

Accent or not, my voice counts

By Rodika Tollefson

It used to be the most annoying question.

“So, where are you from?”

I still answer it now and then, but I’ve learned to accept it. Just like my slight accent.

The accent comes out occasionally, especially when I am tired or nervous. And when it doesn’t, my name— Rodika — does the job just as well.

Some say the accent is nice. Others try to guess — is it...Russian?...German? Over the years, I’ve rehearsed the answer so well it comes out in one breath. “I am from Moldova, between Romania and Ukraine. It used to be part of the former Soviet Union....”

I don’t mind those lessons in geography. I don’t blink if people feel compelled to raise their voice, speak slowly or restate the question. It doesn’t happen that much any more. But the memories from more than a decade ago, when I was FOB—fresh-off-the-boat—still remind me that my accent, not much thicker then, was perceived as a shortcoming.

Although I’ve been speaking English as my third language since I was 7, it was British English nonetheless. Between confusing moments like calling cereal porridge and pants trousers and confusing those strange phrases, like pulling a leg or kicking butt, I was labeled by some Americans.

I never actually said, “I am not stupid” or “I understand you as well as anyone else.” Yet that first year in an American

college, that condensed lesson in cross-cultural diversity reminds me of a Hispanic character in the film “A Walk in the Clouds.”

“Just because I speak with an accent doesn’t mean I think with one,” he said.

For me, my job as a journalist has proven that my accent is not a handicap or an indication of my thinking ability. I have to prove my English every day with every story I write. And I write many each week.

Strangers no longer say, “You speak English so well.” I guess that’s a given, or I wouldn’t be a reporter and writer, right? No one would question the obvious, as they questioned me when I worked in a liquor store several years ago. At 23, I looked 16. Not a day went without “Are you old enough to work here?” or “Have they changed the drinking age?” or “Does the store know they can be fined?”

No one would ask a professional journalist: “Are you allowed to be a writer, since you have that accent and English is your third language?” or “Is your paper OK with this?”

One question, however, will continue to be asked. “So, what brought you here?”

They forget it’s probably the same question that hung over their own ancestors centuries ago. Times have changed and so has the face of America. But many things have not. Foreigners came to seek freedom, a better life and opportunities. They still do.

Many succeed and nearly shed their old identities, customs, voices. Like me, they blend into the culture so well they can’t be told apart until they speak.

Others, as I did, learn fast that the

freedom has a price. My price-tag included loneliness, poverty and family left behind. It meant my kids, now 6 and 8, not knowing their grandparents or cousins who “live far-far away.” My victories and sorrows not shared with best friends. My lessons in motherhood and marriage diplomacy learned from a book, not from my mom.

Despite my nearly 11-year marriage to an American and my living in this country for a dozen years now, for a long time I didn’t feel the necessity of becoming a U.S. citizen. Changing somehow meant betrayal. It meant giving up my last link to the world “far-far away,” dazzled with sweet memories of cherries in bloom, fresh-baked bread and that first kiss. A world of lost innocence and silenced songs.

Yet the world had been fading until a faint smell and some photographs were all that remained. It was time to let go.

As I pledged my allegiance to the United States in the tidy Anchorage INS conference room a few summers ago, I felt a moment of rebirth. My shoulders somehow felt heavy. Not with burden. With pride but also with responsibility. I had been working and paying my taxes within weeks of stepping off the Alaska-bound plane. I had felt as much part of America as my husband or my two sons born here. The only thing I couldn’t do was vote, take a stand. Something many Americans dread anyhow.

But with the official seal came a new feeling. My voice could now count.

Even though it has an accent.

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