

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

ITALIAN

by

DAVID ALAN STERN, Ph.D.

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P.O. Box 44
Lyndonville, VT 05851
(802) 626-3121

www.DialectAccentSpecialists.com

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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 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.

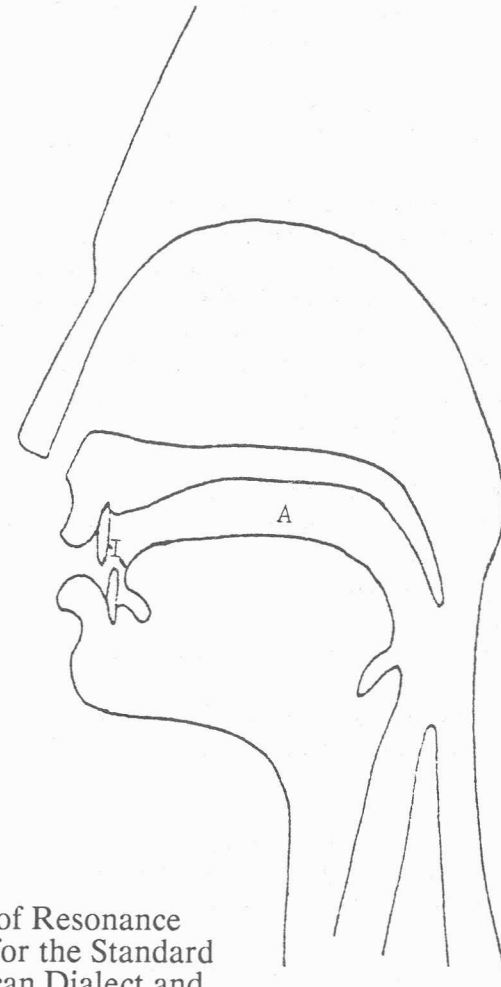
PITCH CHARACTERISTICS: "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside vowels,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

A -- Standard American

I -- Italian

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT ITALIAN

LESSON ONE:

RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE

Whereas the resonance, tone focus, or timbre of non-regional American English speech seems to concentrate somewhere around the central point of the oral cavity, the focus for the Italian language and its accent in English is considerably farther forward in the mouth. For Italian speech, the resonance focus is shared between the back of the top-front teeth and the tip of the tongue (see diagram on Page 5). Follow the tape closely through these exercises in which you will:

1. visualize and feel the new focal point.
2. lift your tongue tip and thrust it forward toward the top of the back of the top-front teeth.
3. lift your upper lip slightly, exposing the bottoms of the top-front teeth.
4. use a short, strong burst of air to accompany several target sounds.
5. follow the tape through a gibberish exercise making use of new muscularity and resonance focus.

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 Italian vowels grow naturally out of that change in speech impulse.

NOTE: In the Italian 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" & "SHORT-I" as in GREEN INSECT

IPA: [i] and [I] become [i] with the new resonance.
LESSAC: y and N² become y with Italian resonance.

equal, machine, cheat, yield
crib, grip, twitched, infant
- She had to yield to speeding vehicles on the freeway.
- The clinician instantly investigated the infant's itch.
- The inspector charged interest on Wilma's income tax.

Now here are a few additional drills for these two vowels which are not recorded on the tape.

* *Meat and cheese were served under the tree.*
* *He twisted his knee while skiing fleety down the peak.*
* *Steve went to pieces because he was green with envy.*
* *The speed demon careened off the freeway.*
* *The chicken committed itself to living in the interest of the family dinner.*
* *Winter differs incredibly in its impact on individuals.*
* *Inspector Smith hinted at mistakes in the investigation.*
* *I intend to split the pit in the middle of the cherry.*

2. "LONG-A" & "SHORT-E" as in EIGHT CENTS

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

neighbor, player, face, wayward
effect, twenty, net, men, render
- A great April shower came our way today.
- They paid the price for delaying the instant replay.
- Ben was a general in the Army of Tennessee.
- Every effort was made to help the enemy to escape.

And now here are additional drills for this pair of vowels which are not recorded on the tape.

* *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.
- * Heaven help those still awake after eleven.
- * He was especially edgy after the separation.
- * The song was rendered by two men who netted twenty-five cents for their efforts.

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

IPA: [u] and [U] become [u] with Italian resonance.
 LESSAC: #1 and N¹ become #1 with Italian resonance.

- school, food, troupe, loose, spoon
 book, could, brook, pull
- The gloomy June moon is moving foolishly.
 - At two past noon, I heard hooves on the roof.
 - We pulled the wolf from the woods and took him to the boulevard.
 - Captain Hook ate a bushel of gook instead of cookies.
 - I understood there was a good book in the neighborhood library.

And now here are additional drills for this vowel pair which are not recorded on the tape.

- * I always knew that prunes grew under the blue moon.
- * It's true that Sue proves school is gloomy.
- * Give the duke a boost with your boot.
- * The butcher's hook took out the sooty bully.
- * Woody stood up wearing cushioned footwear.
- * Pull your thumb out of the sugary pudding.
- * Dr. Goodman took the bullet out of the rookie's foot.
- * Don't put that bushel of soot into the gurgling brook.
- * The pupil was soon to shoot for the moon.

4. "LONG O" & "AW" as in SLOW SONG

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

NOTE: In many syllables, this vowel is followed by the letter "R." In such cases the vowel stem will still change to this sharper target vowel while the "R" trills slightly in the Italian style (see Lesson 4, Item #2).

- oaken, old, no, coat, notion*
caught, brought, soft, sore
- The lump of coal glowed only long enough to roast the bone.
 - The gourmand was bloated after finishing the roast with four potatoes.
 - Lost boys become flawless at reform school.
 - Don't tell morbid stories on warm nights.

And now here are additional drills for these vowel sounds which are not recorded on the tape.

- * Long ago people slept on the cold earth.
- * Slowly the ocean rolled toward the row of homes.
- * Of all the folks I know, he is the most hopeful.
- * The tall author walked often.
- * The awkward, awful, strong man walked home.
- * The awful sauce made Paul pause and walk to the emergency ward.
- * Horses often cost more than the monthly draw.
- * The quarterback stalked the ball as he vaulted for a score.

5. "SCHWA" & "SHORT-A" as in TOUGH MAN

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

bath, adding, ask, lamb, flag
lunch, couple, month, mother

- The passengers and baggage were trapped af of the alcove.
- Sam rammed the flag into the anthill.
- The bum blundered into the lumber yard where the donkey was slumbering.
- A couple of hunters had trouble munching their lunches.

And now here are additional drills for these vowel sounds which are not recorded on the tape.

- * The soprano laughed as she shattered the glass.
- * Lady Astor handed the annual to the admiral.
- * Ask any bashful man in Alabama and accept his answer.
- * The governor interrupted the huddle with a bundle of bus passes.
- * 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:

THE PITCH AND RHYTHM OF THE ITALIAN ACCENT

1. A "DRAMATIC" STRUCTURE

The Italian language and its accent have a very characteristic rhythm pattern. This pattern begins with a staccato segment (which I call "rising action"). It continues with an upward pitch glide on the stressed syllable of an important word (the dramatic "climax"). The pattern then ends as the pitch drops back down and the staccato rhythm returns to complete the phrase (the "falling action"). Practice along with the tape on the alphabet exercises and then on the following line:

In fourteen ninety-two, Columbus sailed the ocean blue.

2. THE "INTRUSIVE SCHWA" as in ^aBIG JOB

Some Americans think that all Italians add the "schwa" vowel [ə] or "UH" at the end of almost every word they speak in English. Let's clear up some misconceptions about this practice.

- a. Only those speakers from the very south of Italy or from Sicily have the tendency to add the intrusive vowel.
- b. Even those who use this sound add the vowel only when a word (or syllable) ends in a consonant and is not followed immediately by a vowel sound. In a sense, this intrusive "schwa" compensates for the lack of a vowel between the two consonants.
- c. Even when the intrusive vowel appears, often it is not fully voiced. It is more like a "follow through" of breath after the consonant sound.

Practice the correct use of the intrusive vowel on the song lyric which follows. But remember, you do not have to use the intrusive "schwa" in order to create an authentic-sounding Italian rhythm pattern.

*Way down upon the Swanee River, far, far away,
There's where my heart is yearning ever,
There's where the old folks stay.*

LESSON FOUR:

ITALIAN CONSONANT SUBSTITUTIONS

1. "SLOPPY" FINAL CONSONANTS

In very heavy versions of this accent, final consonants can often disappear. But be very careful. Doing too much consonant dropping on the stage can lead to serious trouble with audience intelligibility.

television, interesting, refrigerator, conversation

2. "R SOUNDS" as in EARTH'S RED RIVERS

Italian R-sounds are formed with a single trill or tap between the tongue tip and the gum ridge behind the upper-front teeth. This happens regardless of the position of the R in words.

restaurant, create, very, person, region, star

- *Everyone should return very often to the region of his birth.*
- *Richard Rodgers wrote the music for Carousel and several other great shows.*

Here are some additional drills for this consonant 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.*

3. "D" and "T" as in DOING TIME

Lingua-alveolar consonants, especially [d] and [t], tend to be articulated on the backs of the top-front teeth instead of on the alveolar ridge.

*time, taxes, attack, attitude
dinner, don't, desert*

- *Tall tails were told down under the dock by Tom Drake and friends.*

Here are some additional drills for these consonants which are not recorded on the tape.

- * *We had a terrible time down in Denver.*
- * *David discovered two dreadful typos.*
- * *Don walked down toward the center of town.*
- * *I didn't dial the phone; I pushed the buttons instead.*
- * *Don't deliver the bland dinner on gold dishes.*
- * *Too many tourists hit their heads on low ladders.*
- * *Last night, dozens of credit cards were distributed to executives*

4. "TH" SOUNDS as in THROW THIS

The voiceless TH [θ] and the voiced TH [ð] become [d] and [t] respectively with dental placement as explained above. In the sentences below, the voiceless version is underlined once and the voiced TH sounds are underlined twice.

*thought, thistle, theory, thorax, theology
gather, other, therefore, thus, their*

- *Thoughtful theologians thank God through prayer.*
- *Thus thou came, and thus thou goest.*
- *The snake slithered in from the other room.*
- *Thin people think dieting is thoroughly unnecessary.*

A little bit more of the original fricative sound is retained when "TH" sounds occur at the ends of words.

wrath, teeth, eighth

- *I had my eighth tooth pulled by Seth the dentist.*
- *lithe, blithe, soothe*
- *I was soothed by the blithe spirit.*

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

- * *Thank you for thinking of me.*
- * *Don't throw that thing in the booth.*
- * *I thought you were through with those.*
- * *They both received three thousand thank-you notes.*
- * *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.*

5. THE "Z-SOUND" as in ZEBRAS and EASY

The voiced sound of the letter Z is almost always pronounced as a voiceless S by Italian speakers, whether it is part of the root word or part of a tense-related ending. NOTE: There are thousands of words in which English speakers often use the [z] sound even when the letter "s" is used in spelling. Most Italian speakers will use the voiceless [s] pronunciation in these words.

tries, repose, zebra

- Max tries to revise the law that applies to blazing potatoes.
- The bulldozer made so much noise that Edward's repose ended.

And now some additional drills not recorded on the tape.

- * It was as easy as that.
- * There is a surprise for you in the rose-colored house.
- * Who caused you to transfer those musicians?
- * He often raises a toast with two glasses of champagne.
- * The games she plays raise money for several churches.
- * He tries to wake her from her repose, but fails.

LESSON FIVE: 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 Italian 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. Remember that the "intrusive schwa" is optional!

From Dante's Inferno

i 3 e a a d . a . 12
MIDWAY UPON THE JOURNEY OF OUR LIFE I FOUND
e i / . 3 u / . d . 12 e
MYSELF IN A DARK WOOD, WHERE THE RIGHT WAY
a 3 0 / . / t i / 12 / e 3
WAS LOST. AH! HOW HARD A THING IT IS TO TELL
12 d i 3 1 a 12 . a 4 1 i i 12 u 12
WHAT THIS WILD AND ROUGH AND DIFFICULT WOOD
4 5 i i 3 t 0 12 . 3 i . 0 i /
WAS, WHICH IN THOUGHT RENEWS MY FEAR! SO BIT-
i s i / d a 12 / e t i 2 i / 0 . a / i
TER IS IT THAT DEATH IS LITTLE MORE. BUT, IN

0 . / . / . i / a 3 d u 3 d a / i i i /
ORDER TO TREAT OF THE GOOD THAT I FOUND IN IT, I
i 3 / e a 3 d a d . t 3 d a / 0 d .
WILL TELL OF THE OTHER THINGS THAT I SAW THERE.

The tape will take you through the next paragraph several times, demonstrating different levels or degrees of the Italian accent. But as you play with some of these heavy accent traits, remember that such items as "intrusive schwas" and sloppy final consonants can at times both stereotype the speech pattern and make it difficult for an audience to understand. Be careful!

a 12 e . 0 . / e / . i / 0
I CANNOT WELL REPORT HOW I ENTERED IT, SO
u 3 a s a 3 a . a / d a 3 0 e / e
FULL WAS I OF SLUMBER AT THAT MOMENT WHEN I
a a / d / u e a / a / . a 3
ABANDONED THE TRUE WAY. BUT AFTER I HAD
. i / d u 12 i . 3 d a / a i
REACHED THE FOOT OF A HILL, WHERE THAT VALLEY
e / i a i . / 12 i t i .
ENDED WHICH HAD PIERCED MY HEART WITH FEAR, I
u / a . / a 3 0 i / 0 / . 5 0 d /
LOOKED UPWARD, AND SAW ITS SHOULDERS CLOTHED
0 . e / i t 3 d . e s a d a / i
ALREADY WITH THE RAYS OF THE PLANET WHICH
i s a . / 0 e a t
LEADS MAN ARIGHT ALONG EVERY PATH.

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR ITALIAN ACCENT!