

# **ACTING WITH AN ACCENT**

**RUSSIAN**

by

**DAVID ALAN STERN, Ph.D.**

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**DIALECT ACCENT SPECIALISTS, Inc.**

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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 theatre faculties of both Penn State University and the University of Connecticut. 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.



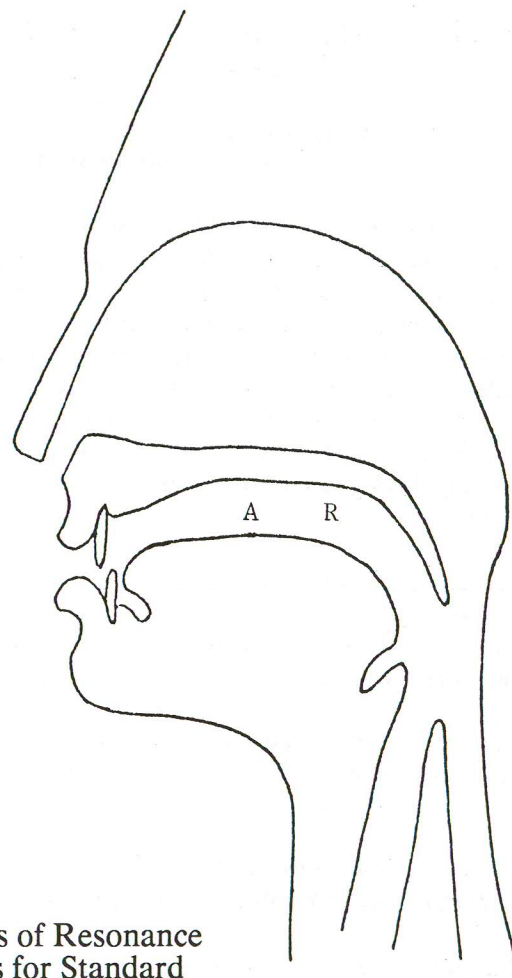
**PITCH CHARACTERISTICS:** "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside 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 Standard  
American and Russian  
Speech Patterns

A -- Standard American

R -- Russian

## ACTING WITH AN ACCENT RUSSIAN

### LESSON ONE:

#### RUSSIAN RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE

The first step in creating a Russian accent is to make an overall change in the resonance features of the voice. As I explain on the tape, Russian speech focuses its vibratory tone higher up and further back in the mouth than does the standard American pattern (see Page 5). To a large degree, this resonance is created by a particular style of tongue movement. Follow the tape through the series of exercises for generating the new muscularity and resonance away from the mid-mouth focus of American speech and toward the high-back placement of Russian. During these exercises you will:

1. visualize the change in tone focus and feel a change in the tissue vibration.
2. drop your jaw more than normal and feel a larger space open between the rear-tongue and soft palate as you open your mouth.
3. create a "pumping" motion in the back of your tongue which is based initially on producing the two-stage vowel [Iə].

### LESSON TWO:

#### PRONUNCIATION CHANGES RELATED TO 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 Russian vowels grow naturally out of that change in speech impulse.

1. "LONG E" (SLEEP), "SHORT I" (SIT), & "SHORT E" (GET)

IPA: [i] [I] and [ε] all move toward [Iə].  
LESSAC: y, N<sup>2</sup>, and N<sup>3</sup> all move toward N<sup>2</sup> + N<sup>4</sup>.

*bean, city, tell, people, inside, tell, beat, differ, section*

NOTE: In many situations, these three vowels (and occasionally some other front vowels) are preceded by the consonant glide [j], especially if the vowel follows the 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 which aren't recorded on the tape.

- \* 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.

#### 2. THE "LONG A" as in GREAT DAY

IPA: [ei] moves toward [εə].  
LESSAC: + y moves toward N<sup>3</sup> + N<sup>4</sup>.

*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 which aren't recorded on the tape.

- \* 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.



### 3. THE "SHORT A" as in JACK SPRAT

IPA: [æ] usually becomes [ɑ].  
 LESSAC: #6 usually becomes #5.

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 which aren't 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 huddled masses sang the National Anthem.

### 4. THE "SCHWA" VOWEL as in MOTHER'S LOVE

IPA: [ə] becomes [ɑ] or [ɒ].  
 LESSAC: N4 become #5 or #4.

*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 which aren't recorded on the tape.

\* 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.

### 5. "LONG OO" and "SHORT OO" as in BLUE BOOK

IPA: [u] and [U] become [Uə].  
 LESSAC: #1 and N<sup>1</sup> become N<sup>1</sup> + N<sup>4</sup>.

*food, shoot, soup, book, cushion, brook*  
 - The pupil was willing to shoot for the moon.  
 - Soup is the best food for winter cooking (shooting).  
 - Captain Hook ate a bushel of cookies.

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

\* 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.

### 6. THE "LONG O" as in GO HOME

IPA: [ou] becomes [ə].  
 LESSAC: #21 becomes N<sup>4</sup>.

*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 which aren't recorded on the tape.

\* 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.

## 7. THE "SHORT O" as in <sup>o</sup>HOT <sup>o</sup>SHOT

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

LESSAC: #4 moves toward #5 when spelled with "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 which aren't recorded on the tape.

\* *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 which 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 tape 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

### 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 [ɛə] 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 tape. If you still have trouble, perhaps you would benefit from a section of **ACTING WITH AN ACCENT** for the Scottish which devotes considerably more time to the trilling and rolling of the R.

Here are some additional drills for the R-sound which are not recorded on the tape.

\* *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.*

### 2. UNVOICED FINAL CONSONANTS as in GRAB BAG

Most of the Russian consonant substitutions involve voiced consonants or clusters which become voiceless in final (and sometimes medial) word position. As such, B becomes P, G becomes K, ING 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 drills which are not recorded on the tape for the unvoicing of 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.

### 3. THE "V" AND "W SOUNDS" as in <sup>v</sup>VERY <sup>w</sup>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 yast events.

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

- \* 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.

### 4. THE "TH SOUNDS" as on <sup>ð</sup>THIS <sup>t</sup>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 which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* 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] 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 which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* 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 tape. All of the important pronunciation changes are indicated using the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual.

### From THE BROTHERS KARAMAZOV

АЛЕКСЕЙ ФЕДОРОВИЧ КАРАМАЗОВ БЫЛ ТРЕТИМ СЫНОМ ФЕДОРА ПАВЛОВИЧА КАРАМАЗОВА, А ЛАНДОВНЕРА ХОРОШО ИЗВЕСТНОГО В НАШЕМ РАЙОНЕ

СВОЕГО ДНЯ, И ЕЩЕ ПОМНИЛИСЬ НАМ ДОЛЖАЮЩЕМУ ЕГО ГЛУХОМУ И ТРАГИЧЕСКОМУ СМЕРТИ, КОТОРАЯ ПРОИЗОШЛА ТРИНАДЦАТЬ ЛЕТ НАЗАД, И КОТОРАЯ БУДЕТ ОПИСАНА В СВОЕ ВРЕМЯ. НАСТОЯЩЕ ВРЕМЯ, Я СКАЖУ ТОЛЬКО ТО, ЧТО ЭТОТ "ЛАНДОВНЕР" -- ЗА ЭТО ВРЕМЯ Я НЕ ЗАСТАЛ ЕГО, ХОТЯ ОН НЕ ПРОЖИЛ НИ ОДНОГО ДНЯ СВОЕГО ДНЯ НА СВОЕЙ СОБСТВЕННОСТИ -- БЫЛ ОЧЕНЬ СТРАННОЙ ТИП, ЕЩЕ ОЧЕНЬ ЧАСТО БЫВАЛ С НЕЙ, А ТИП АБСОРБОВАН И ВООБЩЕ НЕ СМЫСЛЕН.

Follow the tape and experiment with several different levels and intensities of Russian accent using the next passage.

### THE THREE SISTERS--CONDENSED

Я ХОДУ БУДУ ЧИТАТЬ ВАМ МОЕГО ОДНОГО ЧЕЛОВЕКА. АББРЕВИРОВАННАЯ ВЕРСИЯ ПЬЕСЫ ЧЕХОВА "ТРИ СЕСТРЫ". ЭТО, КОНЕЧНО, ПЬЕСА В ЧЕТЫРЕХ АКТАХ О ТРЕХ СЕСТРАХ И ИХ СЕМЬЕ И О ВОПРОСЕ, КОТОРЫЙ ВОЗНИКАЕТ, БУДУТ ЛИ ОНИ НАКОНЕЦ СДЕЛАТЬ ТО ДЛИТЕЛЬНО ОЖИДАЕМОЕ ДВИЖЕНИЕ В МОСКОВУ. ВОТ ТЕПЕРЬ:



$\Delta \sum_{n=1}^{\infty} 4n \cdot I_2$

**ACT I:** (*First Sister*)

$\frac{v}{w} \quad v_2 \quad \partial \quad v_2 \quad \supset \quad \partial$

"I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW."

4  $v_2 \neq I_2 + I_3$ .

**ACT II:** *(Second Sister)*

$\frac{v}{w}$        $v \geq 3$      $v \geq 3$      $v \geq 3$      $v \geq 3$

**"I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW."**

a tria tertio.

ACT III: (Third Sister)

$\frac{v}{w} \quad v \quad a \quad \frac{v}{a} \quad \frac{v}{a} \quad a$

"I WANT TO GO TO MOSCOW."

4 5 1.12.12

**ACT IV:** *(All Three Sisters)*

$\frac{1}{2} \frac{v}{v_0} \cdot \frac{1}{2} \frac{v}{v_0} \cdot \frac{1}{2} \frac{v}{v_0} \cdot \frac{1}{2} \frac{v}{v_0} \cdot \frac{1}{2} \frac{v}{v_0}$

"I GUESS WE ARE NOT GOING TO MOSCOW."

$$d + d \cdot s \supset \supset f j r d \dots \forall w e \text{ } I D$$

ACTUALLY, THERE'S A LOT OF LITERARY VALUE IN

THE REST OF THE SCRIPT, BUT THAT'S BASICALLY IT.

THE REST OF THE SCRIPT, BUT THAT'S BASICALLY IT.

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

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