

# **ACTING WITH AN ACCENT**

## **AMERICAN SOUTHERN**

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,  
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.

## ACTING WITH AN ACCENT AMERICAN SOUTHERN

### LESSON ONE: THE AMERICAN SOUTHERN LILT

In the Southern dialect, most vowels and diphthongs contain a characteristic jog in pitch, especially when they occur inside stressed syllables. The pitch slides up and then back down again during the stressed vowels. This lilt is particularly noticeable within particularly important words. Carefully follow the tape through the gibberish exercises for producing this Southern vowel lilt.

### LESSON TWO: VOWELS RELATED TO THE SOUTHERN LILT

#### I. LILT TRUNCATIONS

As the pitch lilt up and down, two of the diphthongs drop (or almost drop) their second stages.

#### 1. "OY" as in <sup>3</sup>JOYFUL <sup>3</sup>NOISE

IPA: [ɔi] almost becomes [ɔ]  
LESSAC: #3y almost becomes #3

- A. boy, joy, Roy, poison
- B. Did James Joyce employ metaphors in writing about the war in Troy?
- C. The farmer was annoyed when the car failed to avoid the field of soy beans.

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

- \* The boy joined in the noise.
- \* Loyal Lloyd anointed the royal head with oil.
- \* Doyle put soy sauce on the boiled oysters.
- \* He coiled around the moist cloister pillars.
- \* He toiled to hoist the soybeans from the soil.

## 2. "LONG-I" as in RIGHT TIME

IPA: [ɔi] becomes [ɑ]  
 LESSAC: #6y becomes #6

- A. light, time, finally, ride  
 B. I transcribed all five dialogues into IPA, though I couldn't think why.  
 C. Eliza was the pride of the whole science department when she won the biology prize.

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.  
 \* The sight of dry land was exciting for Ira.  
 \* A life of violent crime is a sign of the times.  
 \* Fried pike is sliced for Friday night's supper.

## II. MINOR LILT EXTENSIONS

There are a series of vowel changes I call "minor lilt extensions." Some vowels elongate slightly as they lilt up and down. Although some hear an extra "schwa vowel" [ ] at the end of the sound, it's easiest simply to perceive these vowels as stretching out or elongating slightly during the lilt.

### 1. "SHORT-I" as in BIG CITY

IPA: [ɪ] elongates as it lalts  
 LESSAC: N<sup>2</sup> elongates as it lalts

- A. suspicious, city, sister, invisible, minute  
 B. The inspector charged interest on Wilma's income tax.  
 C. The cliniician instantly investigated the speech impediment.

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

- \* Sit inside the pavilion instead of in the sun.  
 \* The chicken committed itself to the interest of dinner.  
 \* I intend to split the pit in the middle of the cherry.

\* The infant twitched and gripped the crib.

## 2. "SHORT-OO" as in COULD PUT

IPA: [U] elongates as it lalts  
 LESSAC: N<sup>1</sup> elongates as it lalts

- A. bullet, footwear, rookie, cushion, butcher  
 B. We pulled the wolf from the woods and took him to the boulevard.  
 C. The butcher's hook made pudding of the sooty bully.

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

- \* 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.  
 \* Brooks was hoodwinked from the pulpit by Mr. Cook.

## 3. "SHORT-O" (and RELATED "A") as in QUALITY OPTION

IPA: [ɑ] elongates as it lalts and remains unrounded  
 LESSAC: #5 elongates as it lalts and remains unrounded

NOTE: In parts of the South, when the letter "R" follows this vowel sound, the R-shading will drop (see Lesson 3).

- A. oxygen, honor, clam, scarf, quality  
 B. The frog got groggy and hopped into Prince Charming's armor.  
 C. People disembarked from the rocket parked at the cargo hatch.

NOTE: Within the "Plantation" style of Southern dialect, this vowel can sometimes round, moving closer to the [ou] sound. In regions where the dialect is extremely heavy, this sound may also take a "major lilt extension."

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

- \* He occupied the gondola of the golf cart.  
 \* The rocket shot toward the opposite air lock.

- \* The obstinate opera singer was preoccupied.
- \* Becket was positive about the honor of God.

#### 4. "SHORT-E" as in BED REST

- A. bed, deck, headache, met, western
- B. A great echo beckoned across the canyon.
- C. If you make an extra effort, you can cross the desert handily.

#### 4A. "SHORT-E" BEFORE NASALS as in TWENTY MEN

Prior to nasal consonants, and in several other isolated words, this vowel not only elongates, but actually changes in pronunciation to the "Short-I" [ɪ]. NOTE: In the sentences that follow, the vowels which change to this "Short-I" are underlined twice.

- A. twenty, Tennessee, cents, enter, get
- B. Ben was a general in the Grand Army of Tennessee.
- C. If you can't hold your temper, you can get out of the room.

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

- \* 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.
- \* He was especially edgy after the separation.
- \* I was in an exceptional mental dilemma.

### III. MAJOR LILT EXTENSIONS

Some vowels are really drawn out by Southern speakers. Often, a consonant glide is actually inserted between the original vowel and the added "schwa" [ə]. Follow the tape closely.

#### 1. "SHORT-A" as in HAM SANDWICH

IPA: [æ] becomes [æjə]  
LESSAC: #6 becomes #6 + Y-Consonant + N<sup>4</sup>

- A. bath, hand, adding, laughter, glass
- B. Ask any bashful man in Alabama and accept his answer.

- C. The huddled masses lifted their lamps and sang the National Anthem.

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.

#### 2. "BROAD-AW" as in AWFUL THOUGHTS

IPA: [ɔ] becomes [ɔwə]  
LESSAC: #3 BECOMES #3 + W-Consonant + N<sup>4</sup>

NOTE: When this vowel is followed by the letter R, the major extension occurs whether or not the R is dropped (see Lesson 3). ANOTHER NOTE: In the Plantation version of the dialect, the vowel stem itself can change all the way to [ou].

- A. war, call, short, fought
- B. Horses often cost more than four dollars.
- C. The awful sauce made Paul pause and walk to the emergency ward.

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

### IV. REVERSE LILT EXTENSIONS

There are two cases in which vowels extend into diphthongs by displaying the extra "schwa" [ə] before the vowel stem instead of after it. Listen carefully to the tape.

ə ə

## 1. "LONG-A" as in LAZY DAY

- A. wayward, maybe, face, safety, player, neighbor
- B. Statesmen hasten to awaken the nation in these chaotic days.
- C. The fateful delay in rainfall placed a great weight on Nathan's shalders.

Now here are a few additional 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.

ə ə

## 2. "LONG-E" as in MEAN STREETS

- A. beat, meat, machine, evening
- B. Green beans make a mean evening meal.

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.
- \* He twisted his knee while skiing fleetly down the peak.
- \* Steve went to pieces because he was green with envy.

### LESSON THREE:

#### ISOLATED PRONUNCIATION CHANGES

## 1. DROPPING (or not dropping) THE "R" as in THEIR BEEF

Not all Southerners drop the R-sound after vowels. Southern rural and mountain regions (as well as Texas) all keep the R-shading. General Southern and Plantation-style speakers traditionally have dropped the R. But, in general, R-dropping is occurring less and less in the South as the years go on. Follow the tape closely to practice these drills with and without the R-drops.

- A. German, earth, curse, thirsty, earnest
- B. Herman was the first to win thirty games.
- C. The search for the cursed pyramid left them powerfully thirsty.

NOTE: In "plantation" areas, the vowel stem in the above drills will often approach the [ɔi] diphthong.

- A. dodger, runner, her, player, blur
- B. The runner staggered over the hill and then became a blur.
- C. My mother thanks you; my father thanks you; my sister thanks you, and I thank you.

- A. gear, weird, steer, clear
- B. I'm sincere about wanting the deer to apear this year.
- C. Don't jeer at me; I'm not weird.

- A. hair, pear, air, fair
- B. The flu sare is really hard to bare.
- C. There is an air of excitement which is rare.

NOTE: In several regions, the above combination intensifies into the equivalent of a "major lilt extension."

- A. sure, you're, endure, allure
- B. You're sure you can endure the long tour?
- C. The poor broker tried to insure the alluring gem.

NOTE: In particularly heavy dialects, the vowel stem in the last set of drills, and the next set, migrates toward "Long-O" [ou].

- A. four, door, before, more
- B. Forty gorey creatures poured through the French doors.
- C. The spores were retrieved from the core of the ornament.

- A. star, mar, retard, harm
- B. I played cards in the cardinal's garden.
- C. The archer got out of the arbor unharmed.

NOTE: In regions with heavy dialects, the vowel stem in the above drills takes a major extension, becoming [aʷə] or [oʷə].

Now here are additional drills for the R-shaded vowel sounds.

- \* Esther was a good talker who never wrote letters.
- \* Where can I get my hair cut with great care?
- \* A keg of beer appeared near the rear window.
- \* Fourteen bored sportsmen adorned the shore.
- \* Father Charles argues about the guard's identity card.
- \* The girl caught a perfect fish with an earthworm.
- \* I'm secure that Mr. Moore can endure without the velour.

## 2. "MEDIAL T" as in BETTER BUTTER

As in most American dialects, the T is pronounced as a soft D when it falls between vowels or between a vowel and an L.

- A. British, matter, after, better
- B. The Cincinnati batter was better at the bottom of the ninth.
- C. The beautiful British writer scattered the letters.

And now a few additional drills for this medial-t sound.

- \* 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.
- \* They battled over the bottled water.

## 3. "-ING ENDINGS" as in LAUGHING and CRYING

In much of Southern speech, the [ŋ] consonant in "-ing endings" becomes the simple [n] consonant.

- A. dipping, ripping, writing, finding
- B. The stockings were being stuffed with packages with bright wrapping.
- C. Mr. Reed is writing and reporting the findings of this thing.

**NOTE:** When [ŋ] is part of a root word, as in "sing" and "thing," the vowel moves toward [eŋ] and the [ŋ] does not drop.

Now try some additional "-ing" drills, not heard on the tape.

- \* Don't be telling tales while waiting for the next sailing.
- \* He was walking around carrying the baby.
- \* I was hoping you'd be feeling better and be wanting to go walking.

- \* I'm finding myself slipping into a new way of thinking.

## 4. "Y" and "LY" ENDINGS as in VERY HAPPILY

When the [i] vowel comes at the end of a word, usually as part of a "y" or "ly" word ending, the sound tends to soften to the "Short-I" [ɪ].

- A. twenty, thirty, foggy, lovely, almighty
- B. Everybody has the ability to be mighty.
- C. Generally, Hornsby's parties are lovely.

And now a few additional drills for this sound which are not recorded on the tape.

- \* They filed by swiftly, walking easily and happily.
- \* He exaggerated very greatly about his money.
- \* The bear gently opened the jar of honey.
- \* Mary felt strangely secure about the mystery's outcome.

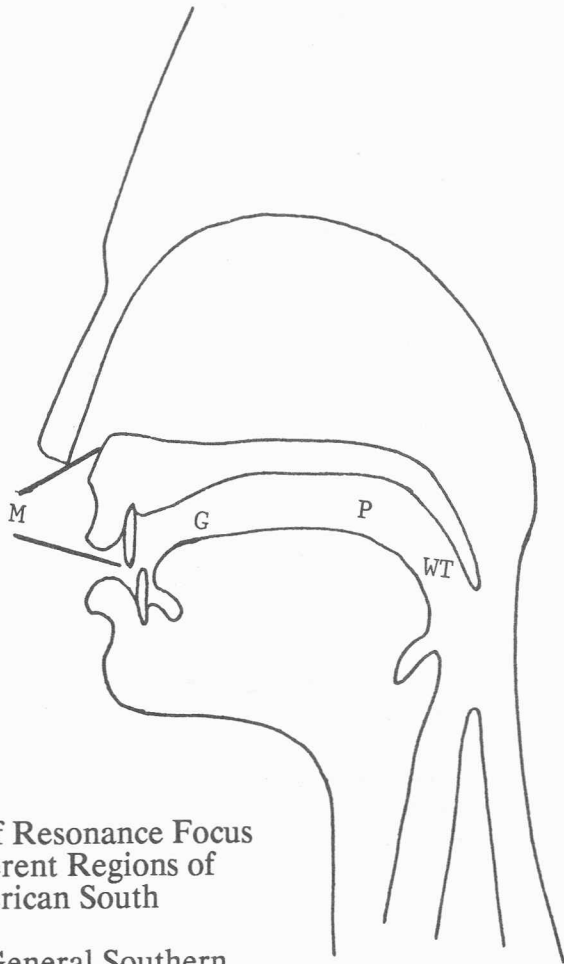
## LESSON FOUR: THE RESONANCES OF SOUTHERN REGIONS

The speech muscularity and the resulting resonance or "tone placement" varies drastically as you move from one part of the American South to another. We'll examine the muscularities of only a few of the major sub-dialects within the larger "Southern" pattern.

**GENERAL SOUTHERN:** The muscularity and "tone focus" of "General Southern" is slightly farther forward than that of non-regional American speech. Thus, there are no exercises on the tape to generate the resonance of this version of the dialect.

**PLANTATION SOUTHERN:** The Plantation dialect, spoken by so many old-time Southern politicians and lawyers, has its "tone focus" farther back in the mouth than does the General Southern or non-regional dialect and reduces the amount of articulation muscularity in the lips. As heard on the tape, this region also turns minor lilt extensions into major ones and hardens several of the vowel stems (as indicated earlier).

**TENNESSEE and MOUNTAIN SOUTHERN:** Both the Tennessee and the other Mountain dialects are more highly



Points of Resonance Focus  
for Different Regions of  
the American South

G -- General Southern

P -- Plantation Southern

M -- Mountain Southern

WT -- West Texas

nasalized (listen to instructions for nasalization on the tape). The farther you go into the mountains, the greater will be the tendency for minor lilt extensions to become major. Another Mountain characteristic is the hard R sound following vowels. **Mountain dialect is not an R-dropping form of Southern speech.**

**OTHERS:** Though there is a separate tape for "4 Texas Dialects," this "Southern" tape does give a brief example of the "throaty" tone focus of West Texas speech. Please understand that there are hundreds of other subtle regional variations as you move from place to place in the American South. Among the variables are (a) muscularity and resonance, (b) degree of vowel lilt, and (c) presence or absence of the R sound after vowels.

Listen carefully to the samples on the tape as you use the following lyric from Gilbert & Sullivan's The Mikado to produce several different varieties of Southern regionalisms.

*The sun, whose rays are all ablaze with ever-living glory,  
Does not deny his majesty--he scorns to tell a story.  
He don't exclaim, "I blush for shame, so kindly be indulgent."  
But fierce and bold, in fiery gold, he glories all effulgent.  
I mean to rule the earth as he the sky.  
We really know our worth, the sun and I!*

### LESSON FIVE: COACHED DRILL

Here are the marked transcripts of the passages you'll hear in Lesson #5 of the tape. All of the important pronunciation changes are indicated using the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual.

#### 1. "Dixie"

*I wish I was in the land of cotton,  
Old times thefe afe nòt fofgotten.  
Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land.  
In Dixie Land where I was born,  
Eafly on a frosty morn,*

Look away, look away, look away, Dixie Land.

And I wish I was in Dixie, away, away.

In Dixie Land I'll take my stand

To live and die in Dixie.

Away, away, away down south in Dixie.

## 2. From Gilbert & Sullivan's Pirates of Penzance

I am the very model of a modern major-general.

I've information vegetable, animal and mineral.

I know the kings of England, and I quote the fights  
historical,

From Marathon to Waterloo, in order categorical.

I'm very well acquainted, too, with matters  
mathematical;

I understand equations, both the simple and  
quadratical.

About binomial theorem I'm teeming with a lot o' news,

With many cheerful facts about the square of the  
hypotenuse.

I'm very good at integral and differential calculus,

I know the scientific names of beings animaculous.

In short, in matters vegetable, animal and mineral,

I am the very model of a modern major-general.

**HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR SOUTHERN DIALECT!**