

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

RUSSIAN

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.

consonants [l], [n], [s], or [t]. This glide is a further extension of the "tongue pump" we were practicing in Lesson One.

leave, little, lesson, niece, initial, neck, since, September, temper

- *Please cease to creep through the Garden of Eden.*
- *The invisible thing was incredibly different in winter.*
- *Don't lose your temper and tell any section that the end is near.*
- *Steve was green with envy and refused to speak to me.*
- *The ticklish infant twisted and gripped the crib.*
- *Two men netted twenty cents for their rendition of the song.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this vowel that aren't recorded.

- * *Meat and cheese were served under the tree.*
- * *Peas and beans each provide protein.*
- * *Winter differs incredibly in its impact on individuals.*
- * *The inspector charged interest on Wilma's income tax.*
- * *Ben was a general from several sections of Tennessee.*
- * *He was especially edgy after the separation.*

ɛə ɛə

2. THE "LONG A" as in GREAT DAY (aka the FACE Vowel)

IPA: [ei] moves toward [ɛə].

great, break, rail

- *Eighteen ugly freight cars carry eighty neighing horses.*
- *The neighbors were breaking away for days.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this vowel that aren't recorded.

- * *A great April shower came our way today.*
- * *They paid the price for delaying the instant replay.*
- * *The ailing aviator chased the victory for its own sake.*
- * *They blamed the dame with the famous face.*
- * *The able often stray in this fateful age.*

ɑ ɑ

3. THE "SHORT A" as in JACK SPRAT (aka the TRAP and BATH Vowels)

IPA: [æ] usually becomes [ɑ].

NOTE: Among some Russian speakers, this vowel won't change at all. On other occasions, it might become "Short E" [ɛ]. But be careful. Too much heavy use of this "Short E" sometimes can create a Yiddish rather than a Russian impression.

- cat, past, last, flag, anchor, castle, slack*
- *Don't attack the Alps without a stacked backpack.*
 - *The soprano laughed after she shattered the glass.*
 - *The frantic man planted the flag.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this vowel that aren't on the recording.

- * *The passengers and baggage were trapped in the alcove.*
- * *Pam made an ample snack of the wax apples.*
- * *Lady Astor handed the annual to the admiral.*
- * *Ask any bashful man in Alabama and accept his answer.*
- * *The huddled masses sang the National Anthem.*

ɑ ɒ

4. THE "UH" VOWEL as in MOTHER'S LOVE (*aka the STRUT Vowel*)

IPA: [ʌ] becomes [ɑ] or [ɒ].

blunder, thunder, above

- *The bum blundered into the muddy puddle.*
- *Thunder and lightning frightened my humble brother.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this vowel that aren't recorded.

- * *The stuntman stumbles and tumbles in the mud.*
- * *A mother's love is above that of another.*
- * *Some suds from the supper dishes were in a dull puddle.*
- * *The puppy covered up the other couple's lunch.*
- * *The blood under the bud vase was trouble for Gus.*

uə uə

5. "LONG OO" and "SHORT OO" as in BLUE BOOK (*aka the GOOSE Vowel*)

IPA: [u] and [ʊ] become [uə].

food, shoot, soup, book, cushion, brook

- *The pupil was willing to shoot for the moon.*
- *Soup is the best food for winter shooting.*
- *Captain Hook ate a bushel of cookies.*

Now here are a few additional drills for these vowels that aren't recorded.

- * *At two past noon, I heard hooves on the roof.*
- * *It's true that Sue proves school is gloomy.*
- * *Give the duke a boost with your boot.*
- * *Dr. Goodman took the bullet from the rookie's foot.*

- * *Woody stood up wearing cushioned footwear.*
- * *I understood there's a good book in the library.*

ə ə

6. THE "LONG O" as in GO HOME (aka the GOAT Vowel)

IPA: [ou] becomes [ə].

know, lonely, toad, throw

- *The ugly old toad was lonely.*
- *Throw the snowball to Rome.*
- *Can you show me where sociology is taught?*

Now here are a few additional drills for this vowel that aren't recorded.

- * *Slowly the ocean rolled toward the row of homes.*
- * *The oboe and cello sat alone, echoing tone for tone.*
- * *He was bloated after eating a roast and a tomato.*
- * *Of all the folks I know, he is the most hopeful.*
- * *The rowboat slowly floated in the ocean.*

ɔ ɔ

7. THE "SHORT O" as in HOT SHOT (aka the LOT Vowel)

IPA: [ɑ] or [ɒ] move toward [ɔ] if spelled with the letter "o."

impossible, honest, stop, hot dog

- *If possible, make six copies of the comrade's papers.*
- *It's not popular to occupy two army cots.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this vowel that aren't on the recording.

- * *He occupied the gondola of the golf cart.*
- * *The rocket shot toward the opposite air lock.*
- * *Oxygen is commonly found in air pockets.*
- * *Becket was positive about the honor of God.*
- * *Move the fox from the rocks to the bog.*

LESSON THREE: RUSSIAN PITCH AND STRESS TRAITS

The accent of the Russian language does not contain any dominant pitch or lilt traits. In fact, the pattern tends to be a bit monotone—certainly within phrases or units of action. If you are playing an expressive character, I suggest letting him or her change pitch between phrases rather than during units of action.

With regard to stress, there are really no such things as unstressed syllables in Russian speech. The syllable that we consider to be stressed in English will most likely still get the greatest stress in the Russian accent. But the syllables we think of as unstressed in English will be hit much harder in Russian. Listen closely to the samples on the recording in this and other lessons as you begin to use the heavier stress pattern. Let the additional syllabic stress help you feel the added vibration in the newly focused resonance cavity.

LESSON FOUR: **RUSSIAN CONSONANT SUBSTITUTIONS**

. . . εə .

1. THE RUSSIAN "R" as in RED RIVER WORMS

In most Russian accents, the sound of the R takes a single trill or tap against the gum ridge, regardless of its position in the word. The "ER" sound, whether in word endings (as in "runner") or in root words (like "earth" and "word") tends to change the pronunciation of its vowel stem to [εə] as in the word "air."

rose, heather, arrive, word, person

- *The girl put the worm on the hook.*
- *The cure makes Salk's name endure.*
- *Are all the royal guardsmen qualified marksmen?*
- *Thirteen dirty birds chirped for thirty minutes.*

If you have difficulty doing the tapped or trilled R-sound, practice the "d" substitution that I illustrate on the recording. If you still have trouble, perhaps you would benefit from a section of *Acting with an Accent* for the Scottish dialect, which devotes considerably more time to the trilling and rolling of the R.

Here are some additional drills for the R-sound that are not recorded.

- * *Remember the Red River Valley.*
- * *Russ can't remember ever having a real rest.*
- * *He remained for hours after the church service.*
- * *Where were you last year during early September?*
- * *Rest assured that the relay race still will be run.*

p k

2. UNVOICED FINAL CONSONANTS as in GRAB BAG

Most of the Russian consonant substitutions involve voiced consonants or clusters that become voiceless in final (and sometimes medial) word position. As a result of this, B

becomes P, the G becomes K, ING endings becomes INK, Z becomes S, V becomes F, ZH [ʒ] becomes SH [ʃ], and DG [dʒ] becomes CH [tʃ].

grab, robe, web, club

- *Rub-a-dub-dub, three men in a tub.*

- *The Cub Scouts gabbed about their olive drab uniforms.*

blood, head, planned, mad

- *Blizzards cause many colds, so the parade was cancelled.*

- *Don't mind his gold badge.*

rag, brag, cigarette, trigger

- *The pig did a jig when the tag in his ear hit a snag.*

ring, laughing, running, sing

- *Acting always brings clapping from the cheering crowds.*

- *My loving daughter is growing up and moving away.*

noise, tries, repose, rose

- *He draws the laws to support his cause.*

- *She grows roses and draws applause.*

NOTE: In the above group, the plural words are spelled with "s," but in English, they are pronounced with the voiced [z]. In the Russian accent they will revert back to the voiceless [s].

grave, save, ever, give

- *The knave gave the slave a haircut and a shave.*

- *Please prove that the salve removes the pain from the horse's hooves.*

perversion, vision, collision, incision

- *He had a vision of the garage being sabotaged.*

- *The supervision of the road fissure avoided another collision.*

courage, budgerigar, voyage

- *Don't nudge the judge over the edge of the ridge.*

- *Don't smudge the walls of the lodge with your fudge-covered fingers.*

Now here are additional unrecorded drills for practicing the unvoicing of various final consonants.

* *The members of the tribe began to sob for rain.*

* *Be candid with the good judges.*

* *Shag the golf balls from the crag.*

* *I love singing and dancing on stage.*

- * *The bulldozer made so much noise that Edward's repose ended.*
- * *The edges of the cage were sharp as knives.*

v/w v/w

3. THE "V" AND "W SOUNDS" as in VERY WORRIED

Native speakers often think that Russians are reversing the [v] and [w] sounds. In reality, most Russian speakers substitute a third sound, lying somewhere between [v] and [w], for both of the original consonants.

will, want, western, Walter

very, vicious, victory, villain

- I wish Ward didn't want whiskey every Wednesday.

- We rose very early to catch various values.

- Wall posters waved in the wind.

- Don't involve Victor in vast events.

Now here are some additional drills for the [v] and [w] contrast that are not included on the recorded.

* *It's very dry way out in the western valley.*

* *Vincent waved a magic wand over the village wall.*

* *I had a vision while visiting the Wailing Wall.*

* *I wonder if the weather will vary very much this winter.*

* *The visionaries took a working voyage to Virginia.*

d t

4. THE "TH SOUNDS" as in THIS THING

"Voiceless TH" [θ] and "Voiced TH" [ð] become [t] and [d] respectively with a hard release. Occasionally a slight sense of the fricative will remain.

[θ]: *thank, thick, theology, thorax*

[ð]: *this, that, the, other*

- Thus thou came and thus thou goest.

- Thin people think dieting is thoroughly unnecessary.

- The snake slithered in from the other room.

- The thistle stuck into Throckmorton's thick thumb.

[ð]: *lathe, soothe, blithe*

[θ]: *wrath, teeth, eighth, path*

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

- * *Don't throw that thing over there.*
- * *There's a day left before they go to the other county.*
- * *They played around with this, that, and the other thing.*
- * *Thank you for thinking of that this early.*
- * *I thought you were through with those.*
- * *They received three thousand thank-you notes.*

5. "INITIAL H" as in HOT HOUSE

Most Russians pronounce the initial [h] with an additional throaty aspiration as the air passes between the rear tongue and soft palate.

history, hill, heaven, harpsichord

- *The handsome highwayman fell from his horse and hit the hill.*
- *Help me read the horoscope; I have to have help from history.*

Here are some additional drills for the initial H sound that are not recorded.

- * *Do not hesitate to help the homeless.*
- * *I hasten to add my hearty and humble congratulations.*
- * *I hated to have to hurry to work hard.*
- * *I have never had such happiness.*
- * *It happened at half past eleven.*
- * *My hands were heavy with hard work.*

LESSON SIX: COACHED DRILL

Here are the marked transcripts of the passages you'll hear in Lesson #6 of the program. All of the important pronunciation changes are indicated using the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual.

From THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

ɪə . v/wɪə ə . ə f v/wɑs d tɛə. t ə əf
 ALEXEY FYDOROVITCH KARAMAZOV WAS THE THIRD SON OF
 . ə ə v/wɪə ə . ə ə f ə tə . v/wɪə ə ɪə
 FYODOR PAVLOVITCH KARAMAZOV, A LANDOWNER WELL KNOWN IN
 . ɪə . ɪə ɪə ɪə ə ɛə ə t ɪə . ɪə ɛə. t ə k ə
 OUR DISTRICT IN HIS OWN DAY, AND STILL REMEMBERED AMONG US
 ə k ɪəs uə ə t .ə ɪə t v/wɪə ə t
 OWING TO HIS GLOOMY AND TRAGIC DEATH, WHICH HAPPENED

t ə. ɪə ɪə .s ə a t v/w ɪə a ɪə . p ɪə ɪə ɒ ə.
 THIRTEEN YEARS AGO, AND WHICH I SHALL DESCRIBE IN ITS PROPER
 ə . d . ɪə v/wɪə ə ə d a d ɪə a t ə ə.
 PLACE. FOR THE PRESENT, I WILL ONLY SAY THAT THIS "LANDOWNER"
 . ə v/wɪə ʊə t ɔ ɪə a d ə ɪə . ɪə
 —FOR SO WE USED TO CALL HIM, ALTHOUGH HE HARDLY SPENT A
 ə af ɪə ɪəs ə ə v/wa s . ɪə ɪə
 DAY OF HIS LIFE ON HIS OWN ESTATE—WAS A STRANGE TYPE, YET
 v/w . ɪə . ɪə v/wɪə ɪə ɪə v/wɪə t a ɪə a t
 ONE PRETTY FREQUENTLY TO BE MET WITH, A TYPE ABJECT AND
 v/wɪə a t at d ə ɪə
 VICIOUS AND AT THE SAME TIME SENSELESS.

THE THREE SISTERS—CONDENSED

v/w t . ɪə t v/w a p . ɪə v/w ə t
 I WOULD LIKE TO READ TO YOU MY ONE MAN, ABBREVIATED
 v/w . ʃ f ə d t . ɪə ə. s d ɪə f . ɪəs
 VERSION OF CHEKHOV'S THE THREE SISTERS. THIS, OF COURSE, IS A
 ə ɪə . a t . ɪə ə. s a t d . a a t
 PLAY IN FOUR ACTS ABOUT THREE SISTERS AND THEIR FAMILY AND
 d ə. k v/w af v/w d . . ɔ ə v/wɪə
 THE BURNING QUESTION OF WHETHER OR NOT THEY WILL FINALLY
 ə ɔ k v/wəə ʊə f ə . ə s
 MAKE THE LONG-AWAITED MOVE TO MOSCOW. HERE GOES:

a v/wa ə. ɪə ə.
ACT ONE: (FIRST SISTER)

v/w ə ɔ ə
 "I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW."

a ʊə ɪə ɪə ə.
ACT TWO: (SECOND SISTER)

v/w ə ɔ ə
 "I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW."

a . ɪə t ə. ɪə ə.
ACT THREE: (THIRD SISTER)

v/w ɔ ɔ ə
 "I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW."

a . t ɪə ɪə ə. s
ACT FOUR: (ALL THREE SISTERS)

ɪə v/w . ɔ ə k ɔ ə
 "I GUESS WE ARE NOT GOING TO MOSCOW."

a d . s o af iə . v/w iə d iə af d
 ACTUALLY, THERE'S A LOT OF LITERARY VALUE IN THE REST OF THE
 iə a d a εə iə
 SCRIPT, BUT THAT'S BASICALLY IT.

With this second selection, follow the recording and experiment with several different levels and intensities of the Russian accent. Go out and

**HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR
RUSSIAN ACCENT!**