A dialect is a variety of language differing in vocabulary and grammar as well as pronunciation. Dialects are usually spoken by a group united by geography or class.

When a standard language and pronunciation are defined by a group, an accent may be any pronunciation that deviates from that standard.

Groups sharing an identifiable accent may be defined by any of a wide variety of common traits. An accent may be associated with the region in which its speakers reside (a geographical accent), the socio-economic status of its speakers, their ethnicity, their caste or social class, their first language (when the language in which the accent is heard is not their native language), and so on.

Yelena Rivera Vale is fully bilingual. She learned English and Spanish at the same time and speaks both with her “Puerto Rican” accent. She created a series of podcasts to share stories about accents. This one is hers.

“Accent Stories” was produced as part of Yelena Rivera Vale 2017 Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship. The male narrator for this piece is Alexander McIntyre. His accent can be described as mid-Atlantic. At the time of this recording, Alexander was a second year master student in Industrial Design at Georgia Tech.
speak, ideally, that the language that I speak should be sufficient. And I think that’s all well and good as an ideal, but the practice of it is very different. So these devices have really sort of been modeled on standard accents. And that is an accent of a region that has sort of been standardized—a standard American accent, a standard British, a standard Australian accent. But anybody who sort of fall out of that space of what would be considered to be a standard accent, then it’s a problem.

There’s so many videos on YouTube of Irish people trying to communicate with Siri or, you know. And it’s not just—I think Siri sort of brought it to our doorsteps, but I think any sort of voice-activated commands, you know. Ten years ago if you were sort of dialing into a bank or dialing in to any voice-automated system, these systems would shut down on us, or just sort of route us back to an operator because our accents weren’t considered to be standard and there were issues will voice recognition. I am the first to say that that has improved significantly. But, right now, for example, as the research suggests that one in five words are still not recognized. I mean that’s every fifth word that I said to you! [laughing] It’s like, “What did she say?” So yes, 20 percent recognition is amazing, but it’s still, you know, we sort of have an expectation that if we’re going to speak with somebody that they understand what we say.

I think the other challenge, of course, that voice technology sort of brings to the fore is that, in the cases of human-human interaction, human-human communication, we always negotiate meaning, and we negotiate understanding. And so if I said something, and as I said, if I see a nodding, so I know you are in an agreement with me. Or maybe if I see you frown, I begin to start adjusting the way that I speak—maybe I need slow things down or, maybe, I need to say in a different way or, maybe, I am using local term to me you’re not familiar with. Well, I don’t have that opportunity to negotiate with technology. And so quite often in these interaction, as a non—I am a native speaker of English, but I am a standard speaker of the English, with an English accent. And as a result, I have to begin making adjustments that I find particularly problematic because our accents is about who we are. It’s about our identity. And that if I’m going to be—I feel like what technology does is force me into an assimilation that I have to begin to adjust my accent to be understood by the technology in ways that I don’t have to when I speak with another human being.

So the example that I used, and I have been talking about it more and more, is my recent visit to Trinidad. I was at a friend’s home, and she had an iPhone and she took out her phone and she spoke to Siri in an American accent. And I was just flabbergasted! And I said, “Is that how you talk to Siri?” And she said, “Yes, that’s the only way that Siri will understand me,” and we laughed. And it’s not the first time that I have seen it happen, but I think what has been so striking to me is that in Trinidad, we have a term called “freshwater Yankee,” and that term is actually very derogatory. It was—I don’t know that it is in uses much anymore, but the idea of you sort of going to the States and coming back with an accent, and so that was sort of frowned upon, like you came back talking with this foreign accent. And so we use the term “freshwater Yankee” to describe that phenomenon.

But I find it interesting is that the devices like Siri and Cortana and Alexa sort of brought that phenomenon to our doorstep, that we no longer have to take a plea and then go spend any significant amount of time abroad to have to adjust the accents to be understood. And I think what is lost in the process, and why it is important that we start having a conversation about the bias that exists in technology and the lack of neutrality, is that identities are lost. There is something really inauthentic about speaking in an accent not of your own. While I understand that we do that for different reasons, which we code-switch all the time, there is something about this forced assimilation that I think is particularly problematic. Right now, large companies are sort of determining what the next accent is going to be.

So I think that in Denmark it’s, for example, are going to be on the, you know, you see that kind of the Korean market was addressed in terms of language and accent, but I don’t think that I’m going to see Trinidadian accent anytime soon! [laughs] I think it’s problematic. I think that when we have to sort of change the way that we speak to be understood, it goes to the core of who we are. The technology, that’s not we have sort of heralded technology. It needed to be allow me to be who I am, you know. Yelena Rivera Vale: This broadcast series Accent Stories was produced as part of Yelena Rivera Vale, Georgia Tech 2017 Diversity and Inclusion Fellowship.