent, but mostly because of my stereotype towards the speakers of the accent.

My stereotype came from the experience I had with the northern people. My father was originally from Perlis, and my family would usually visit Perlis at least once a year. I liked the visits because I could meet and play with my cousins, who are southerners too. However, during the visits, I also met a lot of northerners and I started to dislike them. I had problems understanding them, and whenever they talked to me, I would pretend to understand, nod my head, and say "yes" as if I agree with them. I hated the way they shout while talking, as if I was miles away, when I was actually sitting right next to them. I also disliked the way they speak out, bluntly, of anything and everything that crosses their mind. I didn't understand why they need to pronounce "Rs" as if they were from France, why they changed all "Rs" at the end of a word to "Qs", or why they shorten each word they pronounce. During the visits, I also observed that when compared to the southern counterparts, the northern houses were older and uglier, the shops were smaller and less grand, and the streets were more crowded and not as well maintained. This was how I made up my mind that as a southerner, and as someone who uses "standard" Malay, I was better, more "modern" and superior to the northern people.

At school, it didn't take me long to realize that some northerners have a dislike for

southerners and their accents too. In the first few days, I noticed weird stares when I talked in the southern accent to them. After a few weeks, and they started to know me better, they would laugh and mimic my "As" when they hear my accent.

However, it is really difficult to dislike the people you sleep, play, eat, and study with every day. As time passed, I made friends with my peers, and started getting used to their northern accent. I used the northern accent for my everyday chatter, and started liking my northern accent more than my southern accent. I found that French like "Rs" does sound better than regular "Rs", substituting "Rs" for "Qs" does sound more natural, and shortening words does sound "right." Lippi-Green describes this transition process as renovating a Sound House (46). She explains that we can think of "the human vocal apparatus as a set of building materials" and "the Sound House [as] the [accent] of the language" (46). As children grow up, they start building and renovating their Sound House by observing other people's Sound Houses (47). Using this analogy, when I noticed the different layout of my northern friends' Sound Houses, I renovated my Sound House to make it more like theirs.

As I know my friends better, I realized that they were not as backwards, nor was I as superior, as I thought. In fact, I feel that I liked my northern friends more than my friends at home. At the same time, the southern accent started to sound more foreign to me. Whenever I hear someone talking in the southern accent, it always crosses my mind that they really should learn how to pronounce their "As" correctly.

During my five years of high school, the northern accent became my primary accent, and I lost almost all of my southern accent. I started to notice that I was treated differently by southerners because of my northern accent. When I went back home on vacations, my family would sometimes talk about my new accent, and my cousins would tease me and try to mimic

me. However, my hate for southerners did not come because of the southerners back home, it came because of the southerners I see every day at school. At my school, there was a group of southern students who always stick with themselves, refused to mix with northerners, and caused a lot of problems. They loved mocking me and making fun of me. In fact, the only southern accent I hear at school was from them jeering at me. From this experience, I started to hate southerners, especially those my age, and I felt that most of them are arrogant people that looked down on northerners.

It was because of my new northern accent, and my new mentality towards southerners, that I came to INTEC feeling gloomy and uncomfortable. The thought that the southerners would judge and look down on me because of my northern accent, made me try hard to hide my accent and mimic the southern accent.

"Wei, Sayyid, kau dapat kelas ape? Aku kelas Chicago dowh!" Mirza asked me. "Hey, Sayyid, what class are you in? I'm in the Chicago class!" It was a week after I entered INTEC, and students were being divided into smaller classes that they will be with for the rest of the semester. The classes, weirdly enough, were named after cities in the States. I quickly went through the list and saw to my relief that I was in the Chicago class too. I usually feel awkward around strangers, and I was glad to have Mirza, whom I have exchanged a few words with, in the same class. As both roommates and classmates, Mirza and I went to class, worked on our homework, and stressed over our SAT practice exams together. The more I got to know Mirza, the more I realized that what I initially thought about him was totally wrong. He was never arrogant, and he never looked down on me for my accent.

Now I have been at INTEC for a few months, and I had made friends with a lot of southerners, none of them fitting my southerner stereotype. I now understand that it is not right

to judge or discriminate against someone just because of their accent. In her book, *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States,* Lippi-Green describes the seriousness of this problem in her story of Mr. Kahakua, who was denied a promotion that requires him to read prepared weather reports on the radio, just because of his Hawaiian accent (44). Mr. Kahakua then lost in trial because the judge, who was not a native Hawaii, believed that radio announcers should speak "Standard English" (44). Reflecting this story on myself, as a southerner who speaks "Standard Malay", it is not right for me to believe that the northern accent is lower and "less standard" than my accent. Similarly, as someone who uses the northern accent, it is not right for me to say that southerners need to learn how to pronounce "As" correctly. We must understand that "variation is intrinsic to all spoken languages", and we must learn to accept it (Lippi-Green 25).

"Sayyid, kitorang nak gi keluar makan malam ni. Kau nak ikut tak?" Iman, another one of my roommates asked. "Sayyid, we are going out for dinner. You want to come along?" One important thing that I understand now is that I there is no "best" accent, as each accent is suitable according to the place and situation it is used.

"Nak, jom pegi!" I said, now in the southern accent. "I want to follow too! Let's go!"

Works Cited

Lippi-Green, Rosina. *English with an Accent: Language, Ideology, and Discrimination in the United States*. 1st ed. London: Routledge, 1997. Print.