mystery science

Grades K-5
Mini-Lesson: “Why do people from England sound different than people from America?”

VIDEO TRANSCRIPT

Hi, it's Doug! I've got the flag of the United Kingdom here. I'm sorry, there's a call coming through right now. It's from my brother-in-law, Deacon. Let me take it, hold on one second.

- Hey, Deacon! How are you?
- Hey, Doug! How are you?
- It's great you're calling right now. I'm actually in the middle of an episode that we're going to do about accents, so it's perfect that you called me.
- Why is it perfect that I called when you're doing an episode about accents?
- Because you have an accent.
- No, I don't. You have an accent.
- No, I don't have an accent, you have an accent.
- No, I'm sure I know that every time we speak, I hear an accent from you, not from me.

Okay, agree to disagree. Well, that was perfect timing. Someone named Xander has a question about accents. Let's give him a call now.

[Video Call]
- Hi, Doug!
- Hi, Xander!
- I have a question for you. Why do people from England sound different from people in America?
- That's a great question.

When I was young, my family had an exchange student come live with us. Her name was Shelly, and she spoke with an English accent. Her family was from England. I'll never forget because, on the very first day she arrived at our house, she asked me, "Excuse me, where's the loo?" I was like, "The what?" She said, "The loo." Then she thought for a second, and she realized I couldn't understand her. "Sorry," she said, "I meant to say, where's the bathroom?" Oh, the bathroom. I had no idea that people from England called it “the loo.”

That wasn't the last time that I was surprised by someone's accent either. When I was older, I became friends with someone from Australia. We were about to go hang out somewhere, and he said to me, "I'll be right there. I've just got to use the dunny, eh?" Huh? I was so confused. And that's when I learned that dunny is the word that people in Australia have for bathroom.

Now, it's not that my friends from England or Australia don't speak English. I mean, English started in England, so definitely, that's not true. Why is it that these people, even though English is their first language, speak so differently than the way that I speak? They have different words for certain things, and they seem to just talk a different way.

Why do people have accents? Before I say anything further, what do you think?

Now would be a good time to pause the video and discuss.

Okay. You ready?

The secret to figuring out why people have accents is something you can discover for yourself when you travel to places where people speak English differently than you do. I'll never forget when I traveled to England. I went to a restaurant, and I had to give my last name for the

waitlist. My last name is Peltz, and I spelled it P-E-L-T-Z. The waiter looked amused. "Zee," he said, and he smiled.

You see, in England, the letter Z is called zed. To him, I was the one who sounded different. I'm the one with the accent. I have an American accent. You see, you or me, we don't think of ourselves as having an accent, but we do. An accent is just a way of speaking. It's a way of talking. We all have some way that we speak, and it's not usually something that we chose. Each of us learned our way of speaking by copying the sounds of our parents and the people around us when we were little. That's why we each end up sounding a lot like the people in the area where we live.

Everyone has a way of speaking and pronouncing words that's a little different from people in other places. And it's not just people who speak English. There are different accents found in every language.

Take Spanish, for example. Spanish is spoken in lots of countries all over the world. Just recently, a friend of mine from Spain was telling me that she was speaking Spanish with her coworker who's from Mexico. They were having lunch together, and he said to her in Spanish, "Hey, what's your favorite kind of fruit?" She said, "Oh, I love the fruit melocotón." He was like, "What? I literally don't even understand what you just said." It turns out melocotón is what they call a peach in Spain, but in Mexico, it's called a durazno.

So in summary, it's not just people from other places who have an accent—you do too! Everyone has an accent of some kind. It's just not always obvious to us if we're surrounded by people who have the same way of speaking that we do.

It's always fun to meet people from other places. One of the most fun things you can do is compare how you say things differently, and sometimes what words you say differently, too. Try calling the bathroom the loo or the dunny, and see what reaction you get from your parents.

That's all for this week's question. Thanks, Xander, for asking it!