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Spontaneous Linguistic Interview: Amanda Hamer

Language is quite often taken for granted by the human species— yet it is one of the biggest distinguishing factors between us and animals. Of us all, Linguists are perhaps among the most respectful admirers of language, often they are infatuated with the entire construct of language. There is a mixture of defining categories that coincide with the type of language such as the family of language it belongs to, where it is spoken, how long it has been spoken, and how it has spread throughout its life. It is easy to exclude from that list, however, the effects languages have on those that natively speak it, but this is the focus linguists have in relation to language.

Notably, one of the most interesting aspects of language in my mind is the tendency of the same language to be spoken in different manners, or as it is labeled, regional dialect. One fascinating part about living in the United States is the difference in dialects that exist everywhere from ocean to ocean. Further than this, it is often unknown to many U.S. residents that regional dialect is not specific to this country and is certainly not limited to English. Mainly, it is easy to remain unaware in youth that other languages exist while you are so immersed and accustomed to one; so, the ignorance surrounding the concept of regional dialects should not be considered a choice. However, with age it is a vital aspect of language that must be understood not only as a linguist, but as a language speaker of any kind.

As anyone from the U.S. would say, the biggest regional dialect difference is between the southern states and the northern states. The inflections, mannerisms, speed, tone, and even physical expressions are completely swapped (this was fascinating to see as I moved from

Delaware to Tennessee) or non-existent. While those from the U.S know this, it cannot be expected for a person who has never visited or been exposed to these tendencies to understand how different they are— going as far as impacting even the culture of the region. The same occurs if the roles are reversed— an American individual could most likely not pick apart accents and connect them to specific regions of other countries.

My connection and interest in this topic began in a linguistics course I completed in spring 2021. My professor, Dr. Rebecca Todd Garvin, is a published and internationally recognized linguist, and she is quite fascinated with regional dialects as well. This semester, fall 2021, as a part of the Teaching English as a Second Language (TESOL) focus, I am enrolled in Dr. Garvin's Second Language Acquisition course, which focuses on teaching English to students of other language backgrounds. While the two courses do focus on separate topics, the knowledge I acquired in linguistics directly influenced how the SLA course has impacted me not only as a student, but as a language learner.

The purpose of this explanation and introduction into my interest of language diversity is to set up an understanding of why, when I entered the room one morning of my ten o'clock SLA course and noticed a guest, I was immediately interested in what this person had to say. However, after promptly introducing myself and not receiving a response back, Dr. Garvin informed me the guest's name was written on the board— Amanda Hamer— and she would not speak until each class member attempted to guess where she was from.

Her name did not provide a hint for me, but the red hair, strong smile, and focus on each student gave me the feeling she was not from the U.S. (because why would we be guessing if she was an American like us?) but possibly the U.K. or Germany. The red hair led me to Germany because of my grandmother's red hair, she was born in Germany, but she also was Scott-Irish.

So, I guessed Germany or Scotland, while my classmates guessed other Northern European countries. Eventually Ms. Hamer put us out of our misery and informed us, with a very thick accent, that she originated from Kent, England.

Ms. Hamer: “Good guesses, you lot, but I come from the beautiful town of Kent, England. Do any of you know it’s whereabouts?”

Classmate: “I have heard of it, but never been and don’t know its exact location.”

Me: “Your accent does not sound very, umm, British, though. Does that make sense?”

Ms. Hamer: “Yes! That is precisely why I am here today, Dr. Garvin spotted me visiting a professor here who is a linguistics friend of mine and asked if I would come and chat. She informed me Noah and Anah have interests in linguistics and regional dialect. Is that so?”

Noah: “Yes! We both have loved learning from Dr. Garvin, and I really enjoyed talking about the southern vs. northern dialects of the United States.”

Me: “Same here, is this similar to why your accent sounds different from the typical British accent?”

Ms. Hamer: “I guess in a way, yes, but it is much different there than the differences in the regions you mentioned, Noah. There are less apparent differences in the culture comparatively.

Do you know what I mean?”

Dr. Garvin: “Anah, tell Amanda where you are from.”

Me: “I was born in Columbia, Tennessee, but I was raised for eighteen years in Delaware. I understand the cultural differences once you venture past the Mason-Dixon line.”

Ms. Hamer: “Oh, yes! So, you understand perfectly. Which area have you preferred to live, Anah?”

Me: “I like the politeness of the south, but I miss the culture and people in the north. I find southern politeness is sometimes fake, whereas northern bluntness is honest. Living in the north is less emotional than here, I’m not sure if that makes much sense, but it is what I have noticed.”

Ms. Hamer: “It does. I felt similar when traveling in the U.S. But it isn’t quite like that where I’m from. The politeness or attitude towards others doesn’t change from region to region, the biggest cultural difference is how much you love the Queen! Hahahaha. No, really that is quite accurate, and the other differences stem from wayyyy way back in our history.”

Dr. Garvin: “Not to interrupt, Amanda, but would you also explain why else your accent may sound a bit different?”

Ms. Hamer: “Ah! Yes, thank you, Rebecca. I forgot to mention I am part deaf, so some words may sound a bit different because of this and not because of my regional dialect. I also form words differently than normal.”

Me: “I did notice this, I read lips because I also have hearing damage and although not partial deafness, it does make an impact.”

Ms. Hamer: “I noticed that Anah! Yes, I do so as well. I like to watch conversations of a language I am learning to pick up on the movements of their mouths for practice, this has helped me immensely. So, moving back to regional dialects. The history of England directly impacts the regional dialects today, that is why there are so many accents that come from such a small area. The fight for land resulted in many different people moving all around, spreading language and accents. Quite interesting, huh?”

Me: “Yes! I also read this impacted the southern accents, because of colonial periods, and that is why these accents are so similar. Is this true?”

Ms. Hamer: “It certainly is, but the range of accents is not quite as broad here. It does make sense, however, as to why I am capable of understand southern accents so well.”

Me: “Oh, I struggle with that. The slowness is what messes me up. Are there any other specifics you have noticed?”

Ms. Hamer: “Indeed. Have you noticed the way I use my hands? I am quite dramatic, no matter how minimal the words may be. This is something that differs quite a bit in the U.K., probably why Americans find Scottish people angry. They don’t use much motion and are rather still! Like the differences here, northern people do not tend to be nearly as expressive.”

The conversation with Ms. Hammer continued, but the discussion became more about our personal stories and her describing her favorite places in the U.K. Although interesting, those details did not necessarily connect with the purpose of this article. Ms. Hamer was fascinating and taught us a lot about regional dialects existing in places we had never even considered.

This interview, after discussing with Ms. Hamer, became the basis for this article because of the uniqueness of the interviewee. Never, and probably never again, would I have randomly met a person from Kent, England. The opportunity to discuss such interesting topics with an individual not native to the U.S. was one I could not miss and thankfully Ms. Hamer was more than happy to be included.