

LAUREN WALTON

A LINGUISTIC AUTOBIOGRAPHY

The first time I realized I was not as broad-minded as I'd thought was the moment I landed in Glasgow, Scotland, approximately six years ago. Perhaps I'd thought I was broad-minded because I had always had fairly liberal political views – it was 2004 and I was fully convinced that having George W. Bush as our president meant it was only right that I hang my head in shame as an American – but this was not really broad-minded. If I had been broad-minded, it would have occurred to me before that moment that everyone – everyone – has an accent. Even me. And in this case, especially me.

I am ashamed, and rightly so, to admit that it took me months to wrap my head around the fact that the western American accent was not “pure” English. Not that I had been using this particular word in my mind when I thought about my accent; it just was. I spoke the way pop stars sang; my words came out neither too fast nor too slow; foreigners never had to grapple with my speech due to prolific use of slang or quaint but obnoxious country-isms. This was all clear in my mind and embedded there long ago, but the belief was shaken before I had exited customs in Glasgow International Airport.

“What are you doing here?” the customs official asked me even before opening my passport. Which, incidentally, would have answered his question.

“Studying,” I replied chirpily, sure he would give me a sweetly patronizing smile and stamp “completely non-threatening and adorable American student” on my passport.

Instead, he flipped it open to my visa and decided to quiz me.

“Where?”

“The University of Stirling.” I realized then that someone had spelled it “Sterling” on my visa and hoped he wouldn't think it had been me. I was a smart, broad-minded American – not that 14% I'd read about who couldn't locate the United States on a map.

He gave me a sharp nod, and mumbled, “Anwhayerstudn?”

I was stumped. All I'd understood was that he was asking a question, though as my mind raced I realized even that wasn't a given, since the Glaswegian accent had that sing-songy quality to it that meant everything was a question. Still, as he was a customs official and I was trying to enter his country, I deduced that it being a question was a fair bet, and knew I'd have to ask one of my own.

“Um...what?”

Maybe it was my distinct lack of eloquence or that often used and always irritating “um” that riled him; regardless, it was the look he leveled at me that broke down those first defensive walls in my American consciousness.

“What. Are. You. Studying?” he repeated robot-like.

My relief at finally understanding was immense and, frankly, over the top.

“Ohhhhhh!” Cue nervous laughter before I trilled excitedly, “I'm studying English!”

He was quiet for a minute, before, in a manner I would come to recognize as quintessentially Scottish, one corner of his mouth curled up and he remarked, “Well, you're no' off to a great start, are you?”

He let out a snort of laughter, stamped my passport, and waved me happily out of his sight.

And that pretty much summed it all up; I was not off to a great start. A few hours later, one of my kinder flatmates took me grocery shopping and had to inform me in a whisper that, though she completely knew what I meant, “pants” here meant “underwear.” This was moments after I’d told her that yes, it had been a really long flight, I was feeling tired and grubby, and in fact hadn’t changed my pants in at least three days.

Over the coming years, I would learn more of these differences, and never once did I think they were unimportant. I learned to remember that saying you gave someone the finger implied something unspeakably dirty, that if someone asked me if they could borrow my ‘rubber’ I was not to stare at them bug-eyed and bewildered before suggesting they buy a pack of brand new ones at the drug store – oh, and I was to remember that it was actually called the ‘chemist.’ Bathrobes were ‘dressing gowns,’ slippers were ‘baffies,’ and sneakers were ‘trainers.’ Any sort of mess was ‘minging,’ disgusting people were ‘mingers,’ and the rude customs official I had spoken to before was a ‘Weegee’. ‘Juice,’ I learned after a confused visit to someone’s house, did not involve fruit of any variety, but a soft drink. You could also call it ‘fizzy juice,’ but then someone may wonder why you felt the need to be so descriptive.

Two years later, and once I had finally wrapped my head around most of these differences, I moved to another area of the country called Fife (only twenty miles to the east, but I’d already learned that the British conception of distance was somewhat skewed – I had essentially moved to Mars), where I had to face the fact that at least half of what I’d learned no longer applied. Here, ‘dressing gown’ made you sound like you were going to tea with the Queen in your very best night-wear. They were called ‘house coats’ if you were posh, and ‘hoose coats’ for the remaining 80% of the local population. The ‘ooo’ sound itself was extremely popular in the area and injected into every word imaginable. An hour was ‘an oor,’ the town was ‘the toon,’ and a memorably embarrassing incident taught me that ‘tool’ was not actually a device to fix things, but the Fife way of saying ‘towel.’ That last one was especially important; a surprisingly high number of situations occur in which it’s fairly important to know whether someone is asking for a hamper or a towel before you burst into the bathroom.

Time spent in this area of Scotland did eventually cause some changes to my accent, especially once I started working in a local college, which in Scotland is not similar to a University, but more a giant holding cell for fifteen and sixteen year olds who don’t really care for high school any longer. Though they watched American T.V. and idolized many American stars, I was not on T.V. and clearly not a star – an American accent in real life was so surprising to them that they genuinely couldn’t understand me. If I was to be understood, I had to clip my words and speak at a pace even my own mind had trouble keeping up with. I never did adopt the ‘ooo’ accent to my words, much as it fascinated me – that, I think, is too significant a change to be done naturally – but I did eventually find that my weekly communication with my parents became increasingly difficult. It was like I was bilingual, only poorly so; I couldn’t remember which words I knew first, which were my ‘native’ words.

As expected, a few months back home and back in a college setting has erased whatever accent I’d picked up in my six years in Scotland, and my original one has settled almost completely back into place. Apart from the eye-opening experience of simply living in another country, I’d have to say that the biggest change my time there has left me is an ability to hear accents to an even greater extent. I can now tell the difference between Irish, English, Scottish and Welsh accents, which I hope has enabled me to hear the differences in my own country’s accents as well. While our accents are not nearly as diverse as Scotland’s (considering Colorado is about three times the size of Scotland and has a fairly consistent accent), my time away has made me curious to learn more about our linguistic differences. I have finally accepted that my accent isn’t even “pure” in my own country.