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Breaking the Sound Barrier

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LOS ANGELES

THIS summer, in between the long goodbye to [Katie Couric](#) at NBC and the fracas at “The View” over the departure of Star Jones Reynolds, another television woman quietly made news of a different sort. The Spanish-language television personality María Celeste Arrarás twice filled in as a host of the “Today” show, and no one, on air or off, mentioned her accent.

The Puerto Rican-born Ms. Arrarás is a darling of the Spanish-language news media, an Emmy winner and the host of “Al Rojo Vivo con María Celeste,” a daily news and entertainment show on Telemundo. She speaks fluent English with a Spanish accent.

But while Spanish and other foreign accents are familiar in entertainment and politics (think Antonio Banderas and [Arnold Schwarzenegger](#)), network television news shows are bastions of the broadcastspeak that makes most anchors and reporters sound as if they had been hatched in the same linguistic incubator.

So Ms. Arrarás’s high-profile sally into national network television, in the spot previously occupied by Ms. Couric no less, was groundbreaking for a Spanish-accented broadcaster. There was even an uptick in ratings during her appearance, said Jim Bell, the executive producer of “Today.”

The big deal, they both said, was that her accent was no big deal.

“It’s been an eye-opener for me,” said Ms. Arrarás, 45, who served as a host on June 23 and July 7. “I feel very comfortable on live television, but I was very self-conscious about the accent. But the people in the audience were just very welcoming.”

Just as surprising, perhaps, is that it didn’t happen sooner. After all, Latinos are the nation’s largest minority group; and close to half speak Spanish as their first language.

But accents still do matter in this country. Sounding foreign can hinder careers and has led to accent-discrimination lawsuits. People with accents say they are often ridiculed or not taken seriously outside of their social circle. And in going for the largest audience possible, national broadcast networks have historically aimed for mainstream appeal, deeming even a Southern drawl taboo.

But broadcasters seem to have realized that opening up the tent to accents could attract new audiences at

a time when networks are bleeding viewers.

“Each passing year there’s been more acceptance on the part of station owners to take risks and reflect the culture of a community more,” said Dennis Wharton, a spokesman for the National Association of Broadcasters, which represents radio and television networks.

And television executives, talent agents and linguists say that Americans are growing more accepting of diversity, even with debates over immigration raging. With the [Census Bureau](#) putting the foreign-born population at its highest level in recent history — 34 million people, or 12 percent of the population — demographic changes affecting the voice of television go beyond the Latino population.

“The time has come to identify ourselves by the reality of what our culture is today,” said Don Browne, the president of Telemundo. “It’s about relevance now.”

All kinds of accents have cropped up on television, particularly on cable channels. There’s the Spanish accent of Mexican-born Cesar Millan, the “Dog Whisperer” on the National Geographic Channel, the German inflection of Heidi Klum on “Project Runway” on Bravo and the Georgia twang of Nancy Grace on CNN.

And a woman from Arkansas, Danielle Evans, managed to win the latest “America’s Next Top Model” competition despite the judges’ admonitions that she suppress her “country girl” accent.

Some accents, of course, have been more acceptable than others — English accents, for instance, which many think of as sophisticated. But until very recently, television was a tough sell for a Spanish accent outside the sitcom. It was only five years ago that Claudia Trejos, a Colombian sportscaster, anchored the weekend sports report at the WB Network affiliate in Los Angeles, and the complaints poured in. Viewers’ letters and voice mail messages suggested that she “go back to Mexico.” And her peers made fun of her accent on the radio and some local sports columnists wrote that she should be closed-captioned.

But Ms. Trejos, now 37 and a freelance reporter for ESPN from Miami in both English and Spanish, says she recently noticed an attitudinal turnaround. When she covered the boxing match between [Fernando Vargas](#) and [Shane Mosley](#) in Las Vegas on July 15, she ran into former colleagues who joked, “Hey, you finally learned to speak English!”

Ms. Trejos laughed. “It’s just funny, because I continue being me and I speak the same English,” she said. “The mind-set has changed. There’s an awareness that we’re not only menial workers and bus boys. We have the new owner of the Anaheim Angels,” she said, speaking of Arturo Moreno, a fourth-generation Mexican-American. “People know about reggaetón.”

Raul Mateu, head of the Latin division of the William Morris Agency in Miami, said that in the last three years, while news anchors, reporters and talk show hosts with Spanish accents have still found it hard to cross over to English-language shows, at least they are considered. And sometimes they are hired.

“I get a lot of calls for Hispanic talent and the discussions over accents are extensive,” he said. “The issue now is that subtle accents are O.K. and stronger accents are not.”

But, he added, “a few years ago, any sort of an accent was a nonstarter.”

One of his clients, Ana Belaval, 31, a former correspondent for “Despierta América,” Univision’s morning show, said she first thought of a crossover three years ago. By last year, the time was right. She was hired as a morning-show features correspondent by WGN-TV in Chicago, where she said two other Univision veterans with accents work for competing stations.

Ms. Belaval, who was born in Puerto Rico, said she came to her new job with such self-consciousness that she had nightmares of sounding like Desi Arnaz on “I Love Lucy.”

“Like, ‘There’s a fire and you’re going to be str-rrrrrr-anded,’ ” she said, rolling the R’s. Her other big fear, she said, was hate mail. Greg Caputo, the WGN news director who hired her, said that a few viewers asked who she was and where she came from, but that he hasn’t heard a peep lately.

“The primary motivator for me was that Ana had a wonderful personality, that she broke through the screen and that she had significant Chicago experience,” he said. “Spanish-language television seems to be populated with a lot of personalities that really have an energy about them, a joy.”

But speakers of accented English must still contend with the often intolerant American ear. The [Equal Employment Opportunity Commission](#) says the increase in the immigrant population has led to a rise in job-related accent discrimination charges filed with the agency, from 48 in 1996 to 161 last year. (Regional American accents are not federally protected, only those related to national origin.) In a study five years ago, researchers at the University of North Texas found that employers gave those with neutral speech high-profile jobs, while steering those with regional accents to jobs requiring little technical expertise or customer contact.

“An accent can signal many things — ethnic roots, regional roots,” said Roderick Hart, the dean of the College of Communications at the University of Texas at Austin. “But it can also call up a series of stereotypes. For certain parts of the country, that fast-talking Easterner is too ready to spend your money and that laconic Southerner is too willing to go back to yesteryear.”

Accent-reduction teachers say their foreign-born clients constantly complain of how they are made to feel like an “other.”

“A lot of them are tired of being asked where they’re from,” said Lisa Mojsin, the director of Accurate English, an accent-reduction school in West Los Angeles.

One of Ms. Mojsin’s students, Colette Fournier, weary of having to repeat herself, is working to reduce her French accent. “I don’t want to feel like I speak like a 6-year-old,” she said.

Another client, Guillermo Harpoutlian, who is from Argentina, deals with clients from all over the world

as director of planning for a financial institution. He worries that his thick accent could torpedo his ambitions to become a chief executive.

“In a senior position you can’t have an accent,” he said. “You open your mouth and they say, ‘Oh, you have a beautiful accent.’ What they’re saying is: ‘You don’t know how to speak English.’ ”

As for Ms. Arrarás, who came to Florida at 16 to attend boarding school, her hosting duties were the kind of convergence that Mr. Browne said NBC envisioned when it acquired Telemundo in 2002. Ms. Arrarás said she had no plans to work in English full time, but a few weeks ago she hired a speech coach to polish her English.

“The way things are going,” she said, “it seems that I’ll be doing more things in English.”

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