

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

UPPER CLASS MASSACHUSETTS or
"KENNEDY-ESQUE"

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 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.

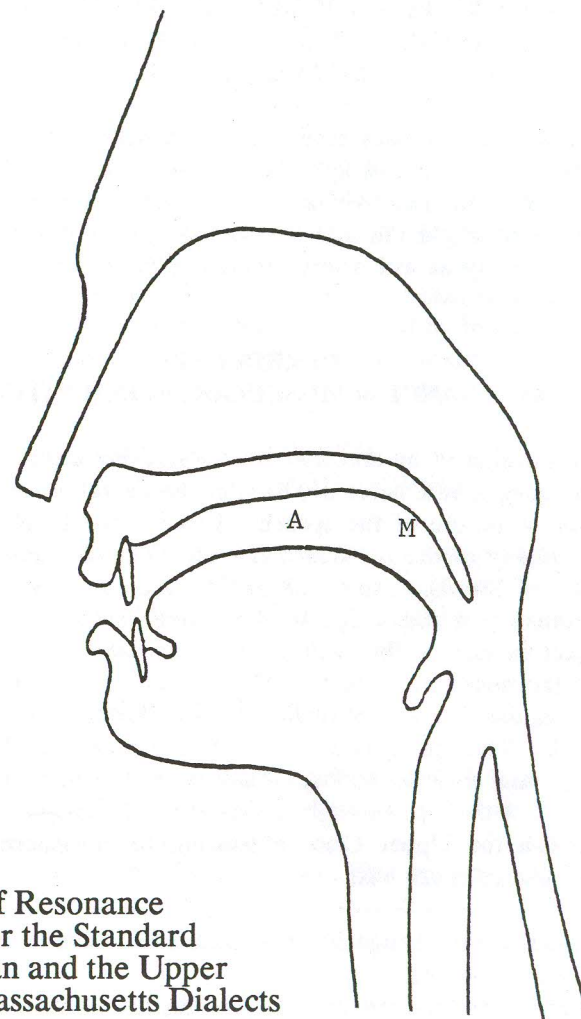
PITCH CHARACTERISTICS: "Pitch" can refer to any of several vocal traits--from how high or low a voice is to how much intonation or pitch variety is used. But for many of the dialects which actors must study, the most important of these traits is a unique lilt or pitch change that takes place inside vowels,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

A -- Standard American

M -- Massachusetts Upper Class

ACTING WITH AN ACCENT

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"KENNEDY-ESQUE"

This tape addresses itself to a very specialized speech pattern. Although it is most likely to be used by those preparing to play members of the Kennedy family, there are numerous other characters who might fall into the "Massachusetts Aristocracy" and who would speak with a very similar dialect.

LESSON ONE:

RESONANCE or MUSCULAR SPEECH IMPULSE

As explained on the tape, before studying actual pronunciation changes, it is necessary to alter the overall resonance, tone focus, or timbre of the speech. This is done by changing the muscularity of the resonance cavities. The characteristic resonance of Standard American Dialect focuses its vibrations approximately at the midpoint of the oral cavity. Massachusetts dialect focuses on the back of the soft palate, near the opening into the nose (see Page 5). The resonance is not really nasal. That is, the air does not really come out through the nose on the vowels. The sound, however, is often perceived by listeners as being nasal because the focus is so close to the nasal opening.

Follow the tape through several exercises designed for you to establish the Upper Class Massachusetts resonance. Within these exercises you will:

1. imagine the change in tone focus and feel a change in the tissue vibration.
2. create and then reduce actual nasality to identify focal point.
3. lift the rear of your tongue.
4. increase lip and tongue-tip movement.

LESSON TWO:

PITCH AND STRESS CHARACTERISTICS

Although the general Bostonian dialect tends to be relatively monotone, the special variation we are dealing with here contains a pitch or lilt characteristic which I call the "drop lilt." (1) You

drop down in pitch at the ends of phrases and on words which are to be given particular stress. (2) You also diminish the loudness or intensity as the pitch is dropping. Drop lilt will often occur at the very ends of phrases, or, to give special emphasis to words in other positions.

Follow the tape through the exercises that teach you how to use this drop lilt. This downward lilt characteristic can be overdone very easily. Not every word or even every phrase absolutely has to contain a drop lilt.

NOTE: In the next lesson, we will note that certain vowels have two possible pronunciations--one occurring in the presence of a drop lilt and the other occurring without the drop lilt.

LESSON THREE:

PRONUNCIATION OF VOWELS

Try not to think of these pronunciations as isolated vowel changes. Study them as natural extensions of the muscularity you learned in the first lesson. Follow the tape closely for spoken examples of the changes.

1. The "SHORT O" as in NOT COMMON

IPA: "Short O" remains unrounded [ɑ].

LESSAC: "Short O" is the unrounded #5 vowel.

Unlike most Bostonian and Down East patterns, the "upper class" dialect maintains unrounded pronunciation of "Short O," similar to that in the Mid-Atlantic region.

- odd, not, knock, golf, obligate, fox
- He occupied the golf cart.
- The ocket shot toward the opposite airlock.
- The obstinate opera singer was preoccupied.
- Move the o from the ocks to the og.
- The frog got groogy and hopped away.

Now here are some words in which the letter "A" falls into this same "Short O" pronunciation category.

what, watch, wash, want

- What do you want to watch?

And here are some additional "Short O" drills which are not recorded on the training tape.

- * Becket was positive about the honor of God.
- * The frog got groggy and hopped away.
- * Oxygen is commonly found in air pockets.
- * Father wanted to wash dishes in the spa.

2. The "BROAD AW" as in AWFUL SONGS

Unlike most New England patterns, the "upper class" dialect maintains a rounded pronunciation of the "Broad AW," similar to that in the Mid-Atlantic region. Because of the frequent regional differences in the pronunciation of this vowel, be aware that this sound can appear in words with any of the following spellings: "au" "al" "aw" "ou" "of" "ong" "oth" and "os."

IPA: [ɔ] remains rounded.
LESSAC: #3 remains rounded.

- applaud, laundry, sought, naught, draw, taught
 - The tall author walked often.
 - Lost boys often become flawless at reform school.
 - The dog fought the moth which he'd brought home.
 - The cat crawled across the lawn with its hurt paw.

Now here are some additional drills for the "Broad AW" which are not recorded on the tape.

- * 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.

3. The "SHORT A" as in SAM'S LAST HAT

In this specialized form of New England dialect, "Short A" does not change to "AH" in most situations, except in certain isolated words. However, the sound often does migrate toward a nasalized diphthong, especially before "M" and "N."

IPA: [æ] occasionally becomes [ɑ].
It becomes [ɛ̃ə] before [m] and [n].
LESSAC: #6 occasionally becomes #5.
It becomes N³+N⁴ before M and N.

- basket, trap, accept, master, as, ask
can't, laugh, last, half, answer, chance
man, handed, annual
 - Sam rammed the flag into the anthill
 - The staff had a rash of bad habits.

Now here are some additional drills for the "Short A" 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.

4. The "AH-OO" DIPHTHONG as in AROUND THE TOWN

In this version of Massachusetts dialect, this sound does not change to the rounded, Irish-style vowel, in spite of the fact that the most famous speakers of the pattern are of Irish background.

IPA: [ɑu] does not round.
LESSAC: #51 does not round.

- coward, powder, crown, how, about, now
 - The loudest hound in town bow-wowed at the mouse.

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

- * I found that I had gained about a pound.
- * He counted the hours and vowed to get out of the house.
- * Even the proud bow down around the count.
- * The sow, the mouse, and the cow sounded a rousing song.

5. The "AR" COMBINATION as in ^{ɜ̃}PARK ^{ɜ̃}THE CAR

As in most New England speech, the "AR" drops the R-shading and fronts the resonance of the vowel stem. However, the resulting vowel is not quite as intensely frontal as the [a] of the general Boston dialect.

NOTE: The first vowel in "father" takes this pronunciation.

IPA: [ɑr] becomes [ɑ].
LESSAC: #5+R drops the R.

marshal, heart, scarf, charge, ark, barn
- He disembarked from the sparkling new car.
- Father Charles argues about the guard's identity card.

NOTE: As with all other Vowel+R combinations in this dialect, the usually-dropped R will remain and glide over to the beginning of the next word if that next word begins with a vowel.

- Park the car in Harvard Yard.
- Are they there? Are all of them there?

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

* Carl and Marni formed an artful partnership.
* The sergeants are college archery partners.
* Father Charles argues about the guard's identity card.
* Arthur charged out of the arbor unharmed.

6. The "AWR" COMBINATION as in ^{ɔ̃}FOUR ^{owə̃}SCORE

This combination also drops the R-shading unless followed by a word beginning with a vowel. However, the remaining vowel does not become the unrounded [a] of most Boston dialects.

NOTE: If this combination appears in the final syllable and is stressed with a drop lilt, the stem will become "Long O."

IPA: [ɔ̃r] becomes [ɔ̃] or [owə̃] when stressed with a drop lilt.
LESSAC: #3+R becomes #3 or #2+W+N⁴ when stressed with a drop lilt.

- four, door, more, pour
- Fourteen bored sportsmen adorned the shore.
- Forty gory creatures poured through the French doors.
- The spores were found in the core of the ornament.
- The Concord poured forth exhaust.

And here are a few additional drills not found on the tape for practicing this combination with a drop lilt.

* I didn't say "three"; I needed four.
* This country is about to go to war.
* You can't leave until you've finished your chores.
* We cheered when she won the award.

7. The "OOR" COMBINATION as in ^{uə̃}ENDURE ^{uə̃}THE TOUR

IPA: [ur] becomes [uə̃].
LESSAC: #1+R drops the R.

poor, tour, cure, allure
- You're sure you can endure the long tour.
- It's secure.
- We found a cure.
- Poor hunters offer no allure to newer sure-shots.
- The cure for polio makes Salk's name endure.

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

* Insurance is a poor risk on guided tours.
* I'm secure that Mr. Moore can endure without the velour.
* They tried to lure the poor back into secure employment.
* The demure heroine was cured before going on tour.

8. The "AIR" COMBINATION as in ^{eɪə̃}A FAIR ^{ə̃}DAKE

This combination also drops the R-shading unless followed by a word beginning with a vowel.

NOTE: If this combination appears in a final syllable and is stressed with a drop lilt, the stem will change to the "Long A."

- IPA: [ɛr] becomes [eə] or [ejə] when stressed with a drop lilt.
 LESSAC: N³n + R becomes #N³n or a hard N³ + Y + N⁴ when stressed with a drop lilt.

air, rare, air is rare

- An air of excitement rarely blares down the stairs.
- The flu scare was really hard to bear.
- Grin and bear it.

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

- * Where can we find the polar bear?
- * Tell the driver where to go, then pay your fare.
- * Where can I get my hair cut with great care?
- * Oh, I've been traveling here and there.

9. The "EER" COMBINATION as in NEAR THE DEER

- IPA: [ir] becomes [iə].
 LESSAC: N²n + R drops the R.

jeer, clear, appear

- Never feared, the wheel to steer is near the gear shift.
- Be sincere, my dear; it's a queer world.
- A keg of beer appeared near the rear window.

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

- * The earring fell clear of the nearby pool.
- * I'm sincere about wanting the deer to appear this year.
- * The water appeared to be clear near the boathouse.
- * My career changed gears as graduation neared.

10. The FINAL "ER" SOUND as in MOTHER'S HELPER

- IPA: [ə] becomes [ə].
 LESSAC: R-Deriv. + R drops the R.

runner, brother, worker

- The burglar and his helper made a clamor.
- My mother, my sister, and my brother went away.
- The runner staggered over the hill.

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

- * Esther was a good talker who never wrote letters.
- * This summer was longer and hotter than last.
- * Remember the answer for another questioner.
- * I never had to capture animals for the trappers.

11. The NON-FINAL "ER" as in EARLY BIRD

- IPA: [ɜ] reduces its R-Shading.
 LESSAC: Non-Final R-Deriv. reduces its R-shading.

earth, earnest, first, search

- Herman was the first to win thirty games.
- He searched the whole world for a perfect curve.
- The girl caught a perfect fish with an earthworm.

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

- * The German hurdler was the scourge of the early events.
- * Herb first learned the names of thirty worms.
- * The early bird catches the worm.
- * The nervous person was determined to make mirth.

NOTE: Occasionally an R-sound will be added between a word ending in a vowel and another beginning with a vowel.

Cuba is, I saw it.

iə↓

12. "SHORT I" as in SIT STILL

This extension of the "Short I" vowel happens only if the word is being stressed with a drop lilt. This change is most likely to happen at the very end of a sentence or phrase.

IPA: [I] becomes [ijə] only with a drop lilt.
 LESSAC: N² becomes y + Y + N⁴ only with a drop lilt.

- mill, still, flip, lift, hint
 - And we do it today, still.
 - We're going to do a flip.
 - Pick up that weight and lift.
 - I intend to split the pit.

Now here are some additional drills not recorded on the tape for practicing this drop lilt on the final syllables of sentences.

- * We always play to win.
 * I wanted to scratch that itch.
 * Please come in.
 * I'll help you bake the cake if you insist.

13. "SHORT E" as in BEST BET

This extension of the "Short E" vowel happens only if the word is being stressed with the New England drop lilt. Once again, this change with lilt is much more likely to happen if the stress is in the final syllable of a sentence or phrase.

IPA: [ɛ] becomes [ejə] only with a drop lilt.
 LESSAC: N³ becomes N³ + Y + N⁴ only with a drop lilt.

- Ed rented the penthouse.
 - Ten and ten eventually get you twenty.
 - Ben was a general from Tennessee.
 - September seventh was a red letter day.
 - September seventh was very red.

Now here are some additional drills not recorded on the tape for practicing this drop lilt on the final syllables of sentences.

- * Pay the rent.
 * I heard what he said.
 * It costs only twenty-five cents.
 * We separated the boys from the men.

14. DIPHTHONGS as in SAIL HOME RIGHT NOW

All diphthongs, [ei] [ou] [ɔi] [aʊ] and [ɔi], can be given additional stress with a drop lilt in a single-syllable word or in the final syllable of a phrase or sentence.

- It's a great day.
 - I'd like you all to go home.
 - We're going round and round the town.

Now here are some additional sentence drills for drop lilt on diphthongs which are not recorded on the tape.

- * A great April shower came our way today.
 * We didn't hear a sound.
 * We have a girl and a boy.
 * Instead of walking, I thought we might drive.

LESSON FOUR: IDIOSYNCRASIES OF KENNEDY FAMILY SPEECH

The tape illustrates two speech characteristics which are idiosyncratic to members of the Kennedy family and not frequently heard from other speakers of this Upper Class dialect. The first trait is a rhythm feature which I call the "Kennedy Stagger-Step." The second issue differentiates between JFK's voice quality and RFK's higher pitch and more frontal resonance.

LESSON FIVE: COACHED DRILL

Here are the marked transcripts of the passages you'll hear on the tape. Important pronunciation changes are marked using the same shorthand symbols I demonstrated earlier in the manual.

From a 1960 JFK Campaign Address

Abraham Lincoln said in the election of eighteen-sixty, that this nation cannot exist half slave and half free. I don't think, in the

long run, the world can exist half slave and half free. And whether it moves in the direction of slavery--whether it moves in the direction of the communists, or whether it moves in the direction of freedom, will depend, in the final analysis, upon us--upon our vigor, upon our energy, upon our determination. And on that basis--on our commitment to build a strong country in a free world--I come to New York City on the steps of this old City Hall, and ask your support.

From Lincoln's Address at Gettysburg

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. We are met on a great battlefield of that war. We have come to dedicate a portion of that field as a final resting place for those who here gave their lives that that nation might live. It is altogether fitting and proper that we should do this. But in a larger sense, we cannot dedicate; we cannot consecrate; we cannot hallow this ground. The brave men, living and dead, who struggled here have consecrated it far above our poor power to add or detract. The world will little note nor long remember what we say here, but it can never forget what they did here.

HAVE AT IT WITH YOUR "KENNEDY-ESQUE" DIALECT!