
Amber: Hello! Today, we learn how to speak English like someone from Yorkshire, in the north of England, and like someone from the USA! Our teacher is Penny Dyer – she’s one of the most respected international film and theatre voice coaches. A voice coach teaches actors to speak with different accents.

An accent is a way of saying words that shows what country, region or social class someone comes from. So we talk about ‘a Yorkshire accent’ or ‘an American accent’, and you may have heard of ‘RP’ – which stands for Received Pronunciation. RP is a way of speaking British English that is considered to be the standard pronunciation in the UK. And we have the verb ‘to coach’, which means to teach someone a special skill.

Penny has worked with many famous actors such as Nicole Kidman, Cate Blanchett and Helen Mirren (whom Penny taught to act the role of the Queen!). So, time for our first lesson – how to speak English with a Yorkshire accent or ‘dialect’. Penny’s advice to actors is to ‘use your imagination’ – in other words, try to see the place, or ‘the landscape’ in your mind, and try to feel the weather! As you listen to Penny, try to catch what the weather is like in Yorkshire.

Penny Dyer

Getting in through the actor’s imagination is always the way forward with dialect. So I suppose, when you listen to someone like Kelly from Doncaster, what she’s doing is talking about how lovely it is to get all snuggle-ly and wrapped up against the biting cold, wet Yorkshire weather, and there’s something about *that* that you need to battle against when you do a Yorkshire accent. So actually talking about the landscape, the topography, the history - that sort of gets you into other areas and that opens up the imagination really for the actors.

Amber: So Penny says to speak with a Yorkshire accent, you need to imagine you are trying to keep warm in the face of ‘the biting cold, wet Yorkshire weather’! That’s a strong description - isn’t it? - ‘the biting cold’. Penny says you need to think about ‘the topography’ of Yorkshire – the features of the Yorkshire landscape – for example, the open countryside, the hills, the winding roads. Listen again and try to hear the sound of the rolling Yorkshire countryside in Penny’s Yorkshire accent!

Penny Dyer

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Amber: Next, we learn how to speak like a native American! As you’ll hear, the trick is the same as before. We have to imagine the place, and in the case of the USA, the huge place! So we need to think of putting some ‘space’ into how our English sounds!

Notice Penny also talks about emphasising ‘the vowel sounds’ – vowel sounds are the sounds you make without closing your mouth or throat. Penny says Americans put a lot of ‘the emotional meaning’ into their vowel sounds. That’s interesting, isn’t it? See if you can hear that the next time you hear an American accent, in a film, for example. Here’s Penny again. As you listen, try to move your face and mouth in the relaxed way she suggests!

Penny Dyer

You need to think about the air under the armpits and the space between the knees when you're doing an American accent – you sort of have to take your space and you sort of *hear* that, because they put a lot of what they do into the vowel sounds. You know, that's how you get the energy, and the length, and the meaning. The emotional meaning goes straight into the vowel, and you let the tongue really start to relax a little bit more in the back of your mouth and that makes you realise that the resonant space is further back. Everything is a little bit more relaxed in the front of the face, and you're working a little bit off your lip corners, here, because that'll help you to get into the 'r' – because as we know, with most of the American accents, we have to use something that we don't use, for instance, with southern English, which is this all-American 'r'.

Amber: How did you do?! The important thing seems to be to make a bigger space inside your mouth – a 'resonant space'. Have fun practising!