

DIALECTS: A STUDY OF DIALECTS AROUND THE  
WORLD AND HOW TO LEARN THEM

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Dialects: A Study of Dialects Around the World  
and How to Learn them

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### **Dialects**

Every person in the world has his or her own unique way of speaking. Patterns, however, can be found within the same language of a country, culture, state, city, or even a neighborhood. These vocal patterns can be noted as a person's accent. An accent along with the slang and unique vernacular of a region creates a dialect.

Dialects are best explored with four different categories: rhythm & melody, sound changes, resonance point and oral posture. Rhythm is the tempo of the speech, and the melody is the pitch. Some languages are more musical than others, depending on the

rhythm and melody of the speech. Sound changes are the specific phonetic changes that vary within one's language. In my experience, these are usually the first thing one notices when conversing with a person from a different dialect. A sound change may make a word sound like a completely different word from another dialect. Resonance point is the "imaginary point of focus or point of maximum resonance" within the articulators when one speaks (Stern 9). Some people hold their resonance point very high in the center of the mouth, and others low in the back by the root of the tongue. And finally, oral posture is the way one holds his or her articulators. Articulators are the parts of the vocal tract that can move to vary the sound including the lips, cheeks, jaw, tongue, velum, epiglottis and vocal folds (Knight 1).

This paper will include a reference to the Neutral American dialect several times throughout. Neutral American is the ideal educated dialect in the United States. For reference, many newscasters like Katie Couric and Tom Brokaw use this dialect while presenting the news. Dialects possess a vast number of variations, and understanding them can better help a person understand not only what someone with a strong dialect is saying, but also another's aspirations, education, culture and background as well.

Supplementing the paper, I have included photos and a video of myself performing the dialect. Because a dialect not only encompasses one's speech, but culture as well, someone observing the media section of my thesis may also notice character choices such as posture, clothing and attitudes that complement the dialects.



## **Part I: Research Methods**

### **Learning IPA**

In my research, I have studied and become very familiar with the International Phonetic Alphabet (IPA). This is a code of symbols created by the International Phonetic Association which includes every sound of every language known throughout the world. The IPA is organized in a chart from left to right with the location of where the action of a sound happens within the vocal tract, and the vertical column denotes the type of action required to make that particular sound. Once I was able to read and write each unique sound, the specific sounds of a dialect became immensely easier to distinguish and perform. Just like learning a foreign language, reading and writing enhance the understanding and quicken the mastery of the skill.

My studies include observing people from as many walks of life, and as many places as I could find. I have interviewed people from West Texas, Central Texas, Long Island, Boston, Oklahoma, New Jersey, Los Angeles, Chicago, Tonga, Brittan, Ireland, Mexico, Nicaragua, Vancouver, Ghana and others. Some interviews were conducted on trains, in airplanes, bars, at my school and even in my home. I have studied films and interviews of people from Australia, Scotland, East Palo Alto, Minnesota, South Dakota, Georgia, and the various burrows of New York; all from various time periods and sub-cultures of these regions. A few of my dialects have research based on a single person from a region. This allows the researcher to emulate a person, not necessarily an entire region, but the research is still representative of the region because it is in fact, based on a native speaker.

#### Variation Research

A dialect is a naturally changing and constantly growing thing. Just as the slang of a language changes from year to year, a dialect often goes through a similar evolution. For example, a central California dialect from the 1880's; we may hypothesize that they had at least some of the same patterns the people did from where they had immigrated. The land was still considered new, and immigration records show people traveling from all over the world after the 1849 gold rush (Kidport). Among the first few waves of immigration to California include people from the east coast of United States, South America, many Chinese, and most frequently in present times, Mexico (Center for Immigration Studies; Magagnini). So a dialect is not only affected by time, but also the blending of cultures over time, socio-economic status, culture and education.



## Part II: The Four Factors



### Rhythm and Melody-Scottish

In my research, I have found that one of the most musical dialects in the world comes from a little place in the northern United Kingdom: Scotland. Picture a little Scottish lassie, skipping home from school, knowing there is to be a market fair that weekend and you will be very close to the rhythm of the dialect. The rhythmic rise and fall of pitch is reminiscent of skipping. The melody also adds great musicality to this sound, and is totally unique. While studying an interview with actor Billy Boyd I noticed

a general mid-range pitch, gradually raising throughout each sentence, almost as if each sentence were a question. Within each sentence, certain operatives were emphasized by raising the pitch tremendously only on the vowel. Operatives are what a speaker chooses to be the most important parts of what he or she is trying to communicate. For example, if capitalized letters are large pitch jumps, he would say, "...And It was my BIRTHDAY, and as we were FLYING, we passed the TIME zone, so we DRANK champAGNE aGAIN!". A Scot will emphasize the most important words with a strong pitch shift, as to communicate the main points of each idea. Even if one only heard those words, "Birthday", "Flying", "Time zone", "Drank" "Champagne" and "Again", one understands, that the actor was able to celebrate his birthday twice (Lord of the Rings: The Two Towers- Special Features). The range in pitch is much greater than that of any dialect we hear in the States.

#### Sound Changes- Cockney

A person from London belonging to the lower class will sound very different from the Queen of England. This is an example of a dialect distinction of class. The poorer person speaks with a dialect called Cockney. One of the most distinct aspects of this dialect is the sound changes. A few examples include dropping the sound "H" from the beginning of a word, changing "ing" at the end of a word to an "n" sound, and replacing medial "T" sounds with a glottal stop (similar to a swallowing sound). Cockney speakers also tend to create contractions with words that are not in Neutral American, and delete several sounds. For example: someone speaking with an Estuary dialect (from the same city, but of a higher class) would say, (phonetically spelled) "Harry iz opening a bottle"; someone with a cockney dialect would sound more like "Arry'z op'nin a



bah'uhl". Proof that proximity is not the only factor involved in the development of a dialect (Altendorf 1).

#### Resonance Point- Received Pronunciation/Estuary

In his book Acting With an Accent by David Alan Stern he states that by directing one's resonance to the space between the top lip and top teeth, one will acquire the correct placing for what is called a Received Pronunciation dialect (Grogan, "Resonance Point"), most commonly associated with a character from a Noel Coward play. Someone from the English upper class or with a high education (or aspiring to emulate one) in England would typically sound like this. Moving the resonance point back closer to the middle of the mouth would help in the creating what is called an Estuary dialect. This is the more "middle class" sound of the region. And even further back would transform a dialect into cockney. The resonance point changes the quality of a sound, and the resultant sound affects how it is perceived socially in Europe. The best example I have found is from the Warner Brothers' Harry Potter films. The Hermione character uses a forward resonance point to illustrate her intelligence. The character of Harry is of middle class, so he has more of an Estuary sound. And Ron, a character from a very poor family, uses a cockney accent to illustrate his class and intelligence level. These vast sound changes illustrate how much can be read from something as simple as where one's focus lies within the articulators.



### Oral Posture- New York

When traveling to the northern United States from Texas, one cannot help but notice what is called a “northern shift”. While New York itself has a vast amount of cultures and languages that are spoken in each borough, the oral posture helps one understand the general places that the articulators of Native New Yorkers are at a comfortable rest. First of all, the jaw allows for more flexibility than the Neutral

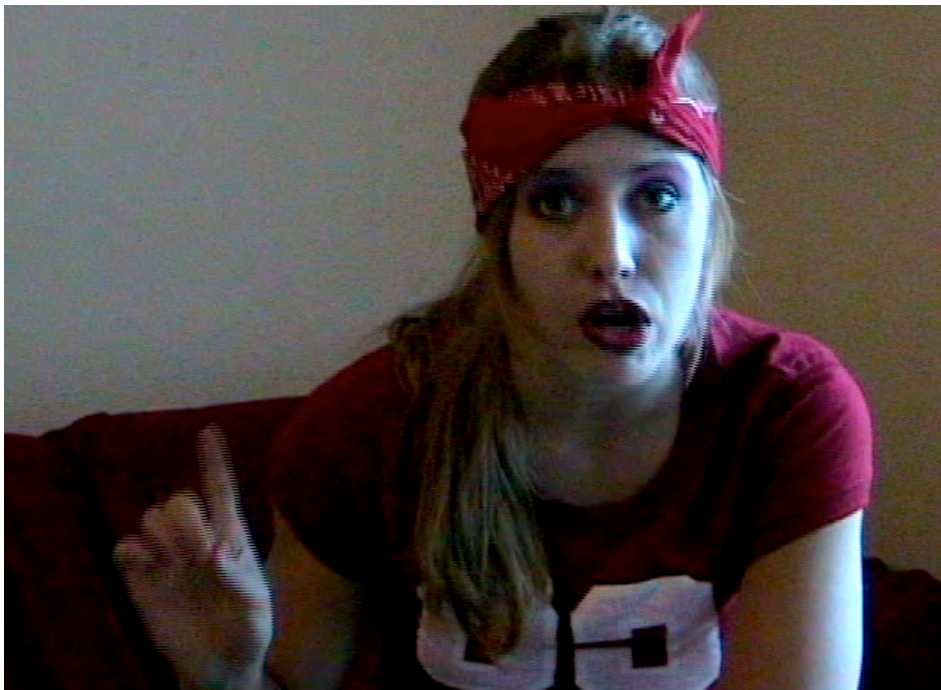
American dialect. It is free to move forward and side to side. When speaking, it may help to think of the sensation of chewing a piece of gum (Grogan, General New York City Dialect). Also, the tongue is comparatively flat during phonation. Lips are relaxed and slightly pursed forward.



### Part III: The Media

Choosing to do a thesis on dialects leaves a great challenge in written presentation due to its auditory nature. To supplement my paper, I wrote, taped, and performed in a video to illustrate the various dialects. I chose the topic of the current economic recession to tie all of the characters together. This is a global issue that has affected everyone who speaks with the dialects I have been studying. Everyone has an opinion, some louder than others, and my goals were to capture these emotions, cultures, and dialects in video form.

Most of the video I did completely on my own. After setting up the shots, lighting, costuming, and all of the script, I finally decided I needed assistance (mainly because I felt a little silly in public places talking to a camera with no one behind it). So I recruited a friend for moral support and he asked me relevant questions from behind the camera to stimulate conversation.





### Characters in the video

A few of the characters in my video were easier to perform than others. Some dialects I find it best to concentrate on oral posture, while others I find it easier to focus on sound changes. Here are a few examples of my characters.

#### Lilly from London



While the London dialect has several variations, I chose an educated estuary sound because I wrote her to talk about the economy as someone who was losing money she had planned on using for higher education and as I wrote earlier, this dialect is usually represented in individuals who are, or who want to sound like they are educated. What I focused on most in this dialect is the forward resonance point and memory/sensory recall of what the dialect feels like. I concentrated on what it feels like

to say certain phrases that I learned from the first time I studied it in dialects class, which makes the dialect very simple for me to perform.

#### Madeline from Scotland



My studies of the Scottish dialect were not first hand experience, but interviews. Though, my video was an interview-style documentary, so it worked out perfectly for my research. For me, the Scottish dialect captures one of the most instantly recognizable melodies of any dialect. I made sure I was harnessing the sing-song “skipping” sound, kept my resonance high in the back of my mouth by the soft palate, and used the blade of my tongue for most of the articulation work.

## Mrs. Bloom from New York City (Upper East Side)



Upper East Side New York, or “The classic old Jewish lady” as I lovingly refer to it, is such a rich dialect it has been used countless times in comedy films, TV shows, plays and musicals. I believe it is used more in comedies than in dramas because it is so big, and requires so much life from the performer who possesses it. While performing this dialect, what I try to focus on the most is the sound change from “ah” as in “coffee” to the diphthong “w-ah” as in “cwawffee”. Before performing, I try to remember some of my favorite lines from interviews or performances I have seen before, repeat them exactly how I remember them and I find the correct oral posture, which makes it much easier to settle into the dialect.



I did similar research for several different characters, which provided great room for several memorization and mastering techniques. I have found the most difficult part about changing dialects is not confusing them with each other and slipping into another dialect unintentionally. When the camera was not rolling and I was between characters in the taping process, I switched to a central resonance point and stretched my articulators as a way of going back to neutral.

### **Conclusion**

In Conclusion, a dialect is a very flexible yet specific thing. It is never exactly the same within a region due to its ever-changing nature. It can, however be studied in general forms academically. Focusing on the four aspects of dialects study: rhythm and melody, sound changes, resonance point and oral posture will help one to recreate the sound within his or her own articulators. Sometimes, all someone needs is one of the four aspects to catch on, but all of them are required to perfect an authentic sound. In order to learn one correctly however, one must always continue his or her observations because a dialect is constantly changing and evolving.



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