

## **Dialect Coach Samara Bay '02 on "Th," "R," and Other Underappreciated Details in How We Speak**

### TRANSCRIPT

How do dialect coaches approach thinking about dialects? Well first of all, we think of everything in terms of vowels and consonants. So what's the difference between a vowel and a consonant? What's the actual definition? A vowel we might think, first of all, a-e-i-o-u, right, if English is our first language. But really even if we just look at "a" alone we can begin to realize that there are so many variations of even that letter. We have aah like father; we have ah like Apple; we have aw, an a-w sound like a law or always; we have a diphthong, which means two sounds smushed together, ay — we think of this is long-a sound sometimes, I hear people say that. But ay is actually a short e sound, eh, and then a short i sound, ih, smushed together — a, a, a. And then we have a different diphthong that's even harder to conceptualize, if you're not thinking about phonetics, which is the diphthong arr, that's aah as in father and then a shwa, for anyone who's ever heard of a shwa, it's a little sound of an oh that can either have some r feeling to it or not. In this case it does, r, r. So "a" alone has all these different variations. So we can't think about vowels simply in terms of these letters on a page. And spelling in fact, when we're thinking about phonetics, is pretty irrelevant especially for English.

So instead we have to think about what do all these vowels actually really have in common, and the answer is your mouth stays open, or you can think of it more technically as an uninterrupted flow of air. And that means that consonants then are the opposite: Something interrupts the flow of air. Your articulators, meaning your lips, your teeth, your tongue, do something to shape your mouth or to stop your mouth from making sound, or to close your mouth. So we have puh, or urr — all of these create a shape in the mouth or a vibration that wouldn't be there for a vowel sound, for a pure vowel sound.

So when we think about dialect, there are certain vowels and consonants that are just the most prominent for almost every dialect around the world, and it's useful to look at those first just to see OK what can I learn about this dialect, whether it's one that I know or I

don't know. Maybe it's — I'm practicing a Boston accent to teach it to a client, or maybe I've been sent an accent of somebody with an interesting hybrid accent that comes from living all over the world or from having family from elsewhere, and it's my job to sort of figure out what that accent sounds like without even knowing where that person's from. In any case, two sounds that are extremely useful, and you can listen to when you hear anybody with a foreign accent, is what are they doing with their "th," and what are they doing with their "r."

So a th, as we English speakers know, is hard for foreigners. Many languages just don't have that sound, and so we have to think well what's going on that it's so unique. You know our tongue comes out of our mouth; it creates a vibration on the using the top teeth on the bottom teeth to actually make a th or thh sound — there's two variations whether it's voiced or unvoiced, meaning it makes sound and vibrates or it doesn't. But if we have an unvoiced we have the th from think, and if it's voiced we have the th of the. In either case you can look at yourself in the mirror and see that your tongue is in fact coming outside your mouth, and you can't actually make that sound without that happening. And people try, and then you get these European and South American variations where they try to get the th but without putting their tongue outside their mouth and they get a d or a z. And this is some attempt at the th without having to, god forbid, make their tongue go outside of their mouth. And often it's my job to teach them how to get over the discomfort and realize that it's not actually about how far your tongue has to be outside of your mouth but actually how little, right, so just the teeniest tip of your tongue outside of your mouth, vibrating with your teeth, and you get that sound.

So it's really important to see, for any dialect, what's happening with those th's. And this is not just for foreigners. If you're thinking about a New York accent like a classic, I don't know, De Niro accent circa 30, 40 years ago you, will notice that th's are often substituted out for a d or t. So those becomes dose, and thousand becomes tousand. That's the th. They are even more complicated, but listen, you went to Princeton, you can handle it.

The crazy part about an r that dialect coaches and linguists and speech pathologists think about constantly, and civilians don't have to do, is that the r that happens at the beginning of a word or the beginning of a syllable that launches you in and that has a nice big vowel after maybe — “red” — is actually a different sound, or a different thing that happens in the mouth, than an r at the end of a word or a syllable that launches you out of a vowel into an r. So the word father, with that er at the end, if you try to match the r from red to the er at the end of rather you'll get a version of r in father that's too much — it's a dialect. It's maybe a deep Texas dialect, where people say they have hard r's. But in standard American you really don't need to go that far. So what does that mean? Well it means that the consonant r is the one that launches you into a vowel — the r at the beginning of a word or a syllable. It's a consonant. Everything is closing in your mouth in concert to make a nice vibration happen and you get “rough.” That's a consonant. An r that happens at the end of a syllable or a word is a vowel. Your mouth actually stays open. And this is totally obvious for British, right? If we hear the word father in British, we're going to hear father, that's an uh, like a u-h, a cup sound, father. And for American, it's less obvious but we're actually doing something on that spectrum. We're not all the way at the end of the spectrum, during a rrr-rrr, and we're not all the way at the other end of the spectrum doing a big British uh. But we're at the sweet spot in the middle. Standard American is a vowel sound with a feeling of an r in the sweet spot between that really muscular ruh at the end of father and the completely open, no-quality-of-an-r-at-all sound, uh, like father. We go father. And you can look at your mouth in a mirror and see your mouth doesn't close. And that is one of the definitions of a vowel.