



Why is my accent funny to you?

There are so many colourful accents in multicultural Singapore. To CHEW WEI SHAN, they sound like music. Yet, accents can be used to put down people who do not speak like everyone else.

Today, Tejas and Luz educate me about accents, and how imitating someone's accent can be unkind. Is it ever okay to put on an accent that is not your own? It is a much more complex issue than I thought.

Tejas: I'm an actor, and mostly perform for the theatre, but I sometimes do TV. Quite often, especially in TV shows, I am asked to put

on a thick Indian accent, even though I do not naturally speak that way. These Indian characters are usually minor roles, and just for comic relief. The accent is supposed to make audiences laugh, even if I'm not telling a joke. I ask myself all the time — what's so funny about being Indian, or sounding Indian?

This series of articles is based on interviews with people who have experienced everyday racism. Based on what they shared, the author wrote up these conversations for you to read. The people's names have been changed, but the stories are real.

Tejas (cont'd): At the same time, I am a big fan of this BBC comedy called *Goodness Gracious Me*. These Indian actors were born and raised in London, so they normally sound British. But, for the show, they put on Indian accents for laughs. Why am I okay with that? It puzzled me for a time.

Eventually, I realised that is okay because they are Indians poking fun at themselves. The show is created by Indian writers for an Indian audience who laugh along at the inside jokes, and can recognise a lot of the funny habits and quirks that they observe about their own Indianness.

Luz: Hmm... that makes sense! I never thought about it that way. I enjoy a lot of Filipino comedy that pokes fun at our own accent and culture too. I guess it is more okay to laugh at ourselves than to laugh at other people.

Tejas: In my school, the Indian kids who were the most popular were the ones with “no accent”. Even saying that is silly because there is no such thing as having “no” accent. Everyone has an accent. People say you “have an accent” when it sounds different from the majority.

Some of these “cool” Indian kids had more of a Singaporean Chinese accent, and so they were seen as “normal” or “accentless”. Sometimes, they had American or British accents because of their upbringing and influences, and that was seen as cool too.

Shan: When the kids from China spoke English with a strong accent, some of my classmates made fun of them by imitating that accent. I was not offended because I didn't speak like that. I used to think, well, I'm also Chinese, and I'm not offended. So, I felt those kids from China were probably being too sensitive. Later on, I realised it was not right to think that way.

I see now that, as a Singaporean Chinese kid, I had never been singled out for my accent or race. Growing up being accepted as “normal” was such an advantage. It made me confident and secure enough in my own skin. I didn't ever have to worry about racial jokes.

Luz: I am Singaporean too. I was born here and grew up here. So, my accent has never been very different from my friends. But, when someone makes fun of the Filipino accent, it still makes me uncomfortable — well, mainly because my parents speak like that. Are Mum and Dad supposed to be laughing stocks because of their accents?

Shan: That's true. I guess it really is about **empathy** and intention? So, when is it okay and not okay to put on an accent?

Tejas: I think learning to imitate other accents isn't always wrong. I mean, actors need to learn accents sometimes, for the roles that we play.

Luz: I guess when we imitate someone else's accent, we need to ask ourselves why we are doing it, and how it will affect others. Will anyone feel disrespected?

Tejas: Right! When we put on an accent to laugh at a whole group of people, that is not right. Especially if we are imitating minority friends, many of whom already endure racial **slurs**.

When people imitate accents to mock others, that spreads certain stereotypes about an ethnic group or social class. It can encourage others to look down on people who have those accents.

VOCAB BUILDER

empathy (say “em-pe-thee”; noun) = the ability to imagine what it would be like to be in another person's situation.

slurs (say “slerz”; noun) = critical remarks that hurt another person's reputation.

Examine our motives

People's accents reflect their culture, where they grew up, and who they spend time with.

So, when we poke fun at accents, those people are being mocked because of things they cannot control.

Sometimes, impersonating others for comic effect can be fun or entertaining. But, we have to examine our motives. We must think about how our behaviour might make someone else feel.

Today, I have learnt that accents can hold a lot of power. Some accents are considered better than others simply because they are more familiar to us, or because they are from cultures that we consider superior. Whether we are just joking among friends, or writing a comedy show, we must make sure that the way we use accents does not put down anyone.



WHAT IS EVERYDAY RACISM?

Racism means to treat some people worse than others, just because they are of a different race or skin colour, come from a different place, or have a different culture. Everyday racism is a form of racism where people say or do hurtful things without intending to be unkind. Everyday racism is also called "casual racism", although there is nothing casual about it for the person at the receiving end.

**This series is sponsored by the Ministry of Culture, Community and Youth, Singapore.
You can find more articles about casual racism at <http://more.whatsup.sg>.**