

Foreign Accent Syndrome

Author: R L Drake

It's rude to mock the way people speak – especially foreign people with accents. It's the kind of behaviour that can get you permanently cancelled. Some might say this new socially progressive proclivity to censor is a bit harsh, others may declare it an overdue correction. Either way, for someone to speak in a foreign accent when they aren't – once perhaps a mainstay of comedy – is now taboo. Awkward.

So when a woman in England sounds like she's speaking with a Chinese accent, folks might well get offended. When an African American woman – who never left the USA – starts speaking in a super posh English accent – she may be mocked and taunted for trying to be something she's not.

And perhaps it is good – we should all be fed up with pretenders, trolls and charlatans.
Then again, they might be suffering from a rare condition.
Foreign Accent Syndrome.

No, really.

First diagnosed in 1907, between 1941 and 2009 there have been 62 cases. 97% of the sufferers are adults, and 67% are female.

It usually involves strokes, brain injuries or neurological damage – and it results in someone suddenly speaking as if they have a foreign accent.

In 2006, Kath Lockett of Staffordshire, a mom of two, suffers a brain injury. She is in the hospital for 13 days. She loses her ability to speak altogether, and when she gets home, her mood is low. She doesn't want to go anywhere.

Her daughter manages to coax her out of the house, taking her to an art gallery.
While there, she comments on one of the artworks. Slowly regaining her speech – a win.
The lady from the gallery asks her what part of Poland she's from.

On the bus on the way home people ask if she's Russian.

Today, she sounds Italian.

She doesn't speak Italian – she doesn't know Italian. She only speaks English, with an Italian accent.

Sarah Colwill sounds as if she works at a Chinese Restaurant. A very heavy Chinese accent. She lives in Plymouth, never left. Australian Cindy Hastings, who never left Australia, sounds East European. Linda Walker from Newcastle-upon-Thyme sounds Jamaican.

Singer George Michael once claimed that, after a 3-week coma in 2012, he spoke in a West Country Accent for a few weeks.

What's going on?

Interestingly, the accents aren't foreign – but are perceived to be by listeners.

Sufferers actually find that their speech processes radically change. They pronounce how they can – and those who listen to them then liken how they sound to various foreign accents.

It is such a rare condition, that treatment is also limited.

One method being used with some success is musical training. According to some research, musicians are, for whatever reason, good at imitating sounds. The treatment involves those who suffer from the disorder to essentially imitate how they used to sound. So – medically – the only way to cope with Foreign Accent Syndrome is to Fake a local one.

Proof that, sometimes, faking is the most authentic thing one can do.