

Walter & Rodolphe: Conversation Summary

A Coaching Story Across Languages, Accent, and Argentine Identity

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Audio version: <https://www.walterfreiberg.com/rodolphe>

[00:00] Who Is Rodolfo

Rodolfo is a French-born anthropologist who has lived in Buenos Aires, Argentina, for over 15 years. He arrived in 2010, built his life there, and in 2024 became a naturalized Argentine citizen. Walter worked with him on Rioplatense accent coaching in 2025–2026, covering both the internal dimensions of identity and the external ones: pronunciation, intonation, and the sound of the language.

In Walter's introduction:

"With Rodolfo we did accent coaching work on the Rioplatense dialect in 2025–2026 that included internal aspects of identity and also external ones — pronunciation and intonation, the sound of the language."

[02:30] The Right to Indifference

Rodolfo introduces the concept that drove his decision to seek coaching: earning the right to go unnoticed when he chooses to.

"For 15 years, everything was fine. But when I became Argentine, I started to feel that question as something a little heavy, because people were systematically putting their finger on my lack of integration — because my accent gave me away. So the idea with the coaching you gave me was to work toward earning my right to indifference. To get on a bus, a taxi, walk into a shop, and be able to speak without someone pointing at my own identity — an identity I increasingly feel is Argentine."

On the distinction between going unnoticed and cutting off connection:

"What I wanted wasn't to stop having those conversations. Sometimes I really enjoy doing what I call wild ethnography — I get in a taxi and listen to what people tell me. That's enormously valuable for building your own identity. But I have to be able to decide when. Without it happening three times a day, every day: but where are you from?"

[07:00] The Argentine Mirror

Walter and Rodolfo explore why Argentines are so openly curious about foreigners — something Rodolfo contrasts sharply with his experience in Boston, Madrid, and Italy.

"I lived in many cities — Boston, Madrid, Italy — and you can go to the bakery for months with a terrible accent and they will never ask where you're from. Probably out of caution, or because asking about origin can seem invasive. In Argentina that doesn't exist. On the contrary. I think it's the only country where you meet someone and within five minutes they're telling you about their genealogy."

On why this happens, Rodolfo offers his theory:

"I think the Argentine asks because it's a way of expressing their own foreign identity. The Argentine identity has been worked on a lot in recent years — it's quite complex. The relationship with foreignness is something fundamental. And I see in that conversation a genuine expression of curiosity, openness, and cosmopolitanism, but also a reflection of what the porteño needs to build with the foreigner. The foreigner is there — and so here's a chance for me to exist as another kind of foreigner too. With a fairly large pride in what their grandparents and great-grandparents did. They're talking about themselves as well."

[13:00] Before the Coaching: The Passport Shift

Rodolfo reflects on how his relationship to Spanish changed — particularly after receiving his Argentine passport in 2024, the symbolic moment that made him more demanding of himself.

"Before that date, I accepted my accent, I accepted my identity as a foreigner in Argentina. And everyone would tell me, but you speak so well for a French person. I'm not sure what that means — whether French people speak badly, or whether I was speaking correctly. But symbolically there was a very big shift. I received my passport and I said to myself: no, you can't keep going like this."

On why functional Spanish was no longer enough:

"One falls into a functional Spanish — but functional Spanish isn't enough. Language is a border that creates a relationship between two people, that marks the frontier. I could argue, I could express a complex idea in Spanish. But it's not enough. And in the work we did on vowels — the A in Spanish is not exactly the same A as in French. The O either. All of that mixes into a Spanish that ends up creating a strange situation of: yes, but how is this person talking? It's not wrong, but it's not quite right either. It's like creating your own identity. And to lose the differences, first you have to analyze the differences."

[19:00] The Work of Awareness

Walter asks about the first step in the coaching process — awareness before production. Rodolfo describes what it was like to begin noticing things he had never consciously perceived before.

"For me it was entering into the detail. The aspiration — very present in the Rioplatense dialect. Also the O, the A. And starting to realize — it seems obvious, but at the beginning your way of pronouncing something seemed totally identical to what I was producing. But with time, with repetition, one starts to see that what you produce is not exactly the same. It's a journey. And when the penny drops — when it clicks, as they say in Buenos Aires — I remember days when I was listening to

people around me and noticing: incredible, I'd never seen this before, never realized this sound was there."

On the strange condition of knowing more than you can yet do:

"Now I recognize it. I say, no — not there, not there. I'm like Medea: I see what's right, I recognize it, but I do it wrong. That's a bit like the human condition. But it's a great step forward."

[25:00] Inhabiting the In-Between

Walter observes that people often can't quite place Rodolfo — he doesn't read as clearly French, and not as a native Argentine either. Rodolfo reflects on what it's like to live in that intermediate space.

"It's an uncomfortable place — let's not pretend otherwise. Because ultimately language, like everything in our culture, has a classificatory function. And not being classified, or being classified not as you perceive yourself, is always uncomfortable. It can have advantages — it's easy to stand out — but sometimes you don't want visibility. You want indifference. And there, one has to build this uncomfortable identity."

On what lies beyond accent:

"One can put all their energy into working their accent, into really imitating an Argentine. But unfortunately that's not enough, because being Argentine isn't just producing sounds like an Argentine. There's also non-verbal language, attitudes, emotional registers that you don't practice in the same way. So this strangeness, this singularity — beyond the accent — will always exist. You can polish it, but you'd have to be a great actor to cover everything."

On choosing discomfort:

"When I made the decision to be a migrant — a voluntary decision, entirely mine — I put myself in that discomfort. And I think discomfort also... I like challenges. I tend to put myself in an uncomfortable place with the illusion of progressing. But

when someone doesn't ask me where I'm from, for me that's a victory."

[31:00] The Victory of Ambiguity

Walter and Rodolfo arrive at a phrase that captures a particular kind of milestone in this work. Walter observes that when the other person gets a doubt — when they can't immediately place you — that already counts as a win.

Rodolfo's response:

"Exactly — the victory of ambiguity."

On the range of things people have guessed when trying to place him:

"They've said everything — Mexican, Galician, from some Argentine province, Brazilian, Italian. French? Rarely."

Rodolfo acknowledges that ambiguity isn't always comfortable either:

"It doesn't have to stay in ambiguity. It can be complicated at times."

[35:00] Language as the First Frontier

Walter asks what conclusion Rodolfo would draw if he wrote a thesis on his own experience of language and identity.

"Language is the first frontier if your goal is to change or adopt another identity. We exist only through differentiation from the other. We're Argentine because Brazilians exist. We're French because the English exist. We're porteños because Cordobeses exist. There's always an opposition. Accepting the rules of that game, entering that field — I don't think it's for everyone. You have to have a real need to want to lower that frontier inside yourself. And once the language barrier loosens a little, you can work on the rest. Living in a country without speaking the language is almost impossible. Living in a country with a very strong accent is very uncomfortable."

[39:00] Displacement, Not Reinvention

When Walter asks for words of encouragement for someone considering this work of identity transformation in another language, Rodolfo pushes back gently on the framing — and offers something more precise.

"I'm not sure I'd use the word reinvention. I'd use the word displacement (*desplazamiento*)."

On what displacement actually means:

"It's a work of displacing yourself symbolically in the country where you decided to live. It's more complicated than just pronouncing well or at the right speed. There's a symbolic part behind it, and a structural part that's entirely unconscious, that makes us change. When you change the language, you ultimately change your way of seeing things too."

On what the journey costs and gives:

"To displace yourself culturally is always to gain something. Even about your own culture of origin. But you have to accept the consequences — because when you start to displace yourself, your culture of origin starts to feel strange. And sometimes the return is not possible."

"For now, at the level I'm at, I already know I've advanced too far and my return is impossible."

Walter: "You burned your ships."

"Yes, a bit. Displacement is never free. It's a great effort. You gain a lot, but you also have to accept that going back is complicated, or not possible. But maybe — I'm speaking from my own personal experience. It's not universal."

Conversation conducted in Spanish. Quotes translated into English and lightly edited for readability while preserving Rodolfo's voice and meaning.

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