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MIKE WENDLAND

Expert makes accents less pronounced

Judy Ravin has some advice for Austrian-born Arnold Schwarzenegger as he campaigns to become California's next governor.

"I'd tell him to get his top teeth off his bottom lip when speaking the letter 'W,'" says the Ann Arbor speech expert. "I'd tell him to purse his lips and open them up and practice making a soft 'wha, wha' sound, sort of blowing it out so it sounds like 'work' instead of 'vork.'"

Ravin is not a speech therapist; she is an accent reductionist. Her specialty is teaching foreign-born people to speak English with a minimal accent.

Her company, English Communications Services (www.lessaccent.com), has been helping a heap of high-tech people communicate better by pronouncing English words more understandably.

She's worked for most of the major corporations in the area — General Motors, Pfizer, Federal Mogul and Daewoo among them — as well as for a slew of new firms attracted by Ann Arbor's bustling technology and life sciences corridor.

"We're not talking about people who don't know English," explains Ravin, a former speech teacher at Eastern Michigan University. "These are usually brilliant people who are extremely fluent with the written language. But in speaking it, their native language comes forward and accents the English words in such ways as are often difficult to understand."

English is not an easy language to speak, she says. Most people think it has five basic vowel sounds: a, e, i, o, and u. But Ravin says there are really 15 distinct vowel sounds and 24 consonant sounds. That makes English a difficult language to

speak clearly because most languages don't have such variances.

Her clients have included Asians, eastern Europeans, South Americans, Israelis and Africans. They are physicists, engineers, computer programmers, scientists, researchers and business executives.

"Usually, they come to us because they have a specific task they have to do in terms of public speaking, either at a conference or a company function or presenting a paper before an academic research organization," says Ravin. "Everything is fine until there's a planning meeting, and all of a sudden, it's apparent that the star speaker is very difficult to understand and somebody in authority goes, 'Uh oh, we've got a problem.'"



Arnold Schwarzenegger's "homevork": Practice "wha" sound.

Ravin employs five accent reductionists in her 3-year-old business. She says it typically takes about 10 sessions to bring about a dramatic improvement in pronunciation. The fee for the sessions is usually around \$3,000.

"Heavy accents can really create problems," Ravin says, explaining that they interfere with team

building and frustrate customers. "And that hurts sales and profitability," she says. "As the economy has become stressed, more and more employers are realizing this is a very positive step that can have immediate payoffs."

With a new client, the initial assessment includes tape-recording the subject pronouncing problem words and sounds. At regular intervals throughout the program, new tapes are made of the person making the same sound so that progress can be monitored.

"When people pronounce a word improperly or with the emphasis in the wrong place, it detracts from their message," says Ravin.

Which takes us back to Schwarzenegger and his plan to get Californians "back to work."

"I'm surprised that he hasn't taken care of that," Ravin says. "It's easily correctable."

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