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Vocal traditions: Knight-Thompson Speechwork

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ABSTRACT

Vocal Traditions is a series in the *Voice and Speech Review* that highlights historically important voice teachers and schools of thought in the world of vocal pedagogy. In this essay, Knight-Thompson Speechwork offers its overview, history, principles, and certification process.

KEYWORDS

Voice; speech; pedagogy;
accent; dialect

Overview

Knight-Thompson Speechwork (KTS) is a skills-based approach to speech and accent training for actors that places emphasis on developing the speaker's detailed awareness of—and deep engagement with—the precise physical actions which make up speech. By combining a rigorous investigation of those actions with playful, experiential exercises, this work moves efficiently past the usual interference that can make speech training difficult for many students (Thompson 2007).

History

Dudley Knight moved at the age of six from New Orleans, Louisiana, to Middletown, Connecticut, and this might be considered the inciting incident of his lifelong fascination with speech and accents, and in particular, his awareness of the stigma attached to non-standard forms of speech. He trained as an actor at Yale Drama in the early 1960s, and during that training, he encountered very little organized instruction in speech designed for actors. It was only later, when he began teaching speech himself, that he became familiar with the prevailing approaches used in American acting schools. In the 1980s and 1990s, while teaching speech and voice at the University of California, Irvine (UCI), Dudley began to ask some fundamental questions about the dominant system of speech pedagogy. Where had it come from in the first place? Why was it such an entrenched, universal feature of American actor-training programs? What did its claims to clarity, correctness, superiority, and euphony rest on? And perhaps most importantly, was it effective?

In answering this last question, Dudley found it necessary to make some assertions about what the goals of speech training for actors *should* be. He was certainly well-prepared to

investigate the question. He had been acting for decades in every medium—on stage, on television, in films, and on the radio. He had also been a dialect coach for many years—for longer than he had been teaching speech in an institution. Through these experiences, he was well aware of the many different demands placed on an actor's speech and embodiment of language. It was clear that some of these demands arose from the work itself, and others were imposed from outside. The principles he saw as essential to an actor's speech training could be grouped into three categories: utility, flexibility, and intelligibility. The speech skills taught to actors should have a *utility* for their artistic work. They should integrate with the rest of the actor's skills, and they should be taught in such a way as to maximize the actor's growth rather than the teacher's convenience. Actors must adapt the way they speak to the circumstances of the character, the language, and the world of the production. They must work under a wide range of acoustic conditions, and because language itself is in a constant state of flux, there is no constant form of speech that will always meet these needs. This means that training for *flexibility* in adopting appropriate physical skills and responsiveness to the needs of the moment is of far greater value than training for conformity to a fixed standard. Finally, the only goal that actors can rely on as a constant throughout their work is *intelligibility*. Whatever each role or each moment might demand, it can be taken as a given that an actor's speech must be understood by an audience.

Dudley recognized that the pursuit of intelligibility in speech training has often been invoked along with a call for correctness or beauty, so he sought to isolate intelligibility and those skills that promote it as a goal independent of other concerns. In fact, he felt if speech trainers pursued ideals of beauty and correctness as though they were the same as intelligibility, then they could seriously interfere with the utility and flexibility of actors' speech skills.

Dudley's practical experience as a teacher and a coach led him to feel that drilling a specific, rigidly prescribed speech pattern was not the way to build a useful speech pedagogy. As he experimented in his classroom with other approaches to developing the skills he saw as necessary for actors, he also read more deeply into the field of linguistics, and he found in the growing literature on phonetics, speech perception, second-language acquisition, and sociolinguistics, abundant support for his approach.

Another powerful influence on Dudley's redefinition of speech training was the work of Catherine Fitzmaurice¹. They two worked closely together in the early stages of Fitzmaurice's development of her work, and Dudley continued as a teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework throughout his career. In particular, the key Fitzmaurice concepts of destructuring and restructuring fit well with the approach that he was finding most rewarding in speech.

In the late 1980s, Philip Thompson came to UCI as an MFA acting student and entered into the study of speech in the midst of Dudley's experimentations. When he returned to UCI as a professor of voice and speech in 2001, he found that Dudley had made tremendous progress in defining this new approach. They two began working together on further developments, and starting in 2002, they began presenting workshops to introduce the approach to other speech teachers.

In 2012, they held the first KTS Teacher Certification course. In addition to offering more advanced training to teachers who wanted to make KTS the center of their approach to speech training, Knight and Thompson had a secondary goal to train teachers who could join them in the teaching of KTS workshops, thereby expanding the organization's reach.

Out of that first class, they selected two outstanding teachers, Andrea Caban and Erik Singer, planning to bring them on as assistant teachers in upcoming workshops.

With the untimely death of Dudley Knight in the summer of 2013, Caban and Singer were suddenly charged with a much more central role in the teaching, organization, and planning of KTS, and they continue as master teachers and key figures in the work.

What is Knight-Thompson Speechwork (KTS)?

KTS is Curious

The primary guiding principle is curious, attentive interrogation—interrogation of what speakers are doing physically when they speak; interrogation of what physical habits we may bring to the act of speaking that inhibit free and flexible expression; interrogation of what it is that makes speech intelligible or unintelligible; thoughtful investigation of what any text, moment, character, or medium might require from the actor in terms of skilled speech; interrogation of what, precisely, makes up what we call an “accent”; interrogation of what allows actors to most efficiently, skillfully, and accurately adopt accents, or otherwise make adjustments to their speech.

This inherent questioning aspect of the work demands of its practitioners a certain tolerance of ambiguity and a willingness to remain in a state of unknowing. We build in to our practice a consciously adopted ignorance as starting point for our investigations. This might be compared to the Zen Buddhist concept of *Shoshin* (初心) or “beginner’s mind.” At each step, exploration precedes explanation. Description precedes prescription.

KTS is Developmental

The process through which each one of us came to be skillful users of our first language was not a didactic one. For the vast majority of people, language is spoken long before it is written, and it is felt and embodied as a skill long before it is explained through grammar. When we return as adults to explore and expand this skill, it is useful to approach it in a similar way.

A Knight-Thompson Speechwork workshop or class usually begins with a study of anatomy. Through active play and close attention to specific physicality, the course of study then proceeds to delve into *descriptive* (as opposed to *prescriptive*) phonetics. Students learn all of the International Phonetic Alphabet as defined by the International Phonetic Association—all of the speech actions, all of the descriptive terminology, and finally, all of the symbols and diacritics². Students experience and learn the specific physicality of all possible speech actions before they learn the symbols; this pedagogical strategy aids in the learning of the symbols and reinforces kinesthetic awareness of speech actions. As students gain mastery of phonetics, they proceed to use the IPA to carry out narrow phonetic transcription of speech. Throughout, the rigor of our work is infused with playful and exploratory exercises to encourage students to own and integrate their new skills, as well as to continue cultivating their curiosity about their own and others’ speech.

KTS is Playful

A playful approach is certainly more appealing to students, but there is more to this aspect of the teaching than simple relief from the monotony of hard work. The unstructured and unpredictable process of engaging in play yields tremendous dividends in the speed and efficiency of learning new skills and awareness. Play is in fact the primary mode of learning and skill building for children (Ormrod 2011), and when we return to play as adults, we are able to access again that mode of learning that served us so well when we first discovered language. One key exercise in this work involves speaking a fictitious improvised language called Omnish. Students take their newly gained knowledge and skills in the broad range of physical speech actions and combine them in a fluent and fantastical exploration. Students are tasked not only with the execution of all possible actions of human speech, but also using this “language” to express their own complex and immediate thoughts. This work strengthens actors’ skills of articulation and awareness of the physical gestures of speech while simultaneously connecting this activity with their human, communicative needs. Actors are, of course, players as well, and by studying speech in an environment of fluent experimentation and play, KTS reinforces and integrates this work within the larger context of an actor’s skill.

KTS is Rigorous

The notion of learning all human speech sounds may seem daunting, even unrealistic, particularly if our view of speech training is limited to actors working in a single language or in a narrow range of possible accents. KTS sees such limitations as unhelpfully constraining to an actor, both because it leaves many possibilities of artistic speech unconsidered and because a fuller awareness of what speech can do necessarily enriches our experience and skill, even if we then choose to remain within the constraints of what we usually do.

The scope of this project then necessitates a rigorous and systematic understanding of human speech. Fortunately, our colleagues in the field of linguistics continue to work to refine our understanding of speech and the International Phonetic Alphabet as a way of communicating very precisely about the details of pronunciation. KTS embraces the rigor of that system and brings this rigor to actors in the full confidence that a rational system of thinking is not always made easier to understand through simplification. Some simplification is necessary, of course, but our goal is to find a useful balance between explanatory simplicity and a respect for complexity. This is a difficult task, but it is essential if we hope to bring our students to a richer and more skillful experience of how they speak.

KTS is Sociolinguistically Aware

Variations in language are a part of a social landscape. Our particular set of speech behaviors communicates something about our identity, history, and cultural context. This information is judged by those around us as carrying positive or negative value (Hudson 1996). The pressure of those judgements—together with our sense that our speech is representative of our identity—makes work on speech uniquely challenging. KTS acknowledges this landscape of social pressure and seeks to equip actors with tools for awareness and skills for making strong, personal, and meaningful artistic choices relating to speech and accents.

Traditional methods of speech training³ have focused on teaching actors some variety of “standard” speech.⁴ This goal has often (though not always) come together with a claim that this variety of speech is superior to—and more “correct” than—other “nonstandard” ways of speaking. Though there may be admirable rigor in the classroom practice of teachers of this work, KTS sees this traditional approach as fundamentally limiting to actors, as well as being linguistically and pedagogically unsound. By leading with prescription, the teacher will inevitably add to the perceptual confusion about speech that all students bring to the table. If, on the other hand, actors are first asked to experience their own vocal tracts in a thoughtful way and taught to be able to both feel and understand exactly what is happening in the vocal tract in order to produce the full range of speech sounds that exist in human languages, then they are vastly better equipped to do everything an actor needs to do, from connecting viscerally to language to acquiring and truthfully embodying other accents.

KTS is Skillful

An acknowledgment of the pervasiveness of bias in our judgements about speech does not prevent us from setting some positive goals and values. For us, the first goal or “standard” for an actor’s speech is intelligibility. This is not a fixed property of some idealized and prescribed accent model, but a constantly negotiated process between speaker and listener, within conditions set by the acoustics of the space and the familiarity of the audience with the language style. Students explore this negotiation without set targets of pronunciation, and from this exploration, they draw conclusions about the most effective features for increasing and decreasing intelligibility.

People make these adjustments intuitively by attending to the opposing values of fluency and detail. If actors wish to be more intelligible, our chief strategy is to increase linguistic detail, often at a cost to fluency. These are largely unconscious adjustments, but after initial exploration into making the adjustments, we can begin to focus on the specific strategies or skills we employ. These strategies can then be enumerated and studied as separable skills with a range of possible executions. With increased physical awareness and flexibility and with a solid foundation in descriptive phonetics, students are well-equipped to make subtle adjustments in their speech in accordance with the needs of the play, character, medium, and moment.

Crucially, in addition to building skills in perceiving, describing, and embodying the sounds of speech with precision, KTS work also explores the actor’s skill in balancing and transforming the complex stream of speech as a fluent totality. Students learn to make finely tuned adjustments both up and down the scale of linguistic detail, providing more or less energy in their speech actions. It is essential that actors develop a sensitivity and skill in increasing or decreasing the activity, energy, and range of motion of their speech without locking in to one particular accent or style of speech. No one speech register will suit all occasions, just as no one accent will serve all characters an actor might play.

KTS is Accents

Contained within the set of possible patterns of speech activity are the varieties of speech that we would call “accent” or “dialect.” This is, of course, an enormous part of what actors are interested in when they seek training in speech. For KTS, work on accents flows naturally

from the preceding work on awareness, articulatory skill, and confidence in fine-tuning the flow of speech. In particular, working through awareness of the physical actions of articulation and encountering all the sounds of human speech equips students to quickly perceive and reproduce the details of an unfamiliar accent.

Acting in accent is a complex task and requires a great deal of analytical and descriptive understanding, but it is also a performance task that must be embodied and integrated with the totality of an actor's performance skills and sensitivities. KTS is concerned with developing an actor's ability to perceive and analyze the component parts of an accent, while strengthening the skills that lead to fluent and authentic performance.

KTS addresses accents under four headings: *People*, *Posture*, *Prosody*, and *Pronunciation*.

People, also called cultural context, refers to an investigation of the world in which an accent is spoken, the societal, historical, and geographical context of the accent. Exploration of the cultural context provides actors with imaginative links to the character and assists actors in identifying personally with the character's circumstances and behavior. A connection with the people also prepares the actor to approach their performance with a fitting respect for the culture and humanity of the people whose identities they are representing.

Posture refers simply to the configuration of the vocal tract during speech (Knight 2012). Through the preceding work, actors develop awareness and the ability to exercise fine motor control over the speech mechanism. This is essential for an understanding of the way speech features flow from the arrangement and state of engagement of the parts of the vocal tract. Making adjustments to this configuration provides a powerful means of effecting changes in accent. This is also the aspect of accent performance that allows actors to manage and remain connected to the other skills of accent in performance. Having invested in the other features, posture is often the handle or interface with the felt experience which guides the rest.

Prosody refers to the rhythmic and melodic aspects of accent. This has long been recognized as a central identifying feature for the perception of accent, but language for the objective analysis of prosodic features remains elusive. In the KTS approach, actors build up an inventory of melodic and rhythmic behaviors for an accent and practice deploying them in the improvisational stream of free speech.

Pronunciation is the aspect of accent analysis most commonly addressed in other approaches to accent. Under this heading, it is important to distinguish clearly between the characteristic sounds of an accent (phonetics) and their distribution (phonology). Actors need to develop a physical and perceptual sense of precisely how a speech sound is rendered in an accent, but it is equally important to know under which conditions that sound is deployed.

By addressing characteristic sounds with reference to the speaker's system of sound categories, the inherent variability in the realization of these sounds, and the relation of these sounds to the speaker's vocal tract posture, actors can more confidently achieve an accent performance that authentically represents the speech of the character.

Certification Process

Dudley Knight and Philip Thompson offered their first workshop in 2002 to introduce their work to speech teachers. Over the years, the workshops—and the work itself—grew, as did the audience it was reaching. The workshops drew the interest of actors, speech language

pathologists, linguists, and dialect coaches as well as theatre voice and speech teachers. Each workshop inspired new ideas and deepened the body of work that eventually came to be called *Knight-Thompson Speechwork*. A second workshop, *Experiencing Accents*, was added in 2010. In 2012, the first Teacher Certification program took place, and KTS has gone on to expand our offerings to include a shorter, intensive workshop in phonetics and numerous workshops focused on training in specific accents.

In the summer of 2017, we completed our 4th Teacher Certification program, and we currently have 25 certified teachers. Many more have been introduced to KTS through our workshops and integrated various parts of the work into their teaching, coaching, or acting practice.

We continue to make refinements in our workshops and have plans for new workshops to add to our list of offerings, but we are guided by the desire to balance the interests of participants with a judgement on our part as to the most effective way to move through the material. Everyone interested in attending a Knight-Thompson workshop will have their own specific interests and goals, and some workshops may be more appealing than others for those reasons. Nevertheless, in order to be sure that each workshop can build on a foundation of shared ideas and skills, some workshops are prerequisites to others. The following is an overview of the regularly offered, foundational workshops.

Experiencing Speech

(No prerequisites)

Experiencing Speech is the introductory Knight-Thompson workshop and is designed for actors, voice/speech teachers, clinicians, and coaches. A six-day intensive, *Experiencing Speech* delves deeply into the work laid out in Dudley Knight's (2012) seminal text *Speaking with Skill*. The workshop is structured in two parts. The first three days focus on the physical actions that produce all the sounds of the world's languages. This first section contains no phonetic transcription, but prepares the participant through a series of *experiential* exercises for the introduction of phonetic symbols. The second three days continue the exploration into even greater specificity through the use of narrow phonetic transcription. Participants then use these skills to explore formal and informal speech actions while building skills of intelligibility. This workshop is the prerequisite for *Experiencing Accents* and the *Phonetics Intensive*. Not infrequently, we are asked if potential participants may skip *Experiencing Speech* as a requirement and go directly to other workshops. We are frustratingly firm in our reply. The essential first step of this work is experiencing. No matter what the participant's expertise or past work, we need to bring the exploration of this work back to a starting condition of self-imposed ignorance and experiential investigation.

Phonetics Intensive

(Prerequisite: *Experiencing Speech*)

This intensive three-day workshop offers focused instruction on narrow phonetic transcription, consistent with the approach laid out in the *Experiencing Speech* workshop. This intensive includes detailed instruction and practice with IPA diacritics, including those found on the "Extended" IPA chart.

Because the Knight-Thompson approach is not centered on any mission of regularizing the pronunciation of English, the work in phonetics uses the entirety of the International Phonetic Alphabet to describe a range of pronunciation possibilities, in English as well as other languages.

We continue to place a special emphasis on the physical actions that produce speech sounds, and this intensive is designed to develop participants' skills in hearing, modeling, and transcribing these sounds. This workshop is also an opportunity to resolve questions about details of phonetic transcription that participants may have from their previous phonetic training.

We strongly recommend taking a *Phonetics Intensive* before taking *Experiencing Accents*; however, this is not an absolute requirement.

All three workshops—*Experiencing Speech*, *Experiencing Accents*, and the *Phonetics Intensive*—are prerequisites for the *Teacher Certification Program*. (Prospective applicants to the *Teacher Certification Program* who feel that their skills in phonetic transcription are strong may opt to “test out” of the *Phonetics Intensive* requirement.)

Experiencing Accents

(Prerequisite: *Experiencing Speech*. *Phonetics Intensive* recommended.)

This intensive six-day workshop carries the techniques of the previous workshops into the acquisition of accents. This marks a conceptual shift of sorts, from approaching the process of increasing awareness from a *descriptive* standpoint, to looking at a specified set of accent features as a *prescriptive* target. What keeps this shift to the prescriptive from becoming limiting is our focus on skill building. Our grounding in physical experience and rigorous description of speech actions prepares us to feel, hear, analyze, and execute the features of an accent. The use of improvisation and playful exploration throughout the workshops keeps us connected to the fluent, performative skills of the actor.

Accents Intensive

(No prerequisites)

While it certainly helps to have taken the *Experiencing Speech*, *Phonetics Intensive*, and *Experiencing Accents* workshops, our goal in these short workshops is to connect with participants in the same way we would with a coaching client or a student. The information is focused and delivered for maximum impact on skill building. For someone following a path toward certification, we may advise taking one or more of these workshops if we feel that accent performance skills need improvement prior to certification.

Certification Program

(Prerequisites: *Experiencing Speech*, *Experiencing Accents*, and *Phonetics Intensive*)

While we are committed to making the path toward certification achievable, these three workshops are the absolute minimum requirements. We realize that applicants' schedules may not intersect perfectly with the KTS schedule of workshops, so the certification prerequisites may take some time in order to complete them in the required sequence.

Nevertheless, if your long-term goal is certification in Knight-Thompson Speechwork, the slow approach is the most beneficial. The workshops are dense and information-packed. It is best to take each workshop in turn, with time in between to assimilate new knowledge and skills and to practice implementing new techniques in the classroom, studio, or production.

The three-week certification course is at least, in part, a review of the extensive material covered in the prerequisite workshops, but more significantly, the course addresses the skills of teaching the material to others. Participants teach short demonstration lessons throughout the course and receive detailed feedback from the course leaders. Teaching anything as complex and sensitive as speechwork requires a dual investment in expertise and in presence. This requires mastery of the material, but it is also a very personal investment in developing one's teaching style. Our approach in the certification course is to address both essential and ongoing teaching needs.

Contact Information, Resources, and How to get Involved

Our organizational email is knightthompsonspeechwork@gmail.com. The Web site <http://ktspeechwork.com> holds extensive information about the work, including contact information and a calendar of upcoming workshops. There is also a Readings & Resources section with articles by Knight and Thompson and a growing list of interesting and informative links. The most important text for KTS is Dudley Knights' (2012) *Speaking with Skill*. In this book, Dudley takes the reader step by step through a practical and physical introduction to the work. The KTS Blog is another excellent resource for more in-depth discussions of aspects of the work. Go there to read posts and comment from members of the KTS community on topics related to the work. Another location for discussion and connection between members of the KTS community is our KT Speechwork Facebook Group.

Finally, KTS is currently offering webinars on various topics of interest to KTS teachers and students and to the KTS-curious. These are always announced on the Facebook page and through our mailing list. You can register for them on the ktspeechwork.com Web site for a small fee. This fee in 2018 is \$10.

Notes

1. For an overview of Fitzmaurice Voicework, see Watson and Nayak (2014).
2. Some systems of speech training employ a simplified form of the IPA, intended to convey only the level of detail necessary for teaching a target pronunciation. While the IPA can be effectively used in this way, it has the capacity to describe speech in a much richer way, and KTS makes use of that full range of detailed description.
3. Dudley Knight (2000a) describes in great detail the traditions that led to the dominance of one particular approach to speech training at the end of the twentieth century in his "Standard Speech: The Ongoing Debate."
4. Knight (2000b) addresses the tradition and theory behind establishing standards for English speech.

Disclosure Statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on Contributors



Philip Thompson is the co-founder of Knight-Thompson Speechwork and a voice, text, and accent coach. He has coached more than 175 professional productions and has coached at five recipients of the Regional Theatre Tony Award: South Coast Repertory (31 productions), La Jolla Playhouse, Denver Center Theatre Company, the Cincinnati Playhouse in the Park (18 productions) and the Utah Shakespeare Festival, where he is the head of voice and text and the resident coach since 1999, coaching numerous shows including 28 of Shakespeare's 37 plays. He is a professor of drama, teaching voice and speech in the MFA acting program at the University of California, Irvine. He was the president of the VASTA as well as a board member and secretary. He also served on the Board of Directors for the University/Regional Theatre Association. He is a master teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework and frequently teaches in the Fitzmaurice Certification Program.



Andrea Caban is an assistant professor and head of voice and speech in the Theatre Arts Department at CSU Long Beach. An award winning solo artist, she has performed her original works in Colombia, the UK, South Africa, Costa Rica, Spain, and across the US. She is an associate director and master teacher of Knight-Thompson Speechwork, an associate teacher of Fitzmaurice Voicework and an associate editor for the *Voice and Speech Review*. Current research: adapting actor voice and accent training for the care of people living with ALS to prolong the ability to speak without the use of assistive devices; arts-based research theatrical performance forms such as auto-ethnography, community-based theater, and investigative theater, and various projects in the medical humanities. She is the dialect expert on HowCast.com demonstrating over 35 accents, a theatrical production coach, and a speaker coach for TED talks. She received her MFA from UC Irvine.



Erik Singer is a freelance dialect coach for film and television. He is a master teacher of Knight-Thompson Speechwork and regularly teaches workshops in voice, speech, accents, phonetics, and text. He taught for a number of years in actor-training conservatory programs, including the MFA program at the Mason Gross School of the Arts at Rutgers University, and at HB Studio in New York City. His videos for wired discussing accent work in films have been viewed over nine million times and won a Webby award. He has played leading roles Off-Broadway and at major regional theaters and has voiced numerous television and radio commercials, documentaries, animated shows, and New York Times best-selling audiobooks. Erik was the associate editor for the *Voice and Speech Review*. He is a graduate of the Webber Douglas Academy of Dramatic Art in London and of Yale University.

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