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COMMENTARY

Hanks: The Geico gecko's gone working class — why?

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If America is a classless society, why has the Geico gecko on the telly suddenly developed a working-class British accent? Although geckos are the only lizards with a voice, this accent seems odd to me. The lizard obsessed with pie and chips is selling car insurance to Americans, not fish at the beach at Brighton.

Anthropomorphic animals are nothing new in American advertising. Tony the Tiger started out shilling for Frosted Flakes on tiny black-and-white TVs, and Mickey Mouse has been drawing droves to Disneyland for decades. Though the Geico gecko has been with us since 1999, his creators at The Martin Agency acknowledge that his accent changed with a new round of commercials (or adverts) that began airing in November. Perhaps I find the change troubling because that little green guy is symbolic of the growing gap between have-nots and have-yachts in this country.

One of the great myths of America is that we are a classless society. We aren't. Although we might not have hereditary titles — there's no Baron of Bastrop — we do have hereditary privilege. Otherwise, how could we have so many people in politics with the names Kennedy and Bush?

You might think you can't identify a British working-class accent. Maybe you've seen Audrey Hepburn as Eliza Doolittle in "My Fair Lady" (1964). Doolittle is ruthlessly drilled by Professor Henry Higgins (Henry Higgins), as she struggles from cockney to the Queen's English. Think of Michael Caine as the title cad of "Alfie" (1966). Or you might be familiar with the cockney accent that Dick Van Dyke attempts as Bert the sweep in "Mary Poppins" (1964).

Ironically, the cockney accent you are most likely to hear on the radio these days isn't much more authentic than Van Dyke's.

When I first heard the catchy tune "Fit But You Know It" by Mike Skinner, the 27-year-old British rapper who performs as The Streets, I thought how wonderful for him that he hadn't had to change his accent to make a go of it in the British music industry. The irony is, he had. Skinner is a sort of Eliza Doolittle in reverse. Though brought up in Birmingham, England, Skinner reportedly adopted a London working class, or cockney accent, which some refer to as a "mockney accent," much like the one the Geico gecko has developed.

Why should you care?

In her 2005 book, "Bait and Switch: The (Futile) Pursuit of the American Dream," Barbara Ehrenreich reported that an awful lot of educated people are working hard just to get by, despite university degrees and years of professional experience. These people need car insurance to get to their multiple minimum-ish-wage jobs. Cue the lizard with his working-class accent.

Among the overeducated and underemployed is my longtime friend Byron King. King is one of the few black men who is currently ABD (all but dissertation) on his doctorate in English Literature at the University of Texas, with an emphasis on linguistics. King has taught readin' and writin' at UT, Huston-Tillotson and Northwestern State University in Louisiana.

King is also underemployed. He's working under the big pink dome as a Capitol tour guide, making \$8 an hour, sans benefits. Putting those linguistic skills to use, he does the French and Italian language tours of the Capitol. In a pinch, he could do tours in Latin, Classical Greek, Old English or Old French. So far, there hasn't been a pinch.

During a recent Sunday brunch with King, I brought up this lizard with an accent that was bothering me.

"The only lower-class person who isn't scary or insulting [to an American] is a cockney. Right now, immigrants and minorities are scary," King said, referring to recent immigration rallies across the country. If King's theory is correct, we have a talking lizard obsessed with pie and chips all because of the tensions that are simmering briskly along the Texas-Mexico border.

At La Zona Rosa tonight, we have The Streets rapping in a mockney accent. It's a linguistic put-on that has worked for Skinner. In the first song of his sophomore album, "A Grand Doesn't Come For Free," he sings of running down the street, pell-mell, to return a DVD before late charges kick in. On his new album, "The Hardest Way to Make an Easy Living," the song "Memento Mori" features Skinner boasting about driving a flashy Ferrari that's "book." Why does he drive it? Because it's pointless for him to resist consumer culture when he has oodles of cash.

The irony is that Skinner achieved the posh rock-star life by adopting a version of a working-class accent, then selling millions of albums in the UK. The gecko is presumably making money for Geico by similarly adopting a working-class accent.

In our society, with growing class divisions and inequalities, it seems eerie that money is being made by people (or talking lizards) pretending to be working class when they aren't.

Perhaps I'm just bitter. In the working-class Houston suburb of Deer Park where I grew up, the parents of nearly everyone I knew worked in "industry." Industry is a catch-all term for employment in the petrochemical hydra, a hydra whose heads include Shell and Exxon. Many of the people I grew up with work in industry themselves. They are working class, and many are struggling to remain solvent.

Perhaps if the people I grew up with just pretended to be working class, it would be more advantageous for them.

Like it is for Skinner and the talking lizard.

The Streets will perform at 9 tonight at La Zona Rosa.

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