

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

POLISH

David Alan Stern, PhD

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About the Author

David Alan Stern received a BFA in Theatre (UConn) and a PhD in Speech (Temple) and then served on the faculties of both Wichita State and Penn State before founding **Dialect Accent Specialists, Inc.** in Hollywood in 1980—working there primarily as a dialect/accent coach for professional actors. Since 1993, he's kept his foot in the industry while serving as Professor of Dramatic Arts at the University of Connecticut. Among the many actors he has helped to prepare for stage, television, and film roles are **Vincent Tyser** (*Chappaquiddick*), **Geena Davis** (*The Accidental Tourist*), **Julie Harris** (*Carried Away*), **Jennifer Jason Leigh** (*Fast Times at Ridgemont High*), **Shelley Long** (*Outrageous Fortune*), **Terrence Mann** (*My Fair Lady*), **Liam Neeson** (*Next of Kin*), **Lynn Redgrave** (*Sweet Sue*), **Pat Sajak & Joe Moore** (*The Boys in Autumn*), **Forest Whitaker** (*Bird and The Crying Game*), and **Julia Roberts, Sally Field, Olympia Dukakis**, and **Daryl Hannah** (*Steel Magnolias*). David has served since 2000 as resident dialect coach for the Berkshire Theatre Group in Massachusetts.

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SOME PRELIMINARY CONCERNS

When should I use dialects & accents?

Here are a few guidelines I've put together after years of performing and coaching accents and dialects.

(1) If there are characters in the script who come from a different speech group than the rest of the cast, consider differentiating them with appropriate accents. (2) If the entire script is set in a country or region where a specific dialect of English is spoken, determine whether the whole cast can use that pattern while still creating complete, believable characters. (3) Avoid using foreign accents for translations of non-English scripts. For example, don't play Chekhov with a Russian accent or Molière with a French accent. For such "classics," try using an "elevated" style of American diction. (4) Elevated diction is also appropriate when American casts are doing Shakespeare, especially those plays that are not set in England. (5) Finally, DON'T USE ACCENTS UNLESS THEY ARE GOING TO BE PERFORMED WELL!

What techniques lead to good accents?

In my experience, relatively few actors have the skill to imitate the accents that they hear with a sense of accuracy and believability. Other actors must use a systematic approach in order to create authentic-sounding accents and dialects. Here is a brief discussion of the most important factors:

PRONUNCIATION: Just making the correct pronunciation changes is not enough to create an authentic-sounding accent. Most teachers, texts, and recorded programs drill students almost exclusively with the appropriate vowel and consonant substitutions for the target pattern. Although I believe that correct pronunciation is one essential component, these vowel and consonant changes will not sound authentic unless you combine them with several other important vocal features.

PITCH CHARACTERISTICS: "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits—from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But, the most important pitch traits that help characterize many accents and dialects are different kinds of upward and/or downward glides that take place during the sounding of vowels—especially vowels in stressed syllables. This trait, which

I call INNER-VOWEL LILT, contributes significantly to the familiar, distinctive sounds of many accents and dialects.

STRESS PATTERNS: American English has a complex pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Many dialects and languages have distinctly different patterns. Some have few, if any, unstressed syllables, while others have rather intricate staccato rhythms that must be present before a performance of that accent can sound authentic.

RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE: My research, teaching, and performing experiences have taught me that the most important part of an accent's aural essence comes from the specific way that the tongue, lips, soft palate, and larynx shape and position the resonance tract. Different tract configurations, in turn, give many unique resonances or "timbres" to the overall sound. Each specific "tone focus" is very noticeable throughout an accent, regardless of whether actual pronunciation changes are occurring on certain words. In fact, once an actor has mastered an accent's muscularity and tone focus, many of the important new pronunciations can happen more easily and convincingly. Most of the programs in this series begin with a detailed lesson on resonance. Pronunciation drills then extend out of the new muscularity. As such, the speech sounds are now "organic," and no longer a set of vowels and consonants you try to memorize in isolation.

What is the best way to practice?

Begin by drilling the mechanics of the new accent—the resonance, lilt, rhythm, and pronunciations. Go on to integrate the changes into phrases, sentences, and passages. Then try improvising and actually generating your own speech while using the new accent. Don't limit your new accent to the target script. If you do, you are apt to be very mechanical and never create the sense that you are a real person who actually talks this way.

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

POLISH

LESSON ONE: **CREATING THE POLISH RESONANCE**

Before studying actual pronunciation changes in your new, target accent, you first must generate an overall change in the resonance, tone focus, or muscularity of your voice production. Non-regional American English focuses its tone or resonance at the midpoint of the oral cavity. The Polish language (and its accent on English) moves that point of maximum vibration slightly forward in the mouth to a spot just behind the front teeth—between the "dimple points" of your cheeks.

Follow the recording closely through a series of exercises for generating this new Polish resonance focus. Within these exercises, you will:

1. imagine or visualize the point of focus shifting between the American and Polish resonance points just described.
2. attempt to feel actual tissue vibration shifting between the focal points of the two accents.
3. limit the amount of mouth movement during speech.
4. pull in your cheeks at the "dimple points"—an inch or so back from the corners of your lips.

LESSON TWO: **RHYTHM AND INFLECTION PATTERNS**

Both non-regional American and British RP dialects have an intricate pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. When English is the second language of a native speaker of Polish (or other Slavic languages), there is a relative absence of unstressed syllables. Listen closely to the examples on the recording as you begin to give a more even stress to the sequence of syllables within the Polish accent.

The Polish pattern also uses a very characteristic lilt or inflection. The pitch glides upwards on the words the speaker is stressing or emphasizing most and then usually stays up until the end of the word in question. This inflection tends to be bigger, and thus more noticeable, when it happens on diphthongs (double vowels). Follow the recording closely as you listen to and produce examples of this inflection both in this lesson and later when you apply it to different vowels.

**LESSON THREE:
THE PRONUNCIATION OF VOWELS**

You should work to create the following vowel pronunciations as extensions of the resonance you just learned. Continue using the new muscularity, stress and inflections. Don't try simply to isolate and imitate the new pronunciations.

I I

1. "LONG-E" and "SHORT-I" as in TREE TRIMMER (aka the FLEECE & KIT Vowels)

IPA: [i] and [ɪ] both move toward a heavily stressed [ɪ].

To the ears of many English speakers, these two vowels almost seem to reverse in their pronunciations.

seat; see; yield; need; meter

- *He hurt his knees while skiing down the peak.*

- *He achieves intrigue very easily.*

- *Meat and cheese were served under the tree.*

physical; pick; inside; mistake; wind

- *The inspector charged interest on Wilma's income.*

- *The chicken committed itself to the interest of dinner.*

- *Sit inside the pavilion.*

U U

2. "LONG-OO" & "SHORT-OO" as in BLUE BOOK (aka the GOOSE & FOOT Vowels)

IPA: [u] and [ʊ] both move toward a heavily stressed [ʊ].

As with the previous pair, to the ears of many English speakers, these two vowels seem to reverse in their pronunciations.

studio; school; review; pupil; truth

- *The gloomy June moon is moving foolishly.*

- *It's true that Sue proves school is useful.*

- *They were soon to be marooned on the moon.*

wouldn't; ambush; goodness; faithful; cushion

- *We pulled the wolf from the woods to the boulevard.*

- *I understood there's a good book in the library.*

- *They couldn't find enough wooden beams.*

a a

3. "SHORT-A" & "UH" as in GRANDMOTHER (aka the TRAP, BATH & STRUT Vowels)

IPA: [æ] and [ʌ] both become [ɑ].

laugh; class; France; grant; and; at; camera; back

- Ask for the hand of any bashful man.
- They ate a lamb and ham sandwich at the camp.

trouble; struggle; under; love; above

- A mother's love makes you struggle to come back.
- The puddle was made by some suds from the supper dishes.

o o

4. "SHORT-O" as in A LOT IN COMMON (*aka the LOT Vowel*)

IPA: [ɑ] or [ɒ] (depending on region) migrates toward [o].

exotic; bond; common; college

- She dropped out of college.
- He's not popular because of many problems.
- The frog got groggy and hopped away.

NOTE: The next five vowels are the English diphthongs or "double vowels." These are the sounds which are most likely to happen in conjunction with the lilt characteristic examined earlier.

εɪ↑ εɪ↑

5. "LONG-A" as in GREAT DAY (*aka the FACE Vowel*)

IPA: [eɪ] moves upward and toward [ɛɪ].

day; rain; investigate; neighbor; administration

- A great April shower came our way today.
- The ailing aviator sought compensation after losing the race.

ʌ ʌ

6. "LONG-O" as in OCEAN HOME (*aka the GOAT Vowel*)

IPA: [oʊ] lilt upward and moves toward [ʌ] or [ʌo].

go; explosion; closed; expropriate; social

- Smoke rolled out of the open hotel window.
- The oboe and cello sat alone, woefully echoing tone for tone.

↑ ↑

7. "LONG-I" as in NICE TIME (*aka the PRICE Vowel*)

IPA: [aɪ] has a large upward lilt.

cry; advice; politely; arrive; dialogue

- The ivy vines were tied down behind the shutters.
- It's the right time to recite ironic rhymes.

o↑ o↑

8. "AH-OO" as in LOUD CLOWN (aka the MOUTH Vowel)

IPA: [aʊ] lalts upward and sometimes moves toward [o].

how; crowd; astounded; Geiger counter; pronouncement

- *Wildflowers abound in out-of-the-way mountain towns.*

- *The scale proudly announced that I had lost about a pound.*

↑ a↑

9. "OY" as in NOISY BOY (aka the CHOICE Vowel)

IPA: [ɔɪ] lalts upward and sometimes becomes [aɪ].

soybeans; choice; exploits; royalty; rejoice; boisterous

- *The little boy was anointed with the oil of royalty.*

- *First aid ointment is your best choice for aching joints.*

LESSON FOUR: CHANGES IN CONSONANT PRONUNCIATION

1. PRONUNCIATION of "R" as in RED RIVER

In this accent, the "R" sounds, whether before or after vowels, fall halfway between taking a single tap on the gum ridge with the tongue and having a typical American R-glide. Follow the recording closely for examples of the "R" in relationship to a wide range of vowel stems.

- *red; rose; truck; crime; brilliant*

- *Rick rode the rapids down the Red River.*

- *singer; runner; player; helper*

[ɚ] (aka the lettER Vowel)

- *The runner staggered into the water and then became a swimmer.*

- *earth; worst; perfect; word*

[ɜ̃] (aka the NURSE Vowel)

- *First thing is to search the world for a perfect curve.*

NOTE: The "er" sound at the beginning or middle of words (as in the above group) will sometimes move its vowel stem slightly toward the [ɛɚ] diphthong.

- *jeer; career; tears*

[iɚ] (aka the NEAR Vowel)

- *I'm sincere about wanting the deer to appear this year.*

- *where; air; therefore; barely*

[ɛɚ] (the SQUARE Vowel)

- *He carefully pays his fare, but he can't bear to walk up the stairs.*

- *poor; cure; sure*

[uɚ] (the CURE Vowel)

- *I can endure a long tour if I'm sure we're secure.*

- *cart; army; charming*

[aɚ] (*the START Vowel*)

- *He disembarked from the car after parking at the cargo hatch.*

- *support; before; implore; corner*

[ɔɚ] (*the NORTH & FORCE Vowels*)

- *The Concorde roared forth, pouring out exhaust.*

NOTE: The vowel stem on these "OR" combinations will often move more toward the single-stage vowel [o].

2. THE TWO "TH" SOUNDS as in ^d THIS ^t THING

IPA: [ð] or [θ] remain fricatives but become harder and more dental.

thin; thick; thorough

- *Thoughtful theologians thank God through prayer.*

- *Thin people think dieting is thoroughly unnecessary.*

wrath; teeth; eighth; path

this; there; thus; therefore

- *They played around with this and that.*

- *There's a day left before they go to the country.*

lathe; blithe; soothe

Here are some additional drills for the TH sounds which are not recorded.

* *Don't throw that thing over there.*

* *That's another thing that was hidden in there.*

* *Thank you for thinking of that this early.*

* *Be thorough when throwing out unneeded things.*

* *I thought you were through with those.*

* *They received three thousand thank-you notes.*

VOICED TO VOICELESS CONSONANTS as in ^k BIG ^t BAD ^f OLIVE

The remaining consonant changes are all related. When in final (and sometimes medial) position, voiced consonants in final usually become voiceless. This trait is similar to that of the German or Russian accents, but the new, voiceless consonant is not pronounced as sharply or harshly as it usually is in those other patterns.

3. Final [b] becomes [p]

- *tribe; robe; grab; sober*

- *The members of the tribe began to sob.*

4. Final [g] becomes [k]

- rag; rig; sag; drag
- *The pig did a jig when the tag in his ear hit a snag.*

5. Final [ŋ] becomes [ŋk]

- singing; ringing; buying
- *My loving daughter is growing up and moving away.*

6. Final [d] becomes [t]

- head; planned; blend; spend
- *Blizzards cause many colds, so the parade was cancelled.*

7. Final [v] becomes [f]

- grave; save; sliver; grieved
- *There will be grave consequences to the native olive groves.*

8. Final [z] becomes [s]

- noise; tries; repose
- *The bulldozer made so much noise that Edward's repose ended.*

9. Final [ʒ] becomes [ʃ]

- garage; vision; collision
- *The lobe of the television studio gave an illusion of confusion.*

10. Final [dʒ] becomes [tʃ]

- voyage; courage; judgment; budgerigar
- *Don't nudge the judge over the edge of the ridge.*

Now here are additional drills, which are not recorded, for the un-voicing of final consonants.

- * *The authors of the five novels signed their names.*
- * *Be candid with the good judges.*
- * *Shag the golf balls from the crag.*
- * *I love singing and dancing on stage.*
- * *Gaze over the waves, and see the sails on the horizon.*
- * *The edges of the cage were sharp as knives.*
- * *I have to buy a short sleeved shirt and trousers*

LESSON FIVE:
COACHED DRILL

The passage you'll hear on the recording is printed below. It is marked with all of the important pronunciation changes using the same shorthand symbols I used earlier in the manual. At first, it might be well to mark scripts in this way to jog your memory of the sound changes, the resonance characteristics related to them, and the upward inflections. Remember to use the resonance and inflection to trigger the pronunciations. Once you've practiced the passage several times, you will benefit from doing a lot of improvising and cold readings in the accent to set the sounds and establish the real sense of conversational authenticity.

from Lincoln's Speech at Gettysburg

a t f s ʌ d s o t o
FOURSCORE AND SEVEN YEARS AGO, OUR FATHERS BROUGHT FORTH ON
 d i o u ε↑ o i t i i i a i ε↑ t
THIS CONTINENT A NEW NATION, CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY AND DEDICATED
 o os d ε↑ t i o↑ i
TO THE PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL. NOW WE ARE
 ε↑tʃ t i ε↑ if k d d ε↑
ENGAGED IN A GREAT CIVIL WAR, TESTING WHETHER THAT NATION, OR ANY
 ε↑ ʌ i f t t ʌ t i ε↑ t a o k u
NATION SO CONCEIVED AND SO DEDICATED, CAN LONG ENDURE. WE ARE
 o ε↑ a t f d i f o u i ε↑
MET ON A GREAT BATTLEFIELD OF THAT WAR. WE HAVE COME TO DEDICATE
 a d i t as ↑ k ε↑ ʌs u
A PORTION OF THAT FIELD AS A FINAL RESTING PLACE TO THOSE WHO HERE
 ε↑f d ↑f s d a d a ε↑ ↑ if
GAVE THEIR LIVES THAT THAT NATION MIGHT LIVE.

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR POLISH ACCENT!