

# **ACTING WITH AN ACCENT**

## **YIDDISH**

by

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

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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,  
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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 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 a sufficient" condition for creating 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.

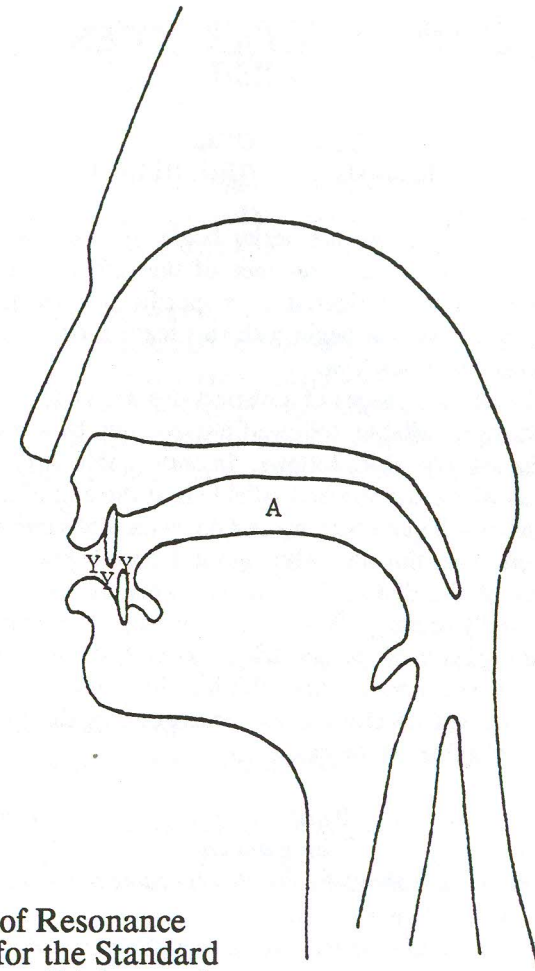
**PITCH CHARACTERISTICS:** "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside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

A -- Standard American

Y -- Yiddish

## ACTING WITH AN ACCENT YIDDISH

### LESSON ONE: CREATING THE YIDDISH LILT

Most of the tapes in this series begin by teaching you the muscularity and resulting resonance of the target dialect. Because Yiddish is so dominated by a specific pattern of lilt, or, pitch movement, we will begin with this feature before studying the resonance in Lesson Two.

The Yiddish lilt consists of a distinct upward glide in pitch on a word's stressed syllable, followed immediately by a downward glide on the syllable which follows. In one-syllable utterances, or in situations where the stressed syllable is at the end of the utterance, the pitch will glide both up and down on that same syllable.

Be careful with this lilt. Although it definitely helps establish the identity of the dialect, it does not occur on every word or even necessarily in every phrase. The lilt helps give emphasis to the stressed syllable of particularly important words. The more expressive the speaker, the more this lilt will be used.

Follow the tape carefully as you practice using the Yiddish lilt within the following utterances:

<i>Well!</i>	<i>Wait!</i>	<i>I really can't.</i>
<i>We can't agree.</i>	<i>Wait a minute.</i>	<i>Get out!</i>
<i>- I want you to know about the people who came to this country</i>		
<i>from all over Europe.</i>		
<i>- I brought a brand new house with an incredible kitchen.</i>		

### LESSON TWO: RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE and RELATED MINOR VOWEL SHIFTS

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 the Yiddish language and its accent in English is considerably farther forward in the mouth. Yiddish resonance focuses on an area of the mouth between the tongue tip and the very bottom of the top-front teeth. I also refer to the Yiddish resonance as being "lazy." The sound

doesn't shoot or spring out of the mouth; it "spills out" lowly. Follow the tape closely through the series of muscularity exercises in which you will:

1. visualize and feel the new focal point.
2. make the muscles of your mouth feel lazy with the jaw closed a bit more than usual and the lips unrounded.
3. make the tongue feel a bit thick and lethargic.

In the following section of this lesson we will examine those vowels whose pronunciations are altered only slightly by this change in speech muscularity. I suggest that you not really think of these sounds as absolute pronunciation changes. Instead, use these words and sentences to practice imposing the Yiddish resonance and to hear how that change slightly effects the pronunciation.

י י

#### 1. THE "LONG E" as in SEE ME

IPA: [i] softens slightly toward [ɪ].  
LESSAC: y softens slightly toward N<sup>2</sup> and lilts downward.

*each, deal, yield, cheat*

*- She needed to beat me so she cheated by dealing a three.*

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* *The speedy car careened off the freeway.*
- \* *He teased the eager marine with sneezing powder.*
- \* *He achieves intrigue by agreeing to speak Japanese in two scenes.*
- \* *Please cease to creep through the Garden of Eden.*
- \* *For tea, meat and cheese were served under the tree.*
- \* *Steve went to pieces because he was so green with envy.*

ו ו

#### 2. THE "SCHWA VOWEL" as in UNDER COVER

IPA: [ə] moves slightly toward [U].  
LESSAC: N<sup>4</sup> moves slightly toward N<sup>1</sup>.

*couple, trouble, glove, just*

- The puppet was dumbfounded at being shut up in the trunk.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* The stuntman stumbles and tumbles in the mud.
- \* A mother's love is above that of another brother.
- \* The puppy hunted the slumbering dove.
- \* The suds from the supper dishes fell into a puddle.
- \* The hunters used clubs and lived in huts.

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

IPA: [ei] softens slightly toward [ɛ].  
LESSAC: + y softens slightly toward N<sup>3</sup>.

chased, rainfall, weigh, today

- The flaky neighbor made a face at the baby.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound which are not 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 fateful delay in rainfall placed a great weight on Nathan's shoulders.

### 4. THE "LONG OO" as in BLUE MOON

IPA: [u] softens slightly toward [U].  
LESSAC: #5 softens slightly toward N<sup>1</sup>.

food, shoot, soup, fool

- Heavy boots stomped on the moon soon after noon.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* Give the duke a boost with your boot.
- \* Rumor has it that raccoons buy fruit with coupons.

\* I always knew that cool prunes were never blue.

\* The gloomy June moon moves fools to loons.

\* At two past noon, we heard hooves on the roof of the room.

## LESSON THREE: FULL VOWEL CHANGES RELATED TO RESONANCE

### 1. THE "SHORT A" as in GRAB BAG

IPA: [æ] becomes [ɛ].  
LESSAC: #6 becomes N<sup>3</sup>.

soprano, aft, hand, ask

- The soprano laughed as the baritone kissed her hand.

- The admiral went aft to avoid her path.

- The huddled masses sang the National Anthem.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound 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.
- \* Let's have a lamb and ham sandwich.
- \* During the disaster the master commanded the castle.

### 2. THE "LONG O" as in SLOW BOAT

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

no, sociology, lonely, oats

- The ugly old toad was lonely at the side of the road.

- Joe is going to throw the snowball over the hills of Rome.

- Can't you show me where the sociologists go when they know it all?

Now here are some additional sentence 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.
- \* 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.

### 3. THE "OY DIPHTHONG" as in NOISY BOY

IPA: [ɔi] becomes [əi].  
 LESSAC: #3y tends toward N<sup>1</sup>+y.

boy, annoy, noise, ointment

- The boy joined in the noise just to annoy the royalty.
- The play was to put the soy sauce in the ointment.
- You may enjoy broiled oysters.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* Loyal Lloyd anointed the royal head with oil.
- \* He coiled around the moist cloister pillars.
- \* He toiled to hoist the soybeans from the soil.
- \* The boisterous boy oiled the noisy toy.
- \* He foiled the exploits of those who were loitering.
- \* Ointment is the best choice for your aching joints.

### 4. THE "BROAD AW" as in AWFUL THOUGHTS

IPA: [ɔ] becomes [ə].  
 LESSAC: #3 becomes N<sup>4</sup>.

NOTE: When an R follows this vowel, most Yiddish speakers will drop the R-shading and change the vowel stem to the [ə].

pause, thought, lost, importance

- The short dog fought because the moth thought that war was normal.
- Don't tell morbid stories about the shortcomings of the north forty.
- Lost boys often become flawless at reform school.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* The tall author walked often.
- \* The awkward, awful, strong man walked home.
- \* Horses often cost more than the monthly draw.
- \* He stalked the ball and then vaulted down the hall.
- \* The awful sauce made Paul pause and then walk away.
- \* The cat crawled across the lawn with its hurt paw.

## LESSON FOUR: RESONANCE-RELATED CONSONANT CHANGES

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

Most of the Yiddish 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], [ŋ] (ING) becomes [ŋk] (INK), [z] becomes [s], [v] becomes [f], [ʒ] (ZH) becomes [ʃ] (SH), and [dʒ] (DG) becomes [tʃ] (CH).

Many actors find it useful to think of the unvoicing of these consonants as being an extension of the "lazy" style of mouth muscularity you learned earlier. So, once again, don't try to learn these new pronunciations as totally isolated sound substitutions.

tribe, robe, tub, grab

- The Cub Scouts gabbed about their olive drab uniforms.

sag, rag, rig, hag

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

singing, acting, ring, rowing

- Ring the bell and the crowd will start singing and dancing.

candid, blood, food, grand

- Jewish cooking is very good, but sometimes it's accused of being bland.

grave, save, engrave, have

- It's naive to deceive a caveman about primitives.
- prize, noise, tries, relies
- She grows primroses 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 Yiddish accent they will revert back to the voiceless [s].

*perversion, derision, incision, television*

- The supervision of the road fissure avoided another collision.

*voyage, courage, badge, cabbage*

- The sage was in a rage and held a grudge against the budget director.

st ps

## 2. UNVOICING CLUSTERS as in DESPISED SCRIBES

Frequently, combinations of two of the above voiced consonants will be pronounced together in a word. In these cases, the entire combination becomes voiceless.

- He who deceives weaves a web.

- They shoved the approved manuscript to be perceived.

- Whoever jogged past the trash snagged it open.

- We were amazed by the razed buildings.

Now here are additional drills which are not recorded on the tape for unvoicing consonants and clusters..

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

\* Be candid with the good judges.

\* Don't mind his gold badge.

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

\* Shag the golf balls from the crag.

\* I love singing and dancing on stage.

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

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

\* Acting always brings clapping from the cheering crowds.

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

\* The bulldozer made so much noise that Edward's repose ended.

\* He draws the laws to support his cause.

\* The edges of the cake were sharp as knives.

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

## LESSON FIVE: ISOLATED PRONUNCIATION CHANGES

We'll now look at those Yiddish sound changes which do not seem to grow directly out of the muscularity and resonance. While practicing these changes, however, you still must continue to produce the new resonance.

### 1. THE "R-SOUNDS" as in TRAIN DRIVE'S FIRST YEAK

There's no general rule for the Yiddish R. It differs by nation and language. For our purposes, we will use an R that characterizes most Yiddish speakers from Poland and the areas of what used to be Austria-Hungary.

When the R comes before a vowel or between vowels, it is articulated by raising the back of the tongue toward the soft palate and creating a soft fricative sound.

*rose, roll, trick, Freud, very, error*

When the R is the last letter in a word, the R-shading often is dropped, BUT, sometimes, final R will retain a bit of the lingual-velar fricative discussed above--especially when the R leads directly into a word which begins with another R or a vowel.

*mother, bear, far, store, actor, year*

*mother is, father did, father reasoned, father arrived*

The [ʒ] ("ER" at the beginning or middle of a word, as in "earth" and "search") is occasionally pronounced with lingual-velar placement, and sometimes it is dropped completely. Very often, especially if the New York dialect is influencing the Yiddish accent, the R shading is replaced with the [əi] diphthong.

*first, worst, worm, hurt*

Now follow the tape closely as you practice drills for the R-sounds. The Rs which are formed with air friction between the tongue and velum are underlined once (r). Those which are dropped are crossed out (~~r~~). The [ʒ] sounds which often change to [əi] are underlined twice (r).

- The burglar and his helper were caught because they stirred up such a clamor.
- There is an air of excitement in the room.
- The red rose rested in the earth for a year.

Now practice all three Yiddish Rs in the following sentences which aren't recorded on the tape.

- \* The runner staggered over the ridge and recovered his reward.
- \* The girl put the worm on the hook and caught a perfect flounder.
- \* 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.
- \* Mr. Adams experiences the fear of flying year after year.

## 2. THE "TH SOUNDS" as in <sup>+</sup>THROW <sup>d</sup>THIS

The voiceless [θ] and voiced [ð] TH sounds become [d] and [t] respectively.

thank, think, theologian, thorax

- The thistle stuck into Throckmorton's thick thumb.
- this, there, thus, therefore
- They played around with this and that and the other thing.

When the TH sounds come at the ends of words, a bit more of the original fricative sound is retained, as in:

wrath, soothe

Now here are some additional sentence drills for the TH sounds which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* Thin people think dieting is thoroughly unnecessary.
- \* Don't throw that thing.
- \* There's a day left before they go to the other county.
- \* I thought you were through with those.
- \* They received three thousand thank-you notes.

- \* They tried to soothe the pain in his aching tooth.

## 3. THE "W" CONSONANT as in <sup>v</sup>WESTERN <sup>v</sup>WORLD

When it is the first sound in a syllable, the [w] becomes a [v].

wish, will, want, western

- Walter waited to question Sir Waldo's will.

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

- \* It's dry way out in the western wheat fields.
- \* William waved a magic wand at the wall.
- \* I had wished I could wander over to the Wailing Wall.
- \* I wonder how the weather will be this winter.
- \* The wonderers took a working voyage to West Virginia.

## 4. THE "MEDIAL T" as in <sup>d</sup>BETTER <sup>d</sup>BUTTER

As is the case in most American dialects of English, the medial [t] sound pronounced as the voiced [d].

matter, later, hitter

- \* It's a pity that a little water is not more greatly valued.
- \* What is it about city settlers?
- \* Get out of the battle with a better position.
- \* The beautiful British writer scattered the letters.
- \* Betty Botter bought some bitter butter.

## LESSON SIX: COACHED DRILL

The passage you'll hear on the tape is printed below. It is marked with the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual. If you use the Yiddish lilt properly and go after the muscularity and resonance aggressively, the pronunciation changes should soon become second nature. At that time do a lot of improvising and cold readings in the accent to set the sounds and establish the real sense of conversational authenticity.

From Shakespeare's The Merchant of Venice

TO BAIT FISH WITHALL: IF IT WILL FEED NOTHING  
 ELSE, IT WILL FEED MY REVENGE. HE HATH DIS-  
 GRACED ME, AND HINDERED ME HALF A MILLION;  
 LAUGHED AT MY LOSSES, MOCKED AT MY GAINS,  
 SCORNE~~D~~ MY NATION, THWARTED MY BARGAINS,  
 COOLED MY FRIENDS, HEATED MINE ENEMIES; AND  
 WHAT'S HIS REASON? I AM A JEW. HATH NOT A JEW  
 EYES? HATH NOT A JEW HANDS, ORGANS, DIMENSIONS,  
 SENSES, AFFECTIONS, PASSIONS? FED WITH THE SAME  
 FOOD, HURT WITH THE SAME WEAPONS, SUBJECT TO  
 THE SAME DISEASES, HEATED BY THE SAME MEANS,  
 WARMED AND COOLED BY THE SAME WINTER AND  
 SUMMER AS A CHRISTIAN IS?

Now follow the tape and create different levels and intensities of the Yiddish dialect while reading the next part of the passage.

IF YOU PRICK US, DO WE NOT BLEED? IF YOU  
 TICKLE US, DO WE NOT LAUGH? IF YOU POISON US, DO  
 WE NOT DIE? AND IF YOU WRONG US, SHALL WE NOT  
 REVENGE? IF WE ARE LIKE YOU IN THE REST, WE WILL  
 RESEMBLE YOU IN THAT?

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR YIDDISH ACCENT!