

# THE SPEECH OF YOUR LIFE



Essay

Our personal accents are as natural as breathing - but they also shape the way other people perceive us. That's something that **Johanna Gohmann** discovers on a daily basis, living in the US with a husband from Northern Ireland



**T**he other day, my husband David and I were chatting when our eight-year-old approached, a slight smirk upon his face. "Daddy?" he asked. "How do you say car in Japanese? Is it kee-yar?" This led to a burst of laughter from me, and a roll of the eyes from my husband. Kee-yar is David's Northern Irish pronunciation of "car". His two-syllable "car" was something of a joke between us way back when we started dating, so hearing our kid (a born and raised Brooklyn boy) tease him about it was rather amusing. It also got me thinking a bit about David's accent. Mainly how lately, I often find myself saying "I don't really notice it anymore." Which I realise is entirely



Back then, if someone had told me that, one day, this “irresistible” accent would become the source of some of my own greatest head-wreckage, I never would have believed them. But then, I had no idea about the level of frustration that can occur when one is exhausted from a day of child-rearing and has just asked their spouse where they put the spatula approximately 400 times.

I suppose I never anticipated how much of my married life would involve peering at my partner as if he were purposely trying to swallow his own tongue. Nor did I foresee how often my beloved would gaze back at me with a look that said: “I am speaking English, you American idiot.”

But, our domestic communication breakdowns aside, I realise that these days I’m much less in tune with his accent’s effect on me, and much more aware of its effect on other people. His voice shapes our lives here in the US in all kinds of oddball ways, turning normally mundane experiences into mini-adventures in miscommunication.

Watching him attempt to place an order at a McDonald’s drive-thru can have all the blunder and tedium of a Carry On comedy, albeit one with fewer breast jokes and all the wrong sizes of fries. And even my own family, who have obviously known David for years, still shoot me panicked glances during FaceTime conversations, silently pleading with me for translation. “He said he’s grand,” I sigh.

Pandemic living has not done David any favours on the comprehension front, either. Want to make a Northern accent even trickier for an American to understand? Swathe it in a KN95 mask.

On the flipside, his accent also has the power to shift the mood of a room in an instant. When we’re in a parent-teacher conference with our son’s school, the teachers will stare at me with glazed-over eyes while I drone on. But then the second David utters a follow-up question, I see their backs straighten, and those same eyes begin to bat their lashes as if nothing in the world could be sexier than the phrase “Common Core Math”.

Same goes for cashiers and waitresses. A Starbucks barista will have no qualms gushing over him as he orders a cake pop for our son. “Oh... are you from Irrreland?” she’ll croon. As if I am not his wife, standing right beside him, but merely some frowning tour guide in a mom-bun leading him on an exploration of America’s finest chain coffee shops.

And of course, it’s been very amusing to see what our son makes of his accent. I used to wonder when he would notice the difference in his father’s way of speaking, as Daddy’s voice has always just been Daddy’s voice. But sure enough, one day he sidled up to David with a grin, and said: “Can we go now, Dad? No? Well, hooow abooooowt noooow?”

## Different contexts

It’s interesting to think about how much impact an accent can have on the way one moves through the world, and how our own perceptions of it (both conscious and subconscious) affect our interactions.

I spoke to Walt Wolfram, a social linguist who has been investigating language variations for 50 years. He says one of the most intriguing things about accents is that they’re not always seen one way, in the sense that the same accent in different contexts can have very different kinds of associations.

“For example, Southern speech in the US is often considered to be polite, attractive and almost sort of romantic to some,” Wolfram explains. “But at the same time, if you ask people about intelligence, it has clear connotations of a lack of education and ruralness. So a dialect in one situation could be considered to be attractive in an aesthetic way, but then also be stigmatised in terms of intelligence.”

This is something that certainly resonates with me. I know that during my younger days in New York, I used to be slightly self-conscious of my drawn out “iiiiis” and “y’alls”, fearful it made me sound like some uncultured hick who spent her youth knocking over sleeping livestock for laughs. (Which I did not. Though I knew people who did.)

And while I honestly don’t recall ever consciously altering my voice, my mother attests to otherwise. Even now, we’ll be chatting on the phone, and she’ll suddenly huff in amusement: “Ooooh... I see someone

is using their New York City voice today.” Though I’ve noticed she tends to make this observation when what I’m saying carries even the tiniest hint of confrontation.

David, meanwhile, happens to have an accent that is generally deemed “attractive” or “friendly” by most Americans. And we’re well aware of this privilege – he’s never had to struggle with any kind of hateful prejudice or xenophobia as other immigrants so often do. No, if any kind of stereotype plagues David here, it’s that people often assume he spends his evenings guzzling Guinness and tapping his foot to the Clancy Brothers.

Take CNN journalist Donie O’Sullivan and his easy way with interviews. O’Sullivan has a seemingly effortless ability to draw out fairly calm opinions from even the most enraged of individuals.

First and foremost, he’s obviously just incredibly smart and talented at what he does. But when I watch him interview those crimson-faced Trumplers, I do wonder if his Kerry accent sets them back on their heels a bit, and if his voice automatically conveys some kind of charm and affability to their Maga-capped ears. Although, affable or not, Donie is clearly not embraced by all of his interview subjects. Some have been caught on camera enthusiastically encouraging him to (using a more delicate euphemism) make love to himself.

Recently, I stumbled upon the internet sensation that is Angie McYen. She’s the Australian woman who got a tonsillectomy and then eight days later awoke sounding like a worker in Dunnes Stores. Even though she has never set foot on Irish soil.

She was subsequently diagnosed with foreign accent syndrome (FAS), a rare but real speech disorder where someone begins speaking totally differently. It sometimes occurs for reasons that aren’t entirely clear, but can also be brought on by a head injury, medical condition, or (if you’re me in college) by drinking too many rum and cokes while watching Four Weddings and a Funeral.

I don’t mean to make light of FAS, as McYen has obviously struggled from the experience. One can only imagine what it would be like to go in for a routine medical procedure such as a colonoscopy, then emerge from the anaesthetic talking like Conor McGregor. Think how this would affect your sense of self. Or how you would explain yourself to disbelieving friends. Family? The strangers who want to sit you down and dissect the finer points of a roundhouse kick?

It’s funny, though, how for some an accent can feel so directly hewn to their identity, but for others, it’s simply something to try and shed. I know a fellow from Dublin who moved to the US. He got so incredibly sick of people commenting on his accent and then regaling him with tales of how their grandmothers is part-Irish and you know they went to Ireland once and, oh, such beautiful countryside, that he actually ironed the lilt from his voice completely. Now, when he tells people he’s Irish, they peer at him sceptically. To him, this is preferable. He’d rather people suspect him of being a pathological liar than hear about the time their uncle visited the Cliffs of Moher.

While I can on some level understand his desire to leave the brogue behind, I have to say I find it rather sad. Living here in Brooklyn, so far away from David’s home country, I feel like his accent is such a solid, constant reminder of where he comes from, and the tangle of history and culture and everything else that trails along behind him. I would certainly never want him to lose it. Not even in our most intensely frustrating moments, such as when he calls me with a question about our pharmacy pick-up and it essentially sounds like he’s singing Snow Patrol to me with a mouthful of batteries (let’s waste time chasing kee-yars, if you will).

It’s true his accent doesn’t sound so exotic to me anymore. But then, marital love isn’t really about the exotic or unknown, is it? If anything, it’s all about the knowing. Or the trying to know. And his voice is certainly the voice I know best. Especially after living together in lockdown, when some days our voices and our son shouting for his iPad were the only sounds to pierce the anxious silence.

While David’s accent may no longer make me swoon, it is still the voice I want to hear in the morning. When we both stumble out of bed and he starts telling me about his nightmare that sounds like something about werewolves and a bog, I am still happy to turn to him and utter the words that have been our constant. Our shared history. Our own personal love language. “What did you say?” ■

untrue. I just notice it in a much different way than I did when we first met 16 years ago.

I will admit upfront that I am one of those ridiculous American women who swoon slightly at the sound of a brogue. So yes, I did initially find David’s upward-swinging, lilting intonation somewhat irresistible. When he quietly uttered some super-Irish phrase such as that “My head is wrecked”, well, he may as well have whispered a snippet of Yeats into my ear.

His sing-songy (admittedly sometimes indecipherable) accent was like an aural version of a sexy cologne for me. Like Dior’s Sauvage, but for the eardrums. It was exotic, and all that my flat, US Midwestern drawl was not. I grew up in Indiana, and if my accent had a scent, it would likely be that of Doritos.