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Professor Perez

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I was born in the early morning hours of November 26, 1999, in the winding corridors of Palos Community Hospital in Palos Heights, Illinois. My parents were the scions of two blue-collar southside families that had only just clawed their way into the middle class. My dad and his sisters were the first in the family to go to college (they all went to ISU), while my mom came from a family of schoolteachers. These two circumstances converged to create an environment that held education in very high regard, with a special emphasis placed on reading. Because of this my linguistic development gestated at quite a rapid clip.

My mom is an English teacher so I, unlike most of my peers, actually learned how to speak English well. The biggest influence on my linguistic development was likely my voracious reading habit. I read at a 12<sup>th</sup> grade level when I was nine years old, which likely contributed to my sprawling and ever-expanding vocabulary from an early age. I had a habit of surreptitiously reading novels under my desk that reached its zenith in third and fourth grade. To this day I still grumble about how my fascist teachers would rip by beloved literature out of my hands, rummaging through my desk/ library without a warrant, and forcing me to pay attention to whatever bullshit mathematics lesson she was attempting to impart to the class, half of whom

were glued to their first-generation iPhones. Forsaken by academia and having been cruelly punished for the thoughtcrime of curiosity, I entered into what I suppose one could consider a “Rebellious Phase.” I stopped dressing well, adopting the hoodie-and-jeans look that would serve double duty as my daily uniform and self-esteem prison for the next nine years. In fifth grade, I decided to try cussing. After saying “frick” and “sucks” for a few days at recess, I decided to ask my mom for permission to move up to the big leagues. While we were moving the trash cans out to the curb, I told her that kids on the playground were saying “frick” and that things “suck.” Her response was to the effect of, “Yeah that’s fine. Just be aware of the context you use it in.” That statement would go on to apply to not only my illustrious cussing career, but also to the entirety of my oral communication. The most lamentable development of this dark era, however, was that I acquired the notion that it wasn’t “cool” to sound smart, as if that were something I should give even half a damn about.

Middle school is when I first became aware that I was in possession of a “Chicago” accent. Tragically, I lost most of this accent in choir. This is because our director was a veritable crusader against the dialect. While I assumed I had been in a linguistic prestige group because everyone spoke like me, in the context of choral singing I was placed firmly into the stigmatized group. Due to the nature of vowels in a Chicago accent, which are often spread and nasally, being contradictory to the desired vowel shape in choir, which are tall and round, they were methodically purged from my linguistic knowledge. In addition to the shift in my accentuation, I began to limit the register of my voice that I spoke in. I would talk in only the lower register of my voice, because it was still relatively high and I was, admittedly, pretty insecure about it. The effect of being in a stigmatized linguistic group was that my confidence in my speaking voice

was very much bruised, and I tried to minimize how much I had to speak to people other than my friends. I made the conscious choice to speak in a more choral manner, partly because I was linguistically insecure, and partly because I didn't want to be speaking the "wrong" way.

When I entered into high school, I decided to intentionally regain my Chicago accent. I came to this decision after reading a couple of books written in a vernacular way, and found that style of speaking to be much more authentic, and much less twee, than the affected intellectual dialect I had adopted. But, I did not use this accent at all times. In different contexts I would use different voices. While singing, I still would use the open choral vowels, much in the mode of classical Latin. When speaking informally, I use my Chicago accent. In formal settings, however, I use what I call my radio voice. The radio voice, known as such because I developed it on speech team doing the radio speaking event, is an articulate, deliberate, and well annunciated manner of speaking. With an emphasis placed on diction and clarity, the radio voice is best for communicating ideas to a large group of people, or in a formal setting such as a presentation. With all three of these "voices" I use the full stretch of my register, occasionally lilting on certain words and phrases to keep my listener's interest. How, you may wonder to yourself, did I make such a one hundred eighty degree change in my linguistic style? The answer is quite simple. I simply thought to myself, "What if I was good at speaking?" So then I was.

At this point in time, my linguistic development in mostly where it was in high school. I make constant use of the skills and habits I developed there, namely in the analysis of context in deciding which voice I use. I like to use obscure and difficult words because it, to me at least, is

charming and adds a bit of flavor to a conversation that might be a bit dry with more conservative synonyms. I now consider myself to be a member of a prestige group linguistically because I use the right voice in the right context. In other words, I use my voice that is considered prestige for the context I am in, such as open vowels in singing or spread nasally Chicago in casual conversation. I am very much linguistically secure, which has the effect of making me feel socially secure. My linguistic behavior has become more esoteric and unique at times, which has carved out a social niche that I am comfortable filling. I feel more confident in my social skills when I feel confident in my linguistic skills, which makes me more confident in my linguistic skills, entering into a self-reinforcing cycle of increasing social confidence.