

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

FRENCH

by

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

DAVID ALAN STERN is the founder and president of DIALECT ACCENT SPECIALISTS publishing, and has worked in Hollywood since 1980 as an accent and dialect coach for the motion picture and television industries. After receiving a Ph.D. in speech from Temple University, he served on the faculties of both Wichita State and Penn State Universities. He has taught thousands of actors and broadcasters to put on (or take off) foreign accents and regional dialects. Among the students he has coached are:

Mike Farrell, Jack Klugman, Edward James Olmos,
Bronson Pinchot, Lynn Redgrave, Forest Whitaker,
and Michael York as well as *OSCAR WINNERS*
Geena Davis, Olympia Dukakis, and Sally Field.

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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 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 dialect(s). (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 foreign scripts. For example, don't play Chekhov with a Russian accent or Moliere with a French accent. For such "classics," try using **ELEVATED AMERICAN DICTION** (see the final tape in the **SPEAKING WITHOUT AN ACCENT** series). (4) "Elevated diction" is also appropriate when American casts are doing Shakespeare, especially those of his plays which are not set in England. (5) Finally, **DON'T USE ACCENTS UNLESS THEY ARE GOING TO BE PERFORMED WELL!**

What techniques lead to good dialects?

Perhaps as few as twenty per cent of actors have the "good ear" that leads to skillful imitation of speech patterns. 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: Creating correct pronunciation changes is a "necessary, but not sufficient" condition for generating dialect authenticity. Most teachers, texts, and recorded programs drill their students almost exclusively with the appropriate vowel and consonant substitutions needed for the target pattern. Although I believe that correct pronunciation is absolutely necessary, these changes will not sound authentic unless you combine them with several other important vocal features that I'll discuss in the next few paragraphs.

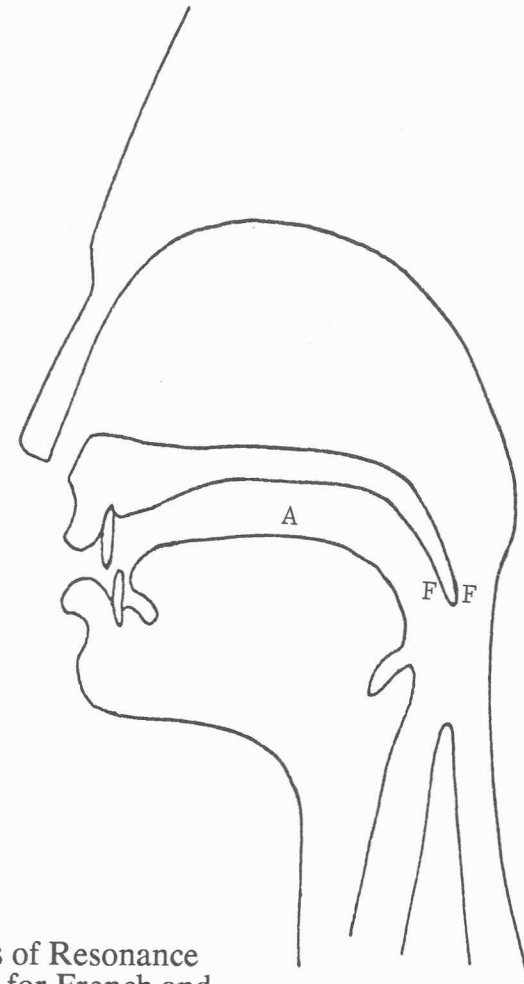
PITCH CHARACTERISTICS: "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside vowels, especially (but not exclusively) during the sounding of stressed syllables. In many accent patterns, this trait (which I call **INNER-VOWEL LILT**) helps to generate an authentic-sounding dialect.

STRESS PATTERNS: American English has a complex pattern of stressed and unstressed syllables. Some other dialects and accents have few, if any unstressed syllables. Still others have rather intricate staccato rhythms which must be mastered before the dialects can possibly sound authentic.

RESONANCE or MUSCULAR IMPULSE: Much of my research, teaching, and performing experience has taught me that the most important part of a dialect's authentic essence comes from a characteristic shaping of the throat, nose, mouth, tongue and soft palate. The many available configurations, in turn, give many different resonances or "timbres" to the overall sound. Such a specific "tone focus" is very noticeable throughout a dialect, regardless of whether actual pronunciation changes are occurring on certain words. In fact, once an actor has mastered the new muscularity and tone focus for a given dialect, many of the important pronunciation changes can be made much more easily and convincingly. Most of the tapes in this series begin with a detailed lesson on resonance. Subsequent pronunciation drills then grow from the new muscularity. So now your new pronunciations have an "organic core." They need no longer be isolated memory exercises.

What is the best way to practice?

Begin by drilling the mechanics of the new dialect--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 dialect. 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.



Points of Resonance
Focus for French and
Standard American Speech

A -- Standard American

F -- French

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT FRENCH

LESSON ONE:

FRENCH RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE

The first step in creating a French accent is to make an overall change in the resonance features of the voice. As I explain on the tape, French speech almost seems to focus its tone or resonance far back to a spot at the very back and bottom of the uvula (the flap that hangs down from the soft palate at the opening of the throat). Since the point of focus is near the place where the throat divides into the oral and nasal passages, the new resonance combines a "velar focus" (the sound bouncing against the velum or soft palate) with a degree of actual nasal vibration.

Follow the tape through the series of exercises for generating the new resonance away from the mid-mouth focus of American speech and toward the more palatal/nasal French muscularity by:

1. visualizing the change in tone focus and feeling a change in the tissue vibration at the new point of focus.
2. producing a full nasal sound and then progressively decreasing the degree of nasality.
3. lifting the uvula and extending it back toward the wall of the throat.
4. extending the upper lip while also creating a slight dilation of the nostrils.

LESSON TWO:

VOWEL CHANGES RELATED TO MUSCULARITY AND RESONANCE

The following vowel substitutions are extensions of the resonance shift you just learned. Repeat the words and sentences after hearing them on the tape. Don't just imitate the new pronunciations. Create the new muscularity, and let the French vowels grow naturally out of that change in speech impulse.

NOTE: In the French language and accent there is only one vowel corresponding to each long/short vowel pair found in English. In the following exercises, the original English "long"

vowels are underlined twice while the original English "short" vowels are underlined once.

1. "LONG E" and "SHORT I" as in CLEAN CITY

IPA: [i] and [I] become [i] with French resonance.
LESSAC: y and N² become y with French resonance.

yield, see, equal, speak, thirteen, clean
sister, Wilma, differ, tickle, infant, clinic, incredible
- Please cease to creep through the Garden of Eden.
- The chicken committed itself to living in the interest of the family dinner.
- Sit inside the pavilion instead of in the sun.

Now here are a few additional drills for this pair of vowels which aren't recorded on the tape.

* Meat and cheese were served under the tree.
* He twisted his knee while skiing fleetly down the peak.
* Steve went to pieces because he was green with envy.
* The speed demon careened off the freeway.
* Winter differs incredibly in its impact on individuals.
* The inspector charged interest on Wilma's income tax.
* Inspector Smith hinted at mistakes in the investigation.
* I intend to split the pit in the middle of the cherry.

2. "LONG A" and "SHORT E" as in TODAY'S WEATHER

IPA: [ei] and [ɛ] become [e] in non-diphthong form and with French resonance.
LESSAC: +y and N³ become the first stage of +y with French resonance.

wait, chased, display, brain, insane
effort, men, get, twenty, enter
- A great April shower came our way today.
- He was especially edgy after the separation.

Now here are a few additional drills for this pair of vowels which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * 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.
- * Ed rented the penthouse at an exorbitant price.
- * Ten and ten eventually get you twenty.
- * I meant every word I said in the elementary section.
- * Ben was a general from several sections of Tennessee.

3. "LONG OO" and "SHORT OO" as in SMOOTH WOOD

IPA: [u] and [ʊ] become [u] with French resonance.
 LESSAC: #1 and N¹ become #1 with French resonance.

food, troupe, loose, boot, rumor, June
 hook, sugar, footwear, woman

- At two past noon I heard hooves on the roof of my room.
- Rumor has it that raccoons buy fruit with coupons.
- Don't put a bushel of soot in the brook.
- Pull your thumb out of the sugary pudding.
- Dr. Goodman took the bullet out of the rookie's foot.

Now here are a few additional drills for this pair of vowels which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * I always knew that prunes grew under the blue moon.
- * The gloomy June moon is moving foolishly.
- * It's true that Sue proves school is gloomy.
- * Give the duke a boost with your boot.
- * We pulled the wolf from the woods to the boulevard.
- * The butcher's hook took out the sooty bully.
- * Woody stood up wearing cushioned footwear.
- * I understood there's a good book in the library.

4. "LONG O" and "AW" as in GO WALKING

IPA: [ou] and [ɔ] become [o] in non-diphthong form with French resonance.
 LESSAC: #21 and #3 become the first stage of #21 with French resonance.

load, coat, motion, loan, moan

ought, jaw, walk, drawing

- The oboe and cello sat alone.
- Don't tell morbid stories on warm nights.
- The awful sauce made Paul pause and walk to the emergency ward.

Now here are a few additional drills for this pair of vowels which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * Long 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.
- * The tall author walked often.
- * The awkward, awful, strong man walked home.
- * Lost boys often become flawless at reform school.
- * Horses often cost more than the monthly draw.

5. "SCHWA" and "SHORT A" as in LUCKY MAN

IPA: [ə] and [æ] become [ɑ] with French resonance.
 LESSAC: N⁴ and #6 become #5 with French resonance.

In the drills that follow, the letters representing the "schwa" sound will be underlined once; those standing for the "short a" will be underlined twice.

after, ask, shatter
 cut, upper, dumb

- The soprano laughed as she shattered the glass.
- The puppy hunted the slumbering dove.

Now here are several additional drills for these two sounds which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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 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 blood under the bud vase was trouble for Gus.*

LESSON THREE: RHYTHM, PITCH, and STRESS TRAITS

The French language gives dominant stress to the final syllable of most multi-syllabic words. As such, the native speaker of French tends to carry this trait over into a second language. The use of final syllabic stress thus becomes one of the most characteristic traits of the French accent, although an overuse of the same trait can carry the accent into the realm of stereotype. Listen to the samples on the tape and practice along with it. I suggest that you limit your use of this stress trait to situations where the character is giving additional importance to a given word.

This trait of stressing the final syllable is often accompanied by a noticeable pitch change. Pitch has the tendency to rise on the same final syllable which is now getting the additional stress. Again, listen closely to the examples on the tape. Practice this combination of pitch and stress on the following words:

separate, factory, refrigerator, aluminum

As is the case with the Russian accent, French speech really has no "unstressed" syllables. Certainly the final syllable has more stress than others, but even the earlier syllables are stressed to a degree. So, in this accent, instead of thinking of syllables being "stressed" and "unstressed," it is better to think of them as having "primary stress" versus "secondary stress."

LESSON FOUR: FRENCH CONSONANT SUBSTITUTIONS

1. THE FRENCH "R" as in *RED RIVER*

To create the Standard American R, the mid-tongue retracts and glides toward with soft palate without touching it. In many other languages and accents, the tongue tip taps or trills against the gum ridge just behind the top-front teeth. The French R

requires a third, entirely different technique. In the French accent, all R-sounds, whether found at the beginning, middle, or end of a word, are made with the back of the tongue coming up to touch the soft palate. As the air is forced between the tongue and velum, the slightly "throaty" sound of the French R results. Listen closely to this section of the tape. You will hear samples of the French R in various positions as well as instructions for forming it.

The greatest amount of "friction" takes place when the R comes before a vowel as in:

really, rose, ready, cringe, broke

When the R is at the end of a word or in other positions where it follows a vowel sound, there will not be quite as much friction needed as when the R comes before a vowel.

dodger, runner, player, cursed, thirsty, earnest

In the above list, all the words contained the sound which is often represented by the letters "ER." In the French accent, the vowel stem on this "ER" also changes pronunciation a bit, sounding more like the vowel stem in the word "AIR."

Now try the version of the French R with slightly less friction in a series of words where the R follows a whole series of different vowels.

jeer, weird, steer, gear, hair, bear, sure, allure, endure, four, shore, door, before, star, mar, retard

And in these sentences:

- *The runner staggered over the ridge and recovered his reward.*
- *The girl put the worm on the hook and caught a perfect flounder.*

Now practice the French R in these sentences which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * *The river ran over its rough banks.*
- * *Richard searched all the roads of the world.*

- * *Be sincere my dear; it's a really queer world.*
- * *Pay your fare to the regular driver.*
- * *I'm not ready to pay these high insurance rates.*
- * *The Concord roared down the runway.*
- * *I rarely argue about works of art.*

2. The "CH" & "DG" as in CHARLES JAMES

The voiceless CH [tʃ] consonant moves toward SH [ʃ]. The voiced DG [dʒ] moves toward ZH [ʒ]. However, both sounds retain a slight plosive quality. Follow the directions on the tape.

NOTE: In the sentences below, the voiced sound is underlined twice, and the voiceless sound is underlined once.

chip, chimney, chime, chirp, chock

judge, jingle, jet, bridge, budge

- *Churchill always chucked babies under the chin.*
- *Churches and chapels aren't places for childishness.*
- *The huge refrigerator froze the bridge club's snacks.*
- *The judge and jury juggled the decision.*

Now practice these two sounds in the following sentences which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * *I charged the price of the chicken sandwich.*
- * *Change the oil before the voyage.*
- * *Children have courage if given a chance.*
- * *I chose to jump over the edge.*
- * *There's a chance that we can change jobs.*

3. The "TH" Sounds as in THROW THIS

The voiceless TH [θ] and the voiced TH [ð] become S and Z respectively with a slight plosive flavoring. In the sentences below, the voiced TH sounds are underlined twice, and the voiceless version is underlined once.

thank, thin, think, thorax

other, therefore, they

- *Thin people think dieting is thoroughly unnecessary.*
- *There's a day left before they go to the other county.*
- *Ethnic Catholics think Luther's theory wrong.*

- *They played around with this, that and the other thing.*

Now practice the TH sounds in the following sentences which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * *The other snake slithered through the grass.*
- * *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.*

4. The "S" and "Z" Switch as in DRIVES CARS

[z] becomes [s], especially (but not exclusively) at the ends of plural nouns and third person, singular verbs.

tries, repose, zebra

- *He tries to wake her from her repose, but fails.*

Now practice "unvoicing" the Z sounds in the following sentences which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * *He rides wild horses.*
- * *She goes to the homes of many families.*
- * *It seems that those in power have many desires.*

5. FRENCH ENDINGS as in FORMIDABLE ACTION

Actual French language pronunciations of "sion," "able" and "ible" sometimes infiltrate English words with similar spellings. Listen closely to the tape for a modeling of the words that follow. But, be careful. On stage, these endings can often get in the way of the audience's full understanding.

diction, prediction, refrigeration, adorable, intelligible

Now practice with the following words which aren't recorded on the tape.

action, admirable, attraction, decision, honorable, impossible, incredible, infection, retraction

6. Initial "H" as in HENRY

The initial H is dropped by many speakers with particularly heavy French accents.

history, highwayman, haphazardly

Now try the H-drop in the following sentences which aren't recorded on the tape.

- * *I have never had such happiness.*
- * *It happened at half past eleven.*
- * *My hands were heavy with hard work.*
- * *Do not hesitate to help the homeless.*

LESSON SIX: COACHED DRILL

The passage you'll hear on the tape is printed below. It is marked with all of the important pronunciation changes using the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual. At first it might be well to mark scripts in this way to jog your memory of the sound changes and the resonance characteristics related to them. If you really go after the French resonance, the pronunciation changes should soon become second nature. At that time 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 Pascal's PROVINCIAL LETTERS

er e . i e i as o e
WE WERE ENTIRELY MISTAKEN. IT WAS ONLY YES-
er e za as a e a i za
TERDAY THAT I WAS UNDECEIVED. UNTIL THAT TIME I
a e . a er z i esion za z
HAD LABOURED UNDER THE IMPRESSION THAT THE
i i z o o er a i .
DISPUTES IN THE SORBONNE WERE VASTLY IMPOR-
a a a e e z i ere a
TANT, AND DEEPLY AFFECTED THE INTEREST OF

e i 3 ion z . e o esion a a
RELIGION. THE FREQUENT CONVOCATIONS OF AN
a e o i a . a as za a z
ASSEMBLY SO ILLUSTRIOUS AS THAT OF THE
s o o 3 i a a a a i a e e
THEOLOGICAL FACULTY OF PARIS, ATTENDED BY SO
e e . i e . a a e e e e er
MANY EXTRAORDINARY AND UNPRECEDENTED CIR-
a a e e a o . as
CUMSTANCES, LED ONE TO FORM SUCH HIGH
e e esion za i as i o ible e
EXPECTATIONS THAT IT WAS IMPOSSIBLE TO HELP
a z sion za z a 3e as
COMING TO THE CONCLUSION THAT THE SUBJECT WAS
o e . o . i e .
MOST EXTRAORDINARY.

Now, in the continuation of the passage, follow the tape and try playing around with some changes in the level of the accent. At various times you will be increasing the amount of nasality and the degree to which you emphasize the resonance, stress and pronunciation features.

i . e er . s e er
YOU WILL BE GREATLY SURPRISED, HOWEVER,
e er . a z . o a
WHEN YOU LEARN FROM THE FOLLOWING ACCOUNT
z i a zi . a e o . asion i
THE ISSUE OF THIS GRAND DEMONSTRATION, WHICH,
a e e er e a er a z
HAVING MADE MYSELF PERFECTLY MASTER OF THE
a 3e a e e i er
SUBJECT, I SHALL BE ABLE TO TELL YOU IN VERY FEW
er s
WORDS.

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR FRENCH ACCENT!