

ASHLEY: Have you ever judged anyone on how they sound, their accent, their pronunciation, their use of slang? Or maybe you've been on the other end of that, someone has looked down on you because you don't sound like them.

RICHARD: Yes to both questions. It's not just what we say that can lead to misunderstandings and division. It's how we say it. This is Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard Davies.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte. Our guests this week are journalist Jessica Mendoza and Jingnan Peng of The Christian Science Monitor. They're the hosts of a new podcast called Say That Again? about how we sound, how we listen, and how we can all come to better understand each other.

RICHARD: And accents are also about identity. The four of us know this firsthand because we've all been newcomers to the U.S., and we share some personal stories in this episode. Ashley kicks off our interview.

ASHLEY: Can you tell us a little bit about your own experience with accents, shall I say, which you've both had since moving to the U.S.? Jing, maybe we can start with you.

JING: So I grew up in Beijing until the age of 18, and then I came to the U.S. in 2011 for college and then for work. And so, the past 10 years, I've pretty much been living in the U.S. I started learning English since I was two, and perhaps because of that, I've managed to not have a pronounced non-American accent. But because my English does not have an obvious foreign sound, I think that has definitely helped me integrate and perhaps be treated as more competent and intelligent and to not have a lot of those times when people become annoyed at me or impatient at me because they can't understand me.

ASHLEY: Well, Jess, what about you? I think, to many people, they just assume you were born and raised in the U.S.

JESSICA: Yeah. I grew up in the Philippines, have been speaking English basically my whole life. I don't actually recall learning the language. But I think, really, what it is, I started my career in broadcasting. I was a radio DJ and had covered sports, as well, in the Philippines. And the radio, in particular, it was an English-language radio station in Manila. Even before then, I had already been aware of wanting to speak English in a particular way to be perceived in a particular way. So I think going into radio, then, made me even more conscious about how I spoke and how eloquent I seemed to other people. So that's been a running undercurrent thought for me all my life. Of course, coming to the States and going to grad school here and trying to fit in, that continued to be a theme. So, when the opportunity came to do a podcast to really try to understand what that means to me and to other people, I jumped at the chance.

ASHLEY: Yeah, Richard, talking of fitting in, you have your own story, right, of accents and fitting in in the U.S.?

RICHARD: Yeah. I'm the child of British parents, one Welsh, one English. My own story was that I had to shed my English accent, which I had when I lived in the UK with my parents for 20 years. In order to get a job in the U.S. in commercial radio, I had to sound American, and it took a lot of work. I was kind of insecure. I felt like people would think that I was out of touch if I was English, and it was only later that I discovered that a lot of people think an English accent is classy and gives you a certain gravitas that perhaps you wouldn't have without it.

ASHLEY: It was just so interesting because when I came here much later, but I went to work in public radio, and I was a little bit concerned about my accent. But I worked for a show that was sort of global in outlook, and they didn't have a problem with it at all. They would tell me that I had to pronounce certain words the American way. There's a different emphasis on certain words, and I would be corrected on various pronunciations, but in general, I have felt that since living in this country, I'm one of those people who gets mistaken for being more intelligent than I am because of my accent. That's a comment that people with Received Pronunciation, English accents, will often get. So, on the whole, I would say it's helped me, although I have had the experience of people having to ask me to repeat myself because they really don't understand what I'm saying.

RICHARD: I remember coming off an ABC newscast and the newsroom being in mock outrage that I'd said "deh-bree," which is the English pronunciation of "debris." And it took many years to shed some of these strange pronunciations.

ASHLEY: Many people will never entirely shed their accent or the way they pronounce things. Still, as far as the four of us know, none of us have actually lost out on a job because of our accents. But Jess and Jing talked to someone who has for their podcast. His name is Dominic, and he's originally from Ghana. Here's a clip from Episode 3 of Say That Again? where we hear from Jing, Dominic, and Jess.

JING: Dominic was interviewing for a job as a training manager.

DOMINIC: I was going in as someone with a training background. I've already played that role a little bit within an organization. I've already gotten a master's degree in Training & Development. The HR manager called me the next day to share with me that I had a really good qualifications and experience that they would have loved to have, but it was because of my accent that they were worried. People I would be training may not be able to understand me or may not be able to...

JESSICA: In short, Dominic did not get the job.

RICHARD: Dominic didn't push back. He let the job go, but as Jing tells us, that wasn't the end of the story.

JING: So he worked with a communication coach, and I think what was interesting to me about that is that he has come away not with a shame in his accent. He has come to an understanding that, in a way, the accent is a mark of his life experiences. All the languages that he has learned growing up in Ghana and now approaching a new language, some of the sounds from your old language comes through. He sees that it's a part of who he is and his background. But on the other hand, he has gotten all these tools to facilitate communication.

RICHARD: Dominic learned a lot from that communication coach. Here he is again, telling Jing and Jess how those communication tools influenced him.

DOMINIC: Oftentimes, when I'm expressing myself, I will acknowledge that I have an accent and that there could be a chance that you may miss one of two of my words. So, if you do, please don't be ashamed to let me know, and I'll be happy to go over it with you. And so I

always put that up front to give the listener more confidence to ask questions if they were hesitant to do that.

ASHLEY: I think what was so, I thought, rather moving about that statement, he was willing to find common ground with them. It was a two-way street.

JESSICA: Yeah, and I think that was a big message out of that episode that we were both hoping to get, but at the same time, were still pleasantly surprised by how meaningfully it had emerged just in talking to Dominic and to some of the other people who were featured in that episode. He was genuinely trying to embody that, not just expecting people to listen to him better, but he was genuinely wanting to engage with the people that he was having conversations with to say, "I know that I sound different than what you normally are probably used to. So I want to work with you to help you understand me because I would like this discussion to move forward." There's a lot to take away from that that I'm personally still processing a little bit.

ASHLEY: What is really going on when we are getting irked and annoyed by somebody's accent? We're getting impatient. We're thinking, "Ugh, why do I have to struggle to understand this person?" What's really happening?

JING: One of our sources cited a study where people were asked to interact with someone whose first language is Korean and is speaking English with a Korean accent. And they're supposed to communicate about a complicated game. What they find is that there's a group of people who have shown some bias towards Korean people, and compared to that other group that has not shown bias, the group that has shown bias had a much harder time communicating with this person and that communication broke down. They weren't asking follow-up questions. And so I think sometimes that there might be certain implicit bias or attitudes inside you that already make you not want to communicate.

RICHARD: So one way to overcome bias is curiosity, is wanting to understand someone who may come from a culture that's very different from your own?

JESSICA: Absolutely. So much of it is attitude. And just a disclaimer, neither of us are psychologists or sociolinguists. So definitely look into that research more, but, yeah, I think that irked feeling that Ashley was referring to, it touches on a lot of intersections about our own human psychology. It's implicit biases, for sure. It's also this expectation of what an interaction is supposed to be. Is it a customer-service situation that you are in, and you are not understanding? You're already coming in a little bit peeved. Nobody calls customer service because they're having a great time. So you're coming in with all of the feelings and emotions and expectations in any interaction versus, like, if you are at a summer camp, and you're trying to befriend people, and you want to be part of the group. If somebody has an accent you're not familiar with, you're probably going to be a little bit more open to hearing them talk. So I think it really depends on the interaction. It depends on what you bring and what you're willing to receive in turn.

ASHLEY: I'm really glad you mentioned that customer service scenario because I was planning to admit this here on the podcast...

JESSICA: We all do it.

ASHLEY: Often, when I call, let's say, my bank's 1-800 number, I am speaking to somebody thousands of miles away. The phone line is poor, and I do sometimes have trouble understanding their accent, and I'm annoyed to begin with, as you pointed out, because that's why I'm calling them. So how can we be better people about that? How can we find commonality with the customer service rep who gets such abuse, frankly, from customers?

JING: What you said, just that initial empathy, yeah, the person that you're speaking to on the phone, they might have spent years trying to get to the point where they are in terms of communicating clearly. There's all that effort while, on the other hand, if you grew up just speaking English, in a way, you never made any effort to sound the way you sound.

JESSICA: Right, and in a realistic sense, you're probably not going to call your credit card company and be like, "Okay, now, today I'm going to be my extra empathetic self." You have other things you're thinking about, and that's totally fine and normal, I think. It's just something that I've felt more after having recorded this podcast, is just a small check in my brain just being like, "Okay, am I not understanding this person, or am I just annoyed for some other reason? Are they truly being unhelpful, or am I projecting that because I'm feeling frustrated?" And that might just be a small, quick moment. It doesn't have to overhaul your entire, "Really, all I want is my PIN to be redone," or whatever, or, "just to get this cash back." It doesn't have to change your entire dynamic, but it helps, and I think those little moments, the more we're aware of it, build up over time.

RICHARD: Jessica Mendoza and Jing Peng of The Christian Science Monitor on Let's Find Common Ground. I'm Richard.

ASHLEY: And I'm Ashley. And although we love doing this show, we don't just produce podcasts at Common Ground Committee. Check out some of our other work by subscribing to our YouTube channel. It's one more venue where we aim to shed light, not heat on some of our most polarizing issues. Now back to our interview with Jing and Jess.

RICHARD: Episode 4 of your podcast, Say That Again? is called Talking Black with Pride, and Black English is often looked down upon, especially by outsiders, and that can have a real effect on the people who speak it. Tell us about Elaine Richardson, the scholar of Black language who you spoke with.

JESSICA: She has an amazing story. Dr. Richardson, Dr. E in particular, she's from Ohio, born and raised, and grew up with a Jamaican immigrant mother and a father from Virginia, so Black family, Black neighborhood, and had always felt that her way of speaking and just the way that she'd been perceived throughout her life has been different.

DR. E: Everybody else in my neighborhood, their parents or their grandparents were from the South. So we were a little bit different, and I didn't really know it until people started asking me, why did my mother talk funny? "Is your mama Puerto Rican?" or, like if my mother happened to be cooking some Jamaican food, "What is that that you all eat? Y'all food stink."

JESSICA: It's such a complicated story, but essentially she saw herself as being less than, and we know that our own personal insecurities, when coupled with circumstances that take advantage of that, can lead to really disastrous consequences, and that's what happened to her. She wound up being trafficked first when she was in junior high and then managed to get out of that situation and then sort of fell into it again later in life.

DR. E: I went to Cleveland State University, and I didn't know where I fit in. I didn't want to talk to people because I felt like, "As soon as I open my mouth, they're going to know I'm from the ghetto." I started meeting different kinds of Black people that were not from the ghetto, didn't talk like I talk, and I figured, "I'm different." So I just didn't try to fit in. I found people on campus that I did fit in with, and they all drank and smoked weed and hung out. I started slipping in my classes, and pretty soon I got kicked out of Cleveland State. I started hanging in what they used to call after-hours joints in Cleveland, and those were places where street people hung, and those were places that I felt comfortable around. That's when I got with my second pimp.

JESSICA: And it was really only through education and determination and the help of people who really believed in her that she was able to get out of it. And the interesting part of her story is that in college, when she finally went back and tried to get her degree, that was the only time as an adult that she learned that there was such a thing as Black English and that her speech and her culture had a history that was worth learning about and respecting and even celebrating.

ASHLEY: Vivian Nixon was another interviewee in that show, and she's among the people who really love Black English and see it as rich and very much part of the community.

JING: Yeah. For Vivian, she grew up in the '60s. Today, she's a writer on criminal justice, and she had worked for about 20 years with a nonprofit that helps incarcerated women go to college. But she grew up sort of on the border of white communities and Black communities and learned to code switch pretty seamlessly. Along with that expectation, in her words, "that Black folks felt a need to prove that they were worthy, they could meet the standards that white people have set." And so there's this pressure that's reflected linguistically of just you can't slip up.

ASHLEY: And this was borne home to her by one teacher at her school who reprimanded Vivian for using Black English in the playground. Here's Vivian talking about that teacher, Mrs. Woodard.

VIVIAN: Like many Southern people who get an education, come to the North to make good, she was so determined to prove that these civil rights advances are deserved because we're going to be productive citizens but in a way that is very much about assimilation and not about a collaboration of cultures.

JING: So Mrs. Woodard was the first Black teacher in her school, very proper in her words, and what she hated most was actually Black English, in a way, in the classroom or in the playground.

RICHARD: Because it was incorrect, in her view?

JESSICA: Right, and I think what Jing was saying before about there being standards set, I think there was this -- still is, frankly -- an association between Black English as we understand it, as something that is only appropriate in certain spaces and certainly not in schools and not in professional spaces, and this was much more pronounced back when Vivian Nixon was in the fifth grade.

RICHARD: Slightly earlier, you mentioned the term "code switch." What is that?

JESSICA: This is probably not the scientific definition, but it's basically when you, as a person, are able to move from one way of speaking to another, depending on the circumstances. A lot of us do this in a much more subtle way in pretty much any conversation. There's lots of studies to show that we adapt to the conversation that we're having in order to be better understood, but code switching is much more pronounced. It's when, for example, a Black person will speak a particular way with other Black people or people that they're comfortable with and then speak a different way at work. That's not something that only Black communities do. I do that. We all do that between home and work. There's all sorts of ways that we code switch. It just varies according to level, I think.

RICHARD: I do it all the time. My sisters grew up and stayed in England. They have English accents. I have English nieces and nephews, and I speak quite differently with them than I am right now to you. Here's the secret of it. It's not about accent. It's about rhythm. If you get into the kind of rhythm that my nieces and nephews are talking about, then I can make myself understood.

JING: You just switched, yeah. One interesting thing about code switching is, if you speak multiple languages, and when I'm talking to my family, I switch to Chinese. That is code switching, too. If you look globally, it is a very, very common phenomenon. Actually, maybe it's more like in the U.S., which feels like the center of the world, a lot of people are monolingual or mono-dialectal, that only speak one dialect, that code switching feels like a fancy thing. But if you look around the world, it's what most people are doing.

RICHARD: What have both of you learned as a result of doing this podcast? Are you, in a way, more tolerant, or are you better people?

JING: Yes, yes, better people, better person.

JESSICA: I hope so. I hope so.

JING: I think I am a more patient communicator knowing the role that I play as a listener in communications. Yeah, I think that's one big thing. What about you, Jess?

JESSICA: I think, for me, although I came to this with some experience as somebody who was very much trying to learn to, like I said before, speak English in a particular way to be perceived in certain ways -- that was important to me -- I think I also projected that out. I externalized that by judging people. You would hear somebody on TV or in podcasts, and you're like, "Gosh, I wish they'd found somebody better." I talk about this in the podcast. I was like, "Oh, gosh, their grammar is terrible," so judgmental. I like to think that I'm... It's hard to do a full 180, but I think I'm much more conscious now, and there's much more of a sense of the whole point is that we are communicating, and the point is not that you are communicating in a way that sounds like me or that I think sounds correct. The point is that we are understanding each other and that we are finding a common place, common ground, I guess, to really interact with in a meaningful way.

ASHLEY: What are some of the steps that the rest of us can take, that the uninitiated can take to be better listeners and communicators and find common ground with people who, at the outset, we might not think we have any with just because they sound different.

JESSICA: Well, number one, listen to our podcast. Steps are interesting because the listening coach, the communication coach was sort of laying out a few of those for us, just very practical

ways to be better listeners. It's, again, bringing an attitude to as many interactions as you can as often as you can and making a habit of it. Instead of saying, when you don't understand somebody, being like, "Huh? What? What are you talking about?" Is that how you would want somebody to ask you if they don't understand you? I feel like no, usually you want to be more specific. What was it exactly that you didn't understand? "Can you repeat that one more time?" or, "Could you say that more slowly?" or, "Could you speak a little louder? I couldn't really hear you." Or at the beginning of a conversation, being like, "Hey, I'm getting a sense that the way you speak is not something that I'm super familiar with. Would it be all right if I asked you questions along the way or asked you to repeat yourself?" and just being respectful and mindful of what other people are bringing to that conversation.

JING: I'll add one last thing. I think we have all of these really nice stories of people coming to love their own voices or coming to appreciate all the human complexity that's behind the way they speak, and hopefully our audience will also get to see their own voice and the voice of people around them differently after they hear the podcast.

RICHARD: That's a lovely way to end. Jing Peng and Jessica Mendoza, thanks very much for joining us on Let's Find Common Ground.

JESSICA: Thank you. Thank you so much.

JING: Thank you.

ASHLEY: Jing and Jess are the hosts of the podcast Say That Again? and this show has been produced in partnership with The Christian Science Monitor.

RICHARD: And our podcast, Let's Find Common Ground, is a member of The Democracy Group podcast network. We often mention their shows at the end of our episodes.

ASHLEY: This week's featured show is one that you do, Richard, with Jim Meigs.

JIM: So, Richard, how do you describe How Do We Fix It?

RICHARD: Serious.

JIM: Playful.

RICHARD: Open-minded.

JIM: Argumentative.

RICHARD: Liberal-leaning.

JIM: Libertarian.

RICHARD: We don't always have the same politics.

JIM: But we do agree on this.

RICHARD: For every problem, there ought to be a solution.

JIM: A smart solution.

RICHARD: We talk solutions on How Do We Fix It?

JIM: With Jim Meigs.

RICHARD: And Richard Davies.

CHILD: How Do We Fix It?

ASHLEY: That's our episode for this week. I'm Ashley Milne-Tyte.

RICHARD: I'm Richard Davies. Thanks for listening.

ANNOUNCER: This podcast is part of The Democracy Group.