

## NPR Code Switch podcast transcript:

**Episode 42** - Not-So-Simple Questions From Code Switch Listeners

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**Hosts:** Gene Demby, Shereen Marisol Meraji

**Guest:** Brent Blair

[14:47]

GD: So what does an accent from someone who is from here, who is American sound like? To get into that, we decided to holler at Brent Blair. He's an Associate Professor of Theatre Practice in Voice and Theater for Social Change at USC. He's sitting right across from you, Shereen.

SM: Yes, he is.

BB: Hi.

GD: So, the question that we have is "What does it sound like to be American in 2017?"

BB: Oh boy. I mean, what a loaded question because what is American identity? I think that we understand this quote unquote "American dialect" or "Received American Pronunciation" based on culture and media: what sells. And that's been mostly generated in the West Coast, from Hollywood, where we're sitting right now. So what I had been referring to as kind of a vanilla accent – it's got no twisty or harsh R sounds or twangy stuff or dropped AH – you know, it's just what Hollywood always understood as standard. And if you don't fit into that, you're kind of out of the Noah's Ark of acceptability in language.

SM: So would my accent be a typical California vanilla accent?

BB: Pretty much. [laughing]

GD: [laughing]

SM: Thanks. Thanks, Brent.

BB: You're welcome. [laughing]

SM: So who's allowed to have an American accent – this vanilla California accent?

BB: For me, accents and dialects is problematically this power game where people would like to control how you sound. I think if you talk to, you know, speech specialists and accent people in academia, they track change and migration of accents. For example, regionalisms are disappearing rapidly. In the last twenty years or so, an Atlanta, Georgian sounds kind of like a Californian these days.

GD: Wow.

BB: You can't tell the difference often between an urban Houstonian and an urban Chicagoan or an urban New Yorker. However, it's sort of when you get into rural areas that you start getting back into that juicy, beautiful diversity that makes us, you know, such an amazing group of people. But because careers and commercialism and, I guess, globalization have basically said "We want to sound all the

same,” we’re heading towards what I would like to call, like, the USS Enterprise future, where you have people from all over but they all sound American with the same kind of American accent.

GD: Now that is really fascinating that you’re in big cities in which you would see a lot of, presumably, a lot of different cultures colliding with each other – that people would have more increasingly placeless accents.

BB: Well, I mean, placeless if you’re in an economic, commerce culture, or if you’re in that class of people.

SM: So you’re saying it’s a class thing, not a race thing.

BB: I think it’s an access thing. I think it’s a power thing. I think, in the same way that people, for example, a cultural background that carries with it a historic stereotypical accent, so, um, you said you have Puerto Rican background?

SM: Mm hmm.

BB: Right. And so somebody thinks “Puerto Rican” and they think an accent that they might hear on a really bad version of West Side Story, where almost nobody was from that place, but they were all learning or affecting a Puerto Rican accent.

SM: Are Latinos, African Americans, you know, South Asians – are we allowed to have that accent?

BB: If I’m allowed to sound anything at all, it depends upon the culture that is, I guess, employing me. But also my relationship to that employment, my relationship to systems of power. So, what’s your relationship to systems of power? You work at NPR.

SM: Mm hmm.

BB: And yet you just said, you didn’t say “Latino”, you said “Latino” [BB impersonates a Latino accent here. -JM]. So you’ve given yourself permission to dive into your Latinoness. Maybe with more permission, you would allow yourself [speaks Spanish] when you want. But we have a cultural idea based on dominant culture and unfortunately, you know, we live in a world of binaries. We need simple things until we fall in love. And the moment you fall in love with somebody with red hair, for example, suddenly every single person with red hair looks different.

GD: [laughing]

SM: [laughing]

[18:43]

BB: Because you have put your focus on that. So for me, when we’re accent stereotyping, it just means we haven’t fallen in love enough with that community to understand its diversity and its complexity.

Transcript by Joe McVeigh <http://www.andreadallover.com>