

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

WEST INDIAN & BLACK AFRICAN

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
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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.

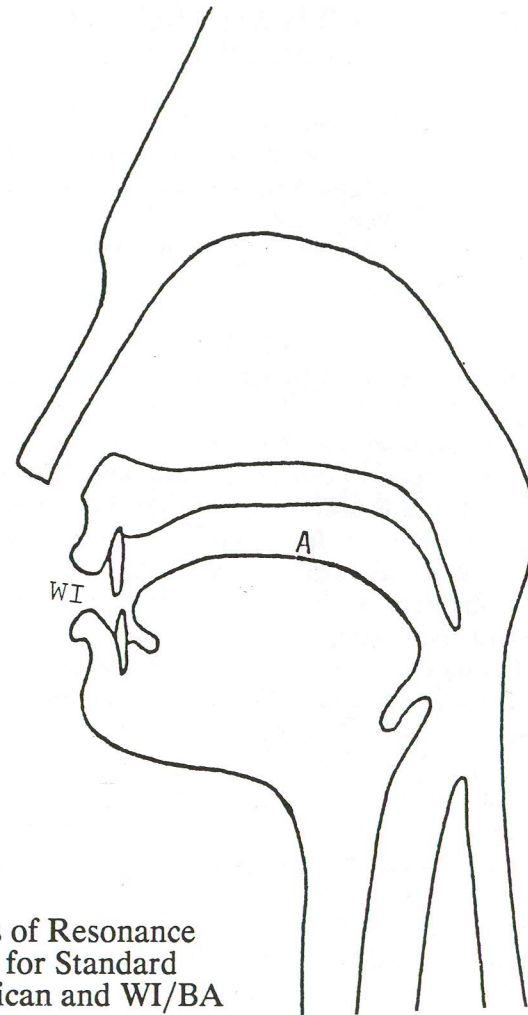
PITCH CHARACTERISTICS: "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside vowels,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

A -- Standard American

WI -- West Indian/Black African

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

WEST INDIAN/BLACK AFRICAN

This tape begins by teaching you the resonance, rhythms, and pronunciations of West Indian-accented English--especially as spoken by those from Jamaica and Trinidad. It then goes on to demonstrate the slight modifications needed to produce Black African patterns and also French West Indian speech.

LESSON ONE: RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE

Whereas the resonance, tone focus, or timbre of non-regional American English seems to concentrate somewhere around the central point of the oral cavity, the focus for West Indian and Black African speech moves far forward to a point created between the lips and in front of the teeth as the lips stretch forward and away from the teeth. As such, in these dialects, the lips seem to glide forward and envelop the speech sounds that are being produced. Lesson One contains a series of exercises for producing this characteristic tone focus. Follow the tape closely through these exercises in which you will:

1. visualize and feel the new focal point.
2. reach or glide your lips forward, but maintain a fairly wide lip opening while letting the lips relax back to the teeth after each sound.
3. engage not only the front part of the lips during this glide, but all of the skin-covered parts (up to the nose and down to the chin).
4. visualize and attempt to reproduce the movements of a fish's mouth as it takes in water for oxygen.

LESSON TWO: CREATING THE RHYTHM/STRESS PATTERN

These accent patterns differ from those of British and American English in that they lack unstressed syllables. Follow the tape and begin to produce the pattern of extra stress. In a later lesson, you will see how these accents seem to place an extra

amount of stress on syllables containing diphthongs (double vowels). Even then, instead of thinking of "stressed" and "unstressed" syllables, it will be better for you to think of syllables as having "stress" and "extra stress."

LESSON THREE: THE PRONUNCIATION OF VOWELS

1. THE "LONG-E" as in GREEN TREES

IPA: [i] moves toward [I] but keeping heavy stress.
LESSAC: y moves toward N² with heavy stress.

seat, see, yield, sea, need, needle, supreme
- *He hurt his knee while skiing down the peak.*
- *He achieves intrigue very easily.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * *Please cease to creep through the Garden of Eden.*
- * *Meat and cheese were served under the tree.*
- * *Steve went to pieces because he was green with envy.*
- * *The speed demon careened off the freeway.*
- * *He teased the eager Marine with sneezing powder.*

2. THE "SHORT I" as in SIT STILL

IPA: [I] takes a harder stress, moving slightly toward [i]. Its pronunciation is identical to that of the vowel just studied.
LESSAC: N² takes more stress and moves toward y.

physical, pick, inside, mistake, wind
- *The inspector charged interest on Wilma's income tax.*
- *The chicken committed itself to the interest of dinner.*

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * *Winter differs incredibly in its impact on individuals.*

- * The clinician instantly investigated the infant's itch.
- * Sit inside the pavilion instead of in the sun.
- * I intend to split the pit in the middle of the cherry.
- * The infant twitched and gripped the crib.

3. THE "LONG OO" as in GLOOMY TRUTH

IPA: [u] moves toward [U] with a heavy stress.
 LESSAC: #1 moves toward N¹.

studio, school, revue, pupil, truth

- The gloomy June moon is moving foolishly.
- It's true that Sue proves school is useful.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * I always knew that prunes grew under the blue moon.
- * At two past noon, I heard hooves on the roof.
- * Give the duke a boost with your boot.
- * Rumor has it that raccoons buy fruit with coupons.
- * Newman got juiced because Stu threw brew into the soup.

4. THE "SHORT OO" as in BUSHEL OF WOOD

IPA: [U] takes a harder stress. Pronunciation is close to that of the "Long OO."
 LESSAC: N¹ takes a harder stress.

wooden, ambush, goodness, boulevard, cushion

- We pulled the wolf from the woods to the boulevard.
- I understood there was a good book in the library.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * The butcher's hook took out the sooty bully.
- * Dr. Goodman took the bullet from the rookie's foot.
- * Woody stood up wearing cushioned footwear.
- * Brooks was hoodwinked from the pulpit by Mr. Cook.
- * Only tourists put bushels of soot in the brook.

5. THE "SHORT A" as in BACKHAND

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

laugh, class, France, commander, grant, bath, and, at, camera,
back, mansion

- Ask for the hand of any bashful man and accept his answer.
- They ate a lamb and ham sandwich at the campground.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * The soprano laughed as she shattered the glass.
- * 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.
- * The Huddled masses sang the National Anthem.

NOTE: The first five vowel changes apply to both the West Indian and Black African accents. The ones which follow are much more likely to be heard from West Indians and not necessarily from Africans.

6. THE "AW" VOWEL as in AWFUL SONG

IPA: [ɔ] becomes [ɑ].
 LESSAC: #3 becomes #5.

NOTE: This vowel is not consistent throughout American regions, so I'll help you identify it by its numerous spellings. We are now considering the vowel sound which may be spelled in English by the letters "a", "au", "aw", "of", "os", "oth" and "ong."

jaw, tall, applaud, vault, wrong, coffee, cost, cloth

- The awful sauce made Paul pause and walk away.
- The cat crawled across the lawn because it hurt its paw.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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.
- * The dog fought the moth he had brought home.

7. THE "SCHWA" VOWEL as in TOUGH LUCK

IPA: [ə] may become [U].
LESSAC: N⁴ may become N¹.

duck, trouble, struggle, under

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

- * The stuntman stumbles and tumbles in the mud.
- * The puppy covered up the other couple's lunch.
- * The blood under the bud vase was trouble for Gus.
- * The drunk mumbled something into his cup.
- * At an upper-crust brunch one must wear gloves.

LESSON FOUR: LILT and DIPHTHONG LILT

As the tape will illustrate, the West Indian speech pattern tends to have much more intonation or pitch change than does Black African speech. In addition, English with a West Indian accent has one very important lilt or pitch characteristic. In this accent there is usually a quick, upward inflection in pitch taking place during the sounding of diphthongs or double vowels. Some of the diphthongs also undergo slight pronunciation changes during these upward lilt. REMEMBER, this trait is not as likely to happen in African accents as it is in West Indian patterns.

1. THE "LONG A" as in GREAT DAY

IPA: [ei] extends to [ejə] and lilt upward.
LESSAC: +y lilt upward with a consonant glide.

day, rain, investigate, neighbor, administration

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

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * They paid the price for delaying the instant replay.
- * They blamed the dame with the famous face.
- * The able often stray in this fateful age.
- * Take haste; delay may instigate a fray.
- * Statesmen hasten to awaken the nation these days.

2. THE "LONG O" as in ROWBOAT

IPA: [ou] moves toward [oə] and lilt upward.
LESSAC: #21 becomes #2 + N⁴.

go, explosion, closed, expropriate, social

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

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not 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 rowboat slowly floated in the ocean.

3. THE "AH-OO" as in OUT OF TOWN

IPA: [au] also moves toward [oə] with upward lilt.
LESSAC: #51 moves toward #2 + N⁴.

how, crowd, astounded, Geiger counter, pronouncement

- Wild flowers abound in out-of-the-way mountain towns.
- The scale proudly announced that I had lost about a pound.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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.
- * The crowd loudly prowled the streets of the town.

4. THE "LONG I" as in FINE TIME

IPA: [ai] maintains pronunciation but lilt upward.
 LESSAC: #6y lilt upward.

- cry, advice, politely, arrive, dialogue*
 - The Ivy vines were tied down behind the shutters.
 - It's the right time to recite these ironic rhymes.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * It's the right time to find a gold mine in the sky.
- * 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.

5. THE "AW-EE" as in NOISY BOY

IPA: [ɔi] often becomes [ai] with upward lilt.
 LESSAC: #3y can become #6y with lilt.

- 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.

Now here are a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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.
- * The boisterous boy oiled the noisy toy.

Remember, the upward lilt and the particular diphthong changes we just studied are not as likely to take place in the

African accents. Words containing these vowels still maintain the resonance and stress characteristics, however.

LESSON FIVE: R-DROPS & ISOLATED CONSONANT CHANGES

West Indian and African English treat the "R" after a vowel much the same way as does British dialect. The R-shading is usually dropped. Occasionally the vowel stem will also change slightly in its pronunciation.

1. The R-DROP as in SINCERE HELPER

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

- earth, worst, perfect*
 - First thing is to search the world earnestly to find a perfect curve.

- jeer, career, tears*
 - I'm sincere about wanting the deer to appear this year.

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

- cart, army, charming*
 - He disembarked from the car after parking at the cargo hatch.

NOTE: In the "OR" words below, the vowel before the R will also change in pronunciation in the West Indian pattern (see item #6 on Page 9).

- before, support, implore*
 - The Concord roared forth, soaring higher than before.

Now here are a few additional drills for the R-drop which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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.

2. RETAINING THE R as in VERY SORE AT

There are some speakers who will occasionally retain a small degree of R-sound even in a post-vowel position where you would expect it to drop. ALSO, when the R comes between two vowels within a word, or when a final R is followed by a word beginning with a vowel, a small degree of R-sound is likely to return.

very, sorry, miracle, carry
I'm sore at you. a pair of socks Mr. Adams

Now here are a few additional drills for the Retained R which are not recorded on the tape.

- * Be there at ten after eight.
- * Mary doesn't care about her animals.
- * Mr. Anderson didn't stare at Harry.
- * Let's clear up the dishes before eight o'clock.

3. "ING" ENDINGS as in WALKING AND TALKING

- We were laughing, singing, and dancing in the rain.
- We were running and jumping every single night.

Now try several more drills for the ING endings that aren't recorded on the tape.

- * playing games, having fun, getting old, sailing away,
- * writing papers, reading books, working late, staying home,
- * going to work, getting married, selling stocks, falling asleep

4. "TH" SOUNDS as in OTHER THINGS

Voiced TH and voiceless TH become D and T respectively.

this, that, the other

thing, thistle
- The other snake slithered
- The thistle stuck in Throckmorton's thumb.
soothe, wrath

And now some additional TH drills which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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.

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.

NOTE: Pronunciation changes which are also underlined are likely to happen in the West Indian but not in the African dialect.

PASSAGE #1: ON USING THIS DIALECT

I AM GOING TO TAKE ADVANTAGE OF THIS FINAL
DRILL PASSAGE TO NOT ONLY POINT OUT HOW THE
STRESS, RESONANCE, AND PRONUNCIATION CHANGES
TAKE PLACE WHEN MOVING TOWARD THE ISLAND
DIALECT, I ALSO WANT TO POINT OUT TO YOU HOW
YOU MUST PRACTICE THE SPEECH CHARACTERISTICS
SO THAT THEY BECOME SECOND NATURE. WHEN
THAT HAPPENS, YOU WON'T HAVE TO PAY ATTENTION

TO THE MECHANICS OF THE SPEECH CHANGES, AND
 YOU CAN GO BACK TO YOUR MAIN TASK OF
 CONCENTRATING ON THE ACTIONS AND INTENTION
OF YOUR CHARACTER--A CHARACTER WHO SPEAKS
 WITH AN ACCENT. THE THOUGHTS MUST FLOW. WE
 MUST NOT BE CONSCIOUS THAT YOUR CHARACTER IS
 THINKING ABOUT THE WAY THAT HE OR SHE IS
 SPEAKING.

PASSAGE #2: from Lincoln's Gettysburg Address

FOURSCORE-AND-SEVEN YEARS AGO, OUR FATHERS
 BROUGHT FORTH ON THIS CONTINENT A NEW NATION,
 CONCEIVED IN LIBERTY AND DEDICATED TO THE
 PROPOSITION THAT ALL MEN ARE CREATED EQUAL.
NOW WE ARE ENGAGED IN A GREAT CIVIL WAR,
 TESTING WHETHER THAT NATION, OR ANY NATION SO
 CONCEIVED AND SO DEDICATED CAN LONG ENDURE.

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR WEST INDIAN AND
 BLACK AFRICAN ACCENTS!