

What's in an Accent?

In the international marketplace, it is very important for organizations to be able to both globalize and localize their product information and service offerings.

That being said, the information presented to their target audiences is only as effective as the means by which it is communicated.

For our purposes, the vessel or means of communication is via a voice talent performance; in essence, a voice-over recording.

Now, when I refer to localization, I mean that a given accent and manner of speaking matches or correlates with a particular group of people in a geographical area.

An example:

If I were writing a French Canadian script for an audience located in Montreal, QC, I would make sure that the terminology I use is familiar to French Canadians living in Montreal. Not only that, I may employ unique speech and formation characteristics indigenous to the French Canadian language and relevant cultural references to help my audience identify with what I have written.

Going one step further, I would hire a native French Canadian voice talent from Montreal who embodies the characteristics I am looking for to convey the copy in a meaningful and direct manner accessible to all French Canadian speakers in Montreal.

Localization is conveying a message to people in a specific geographical location implementing language and concepts that they can understand.

Certain accents have become staples and are relied upon heavily every day. For example, RP English (or BBC English / top of the scale), Neutral American (NPR or prime time national news), Parisienne French, and Canadian (CBC or prime time national news) are all members of an elite club of corporate, global accents.

This doesn't come as a surprise. The most neutral accents found in each country are usually prized above regional accents as is the case with many languages where a "high" or "official" version is preferred to dialects spoken in rural or isolated areas.

One classic example is the Italian language. Italian, when spoken in Rome or in other large Italian cities, does not vary significantly, whereas the Italian you hear in the foothills of the mountains or on the coastline may be dramatically different, in both pronunciation and meaning.

When someone is hiring a voice talent to record, they are often looking for a clean, polished voice with neutral or non-affected accents. These sought after accents as noted above (BBC, NPR, CBC) come with a host of benefits, including perceived authority, intelligence, trustworthiness, and professionalism to name some.

Other accents remain more elusive. Due in part to a lack of demand or market, these accents are requested less often.

Accents can reveal information about an individual's geographical location, ethnicity, socio-economic background, and education. If we only examined the nature of accents from an anthropological point of view, we'd be seeing a fraction of the picture that we're meant to view.

Accents are not always predestined and meant solely for those who live in their district... they can also be learned or acquired.

This is where opportunity knocks, and the world, with your voice, can become yours.

Recently, voice instructor Pat Fraley and his fellow accents masters conducted a workshop called Accent on Dialects Masters Event, a workshop where talent learned about how to identify their own dialects, how to recognize properly executed dialects, tried their hand at British, Irish, German, Russian, and N.Y. accents, and received a bounty of resources on how to prepare for and perform dialects foreign to themselves as well as recordings of their voices on a CD from the workshop.

One of the largest markets for dialects (or accents) today is in performing voice overs for videogames.

If you can acquire several key dialects, you'll be able to work globally and land more diverse roles.

The same theorem holds true for voice talent with regional accents that need to be averted. Some talent find that in order to get work, they must first lose their regional accents and adopt a new way of speaking, reconditioning themselves to pronounce words in the preferred, neutral accent.

This process of unlearning accents can take years. Many talent are not even aware that they have an 'accent' until they are informed by a casting director or agent.

Whether acquiring new accents to expand dialect skills or unlearning a native regional accent, the work required of an individual is extensive. Talent going down this road are more likely to be successful if a set of discerning ears or those of trained linguist are actively involved, coaching the talent to ensure that the accent they are imitating sounds authentic and believable.

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