

# ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

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## ARABIC

*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

## ARABIC

This program begins by teaching you the rhythm and stress characteristics heard in the English of most native Arabic speakers. After practicing this important trait, and learning the pronunciation changes that relate to it, we'll go on to look at other vocal traits that differentiate the accents of speakers from different Arabic-speaking regions.

### **LESSON ONE:** **STRESS, PITCH, and RHYTHM TRAITS**

Although most of the programs in this series begin by looking at an accent's resonance or tone focus, the characteristic that defines and identifies the sound of many Asian accents, including Arabic, comes from the stress and rhythm traits they display.

#### **1. The LACK of UNSTRESSED SYLLABLES**

The most important point is that EVERY SYLLABLE IS A STRESSED SYLLABLE in this accent. Although some may take extra stress, there are no unstressed syllables within this pattern. Follow the exercises on the recording that demonstrate and provide you with drills for this rhythm. Remember, in the Arabic accent, the stress pattern is SLOW AND EVEN—not quick and staccato (like the South Asian accents of India and Pakistan). Also remember that "silent syllables," those that almost disappear in non-regional American English, usually will be pronounced within this accent. For example:

*ac-tu-al-ly;    ba-sic-al-ly;    his-tor-ic-al-ly;    Is-ra-e-li*

Also note—now that unstressed syllables have more duration, their vowels will often be the clearer forms of EH [ɛ], AH [ɑ], UH [ʌ], etc. (as you would often use them in stressed syllables), rather than the very "Short I" [ɪ] or the nondescript "schwa" [ə] toward which they often migrate in American English. Follow the recording for these examples:

*ca-pi-tal;    spe-ci-al;    guar-an-tee;    Mus-lim;    in-de-pen-dent*

*- This is an independent Muslim state.*

*- pronounce; provision*

*- movement; government*

*- sweetest; highest*

*- planted; seated; painted*

*- conservation; instruction; reaction*

## **2. VERY LIMITED PITCH CHANGE**

Arabic and many other Asian accents are relatively monotone—lacking pitch change between words (and often between the syllables of long words). This does not mean that every word or syllable your character speaks must be at the same pitch level. It does mean, however, that most words within the same phrase or thought will be at the same pitch. You can, however, emphasize a new phrase or thought by raising or lowering the pitch at the beginning of the phrase and then keeping it there for the phrase's duration. Follow the recording through the "gibberish" exercises, which contrast intoned phrases with monotone phrases. You will also note that there are many opportunities to slow down and elongate certain words if you wish to give them extra amounts of stress. FOLLOW THE RECORDING CLOSELY.

## **3. INTRUSIVE VOWELS (between consonants)**

The new stress-rhythm pattern also leads to another accent trait—that of occasionally adding an extra vowel inside clusters of consonants. I examine this trait, which is somewhat related to the whole discussion of stress, in much more detail later in the program, during the lesson on consonant pronunciation.

### **LESSON TWO: CREATING THE ARABIC RESONANCE**

The next step toward creating the impression of an authentic Arabic accent is to generate the proper resonance or "tone focus." Whereas the Standard American point of maximum vibration is approximately at the midpoint of the mouth, the Arabic accent focuses its resonance farther back. There is somewhat less articulator movement and a relatively small cavity opening. Follow the recording through a series of muscle exercises which have you:

1. limit the size of the mouth cavity opening.
2. feel a smaller distance between the upper and lower side teeth.
3. close the mouth slightly at the corners, but be careful not to pull the lips back to the teeth.
4. feel most of the speech movement taking place with the front of the tongue while keeping the tongue fairly low in the back.
5. feel more and more of the vibration taking place toward the rear of the mouth.

**NOTE:** As the recording will demonstrate later, the Northern African version of the Arabic accent (especially the Egyptian) will focus a bit more of its resonance near the opening of the throat than will Gulf and Palestinian accents. When you follow these exercises, be very careful to avoid tightening your throat muscles or putting extra tension between your vocal cords. Instead, create the rear focus by slightly lowering the entire laryngeal structure. Follow the instructions on the recording closely.

**LESSON THREE:**  
**VOWEL PRONUNCIATIONS IN THE ARABIC ACCENT**

The following pronunciations should be studied as extensions of the rhythm and resonance traits you have already learned. Try not to think of them as isolated vowel substitutions.

**NOTE:** Additional drill sentences that are not recorded are marked with **asterisks (\*)**.

i i

**1. "LONG-E" & "SHORT-I" as in GREEN INSECT**

*(aka the FLEECE and KIT Vowels in the Wells system of word sets)*

**IPA:** [i] and [ɪ] both become [i] with a single-pitched stress.

*yield; see; need; teach; needle; esteem; supreme*

- *He hurt his knee while skiing fleetly down the peak.*

- *He achieves intrigue by agreeing to speak Japanese.*

**Additional drill sentences that are not recorded are marked with asterisks (\*).**

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

\* *Steve went to pieces last evening.*

\* *The speed demon careened off the freeway.*

\* *He teased the eager Marine.*

*pick; physical; mistake; quiver; wind; in*

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

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

\* *Winter had a different impact on Tim.*

\* *Sit inside the pavilion.*

\* *You should spit out the pits.*

\* *The infant gripped the crib.*

e e

**2. "LONG-A" & "SHORT-E" as in EIGHT CENTS (aka the FACE and DRESS Vowels)**

**IPA:** [ei] and [ɛ] both become [e] with a single-pitched stress.

*wait; chased; fateful; face; neighbor; instigate; inflame*

- *A great April shower came our way today.*

- *The ailing aviator flew the race for its own sake.*

\* *They paid the price for delaying the game.*

\* *They blamed the dame with the famous face.*

\* *The statesman hastened to awaken the nation.*

\* *Dave waited for the great occasion.*

*twenty; embrace; celebrate; semester; deadline; federal; mental; election*

- *Ten and ten eventually get you twenty.*

- *Ben was renting several sections of federal land.*
- \* *Ed said that the penthouse was lovely.*
- \* *I meant every word I said.*
- \* *Heaven help those eleven elephants.*
- \* *Get ready for the general election.*

u            u

### 3. "LONG-OO" & "SHORT-OO" as in SMOOTH WOOD (*aka the GOOSE & FOOT Vowels*)

- IPA:** [u] and [ʊ] both become [u] with a single-pitched stress.  
*studio; plumage; school; spoon; review; pupil; loose; truth*
- *The June moon is moving foolishly.*
  - *It's true that Sue proves school can be useless.*
  - \* *I always knew that prunes grew under the blue moon.*
  - \* *It's too soon to move into the room.*
  - \* *It was too soon to look for the books.*
  - \* *Give the duke a boost with your boot.*

- wooden; ambush; goodness; boulevard; booklet; cushion; sugar; forsook*
- *We pulled the wolf from the woods to the boulevard.*
  - *I understood there's a good book in the library.*
  - \* *The butcher's hook shouldn't be here.*
  - \* *I couldn't eat the sugary pudding.*
  - \* *Dr. Goodman took out the bullet.*
  - \* *The rookie's foot couldn't support him.*

o            o

### 4. "LONG-O" & "AW" as in SLOW SONG (*aka GOAT, THOUGHT & CLOTH Vowels*)

- IPA:** [ou] and [ɔ] both become [o] with a single-pitched stress.  
*romance; bloated; notion; slowly; staccato*
- *The oboe and cello sat alone, echoing tone for tone.*
  - *The rowboat slowly floated on the ocean.*
  - \* *Years ago people slept on the cold earth.*
  - \* *Slowly the ocean rolled toward the row of homes.*
  - \* *He was bloated after eating a roast and a tomato.*
  - \* *Of all the folks I know, he is the most hopeful.*

- *coffee; cloth; wrong; glossy*
- *maul; applaud; cause; naught*
- *Lost boys often become flawless.*
- *The awful sauce made Paul pause.*



- \* *The tall author walked often.*
- \* *The awkward man was awfully strong.*
- \* *It was awful that the song was lost to history.*
- \* *Draw all the water you need despite the cost.*

o o o

## 5. "LONG-O" PRINGIPLE as in A LOT OF BROTHERS

**IPA:** [ɑ] / [ɒ] (depending on region) and [ʌ] become [o] with a single-pitched stress.

In American English the letter "O" is not always pronounced as a "Long O." In accents having the type of stress pattern which characterizes Arabic, however, the sound of [o], which we just examined in the last group, usually applies whenever "O" occurs in the spelling.

- rock; obstinate; on; stop*                      **(with the LOT vowel)**  
 - *The rocket shot toward the opposite airlock.*  
 - *The frog got groggy and hopped away.*

- mother; love; cover; come; trouble*    **(with the STRUT Vowel when spelled with O)**  
 - *A mother's love is above that of another brother.*

a-i          a-u          ɔ-u

## 6. DIPHTHONG STRESS as in FILE DOWN the TOY

**IPA:** [ai] [au] and [ɔi] – stress both stages on the same pitch.

The three remaining diphthongs all retain the same pitch, and stress both stages of that double vowel with nearly equal duration.

- skylight; advice; virus; while; crime*                      **LONG-I (aka the PRICE Vowel)**  
 - *It's the right time to find a gold mine.*  
 \* *I transcribed five dialogues, but I don't know why.*  
 \* *The sight of dry land was exciting for Ira.*  
 \* *A life of violent crime is a sign of the times.*  
 \* *Eliza was the pride of the science fair.*

- coward; south; flounder; shower; trowel*                      **AH-OO (aka the MOUTH Vowel)**  
 - *The crowd loudly prowled the streets of the town.*  
 \* *The loudest hound in town bow-wowed at the mouse.*  
 \* *The lout proudly scowled at those in the household.*  
 \* *The coward found a trowel and plowed into the mound.*  
 \* *I doubt that the louse will pound down the flowers.*

**NOTE:** This diphthong will occasionally migrate toward the [o] vowel of the "O-Principle."

*annoy; pointed; choice; enjoy; poignant*

**OY (aka the CHOICE Vowel)**

- *The boisterous boy oiled the noisy toy.*

\* *The boy joined in the noise.*

\* *Doyle put soy sauce on the boiled oysters.*

\* *He coiled around the moist cloister pillars.*

\* *He toiled to hoist the soybeans from the soil.*

a            a            a

## 7. "SHORT-A" as in CAN'T STAND THAT (aka the TRAP and BATH Vowels)

**IPA:** [æ] becomes [ɑ] all the time.

This differs from the Short-A switch in many British and Australian dialects where the AH pronunciation occurs only occasionally when followed by certain consonants and clusters. An Arabic speaker's English will almost always use the AH.

- *after; passage; can't; handsome; glass; fabric*

- *The passengers and baggage were trapped in the alcove.*

- *The huddled masses sang the National Anthem.*

\* *The soprano laughed as she shattered the glass.*

\* *Lady Astor handed the annual to the admiral.*

\* *Ask any bashful man in Alabama and accept his answer.*

\* *Sam rammed the flag into the anthill.*

## **LESSON FOUR: PRONUNCIATION OF THE "R"**

In English with an Arabic accent, most R's are pronounced with a single tap of the tongue against the gum ridge. Occasionally an R will take a trill consisting of two or more tongue taps. Be careful, however. This accent should not really have a full trill such as the one which characterizes some Russian and Scottish patterns.

*run; ring; red; risk; great; crisp; strong; bright*

*sister; mother; father; later*

*car; spar; heart; sergeant*

*jeer; clear; near; beer*

*hair; bear; everywhere; stairs; blare*

*tour; sure; cure; lure; secure*

*four; door; pour; more; core*

*earth; earnest; first*

*worm; word; worst (The "O-Principle" does not apply to this stressed "ER" vowel.)*

- *Are all the royal guardsmen qualified marksmen?*

- *The runner staggered over the ridge and recovered his revenge.*

- *The girl put a worm on the hook and caught a perfect flounder.*
- \* *Summer went faster and further than winter.*
- \* *Herman was the first to win thirty games.*
- \* *Father Charles argues about the guard's identity card.*
- \* *More and more support came forth for the orphans' party.*
- \* *Pay your fare, then tell the driver where to stop.*
- \* *Be sincere, my dear; it's a queer world.*
- \* *I'm secure that velour will endure.*

## **LESSON FIVE:** **PRONUNCIATION OF OTHER CONSONANTS**

t            t

### **1. Medial "T" does not change to "D" as in A LITTLE LATER**

*British; matter; later*

- *The beautiful British writer scattered the letters.*
- *The Cincinnati batter was better at the bottom of the ninth.*
- \* *Put the kettle on.    a bottle of beer    Get in.    Let it go.*
- \* *What is it about city settlers?    I want a little water.*

d            t

### **2. The TWO "TH" SOUNDS as in THIS THING**

The voiced [ð] and voiceless [θ] TH consonants will sometimes become [d] and [t] respectively. However, many Arabic speakers of English do produce the "TH" placements.

- *this; that; thing; other; thistle*
- \* *Thank you for thinking of me.*
- \* *Don't throw that thing.*
- \* *I thought you were through with those.*
- \* *They received three thousand thank you notes.*

### **3. The INTRUSIVE SCHWA as in G-ə-REAT FIL-ə-M**

**IPA:** [ə] often occurs between consonants in a cluster.

Sometimes (but not always), when two consonants cluster together, the Arabic speaker of English will insert an intrusive vowel [ə] between the two consonants. This happens most frequently when the second consonant in the cluster is [r] or [l].

*intrigue; tree; expression; April; priest; friends; Frank; dress  
dream; cracked; cringe; bring; brought; great; group  
cling; claim; flame; fling; gleam; glow; play; plant; black; blame  
against; suspense; self; film*

## **LESSON SIX: COACHED DRILL**

The transcript below uses the same pronunciation markings I showed you earlier in the manual. Follow the recording closely, as it guides you through the pronunciation changes and demonstrates several variations in the accent representing different parts of the Arabic-speaking world.

### **Passage: Tips for Dialect Actors**

a-i o e a a a d i a-i i a  
*I'M GOING TO TAKE AD-ə-VANTAGE OF THIS FINAL D-ə-RILL PASSAGE TO*  
o o ə-i a-u a-u d e o a o e  
*NOT ON-ə-LY POINT OUT HOW THE RESONANCE AND P-ə-RONUNCIATION*  
e e e e a a a i a  
*CHANGES TAKE P-ə-LACE WHEN MOVING TOWARD AN ARABIC ACCENT. I*  
o ə-i a-u u a-u u a a i d i  
*ALSO WANT TO POINT OUT TO YOU HOW YOU MUST P-ə-RACTICE THESE*  
i a a i i o d d o e e  
*SPEECH CHARACTERISTICS SO THAT THEY BECOME SECOND NATURE.*  
e d a a e u o a e a e d  
*WHEN THAT HAPPENS, YOU WON'T HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION TO THE*  
e a i d i e ε a u a o a o  
*MECHANICS OF THE SPEECH CHANGES AND YOU CAN GO BACK TO YOUR*   
e a o e e o d a a i e o  
*MAIN TASK OF CONCENT-ə-RATING ON THE ACTIONS AND INTENTIONS OF*  
o a a i t a d  
*YOUR CHARACTER: A CHARACTER WHO SPEAKS WITH AN ACCENT. THE*  
t o a o a o o d a o  
*THOUGHTS MUST FLOW. WE MUST NOT BE CONSCIOUS THAT YOUR*   
a i t a-u d e d i o i i i  
*CHARACTER IS THINKING ABOUT THE WAY THAT HE OR SHE IS SPEAKING.*

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