

Monday, June 30, 2008 | [Today's Toronto Star](#)[PHOTOS](#) [VIDEO](#) [COLUMNISTS](#) [BLOGS](#)**thestar.com**

the star.com

[Advanced Search](#)[HOME](#) [NEWS](#) [COMMENT](#) [BUSINESS](#) [SPORTS](#) [ENTERTAINMENT](#) [LIVING](#) [TRAVEL](#) [WHEELS](#) [HEALTH](#)[Toronto & GTA](#) | [Ontario](#) | [Canada](#) | [World](#) | [Comics](#) | [Contests](#) | [Crosswords](#) | [Horoscopes](#) | [Lotteries](#) |

Dion smoothing his faux pas English

Leader acknowledges 'distracting' style as he embarks upon his green-tax sales pitch

Jun 28, 2008 04:30 AM

SUSAN DELACOURT
OTTAWA BUREAU

OTTAWA—Liberal leader Stéphane Dion is aware that his speaking style can be "distracting."

"It's valid advice," Dion said after being urged in a recent *Toronto Star* column to get speech therapy to smooth his pronounced French accent.

Dion wouldn't be unusual seeking out such therapy to deal with his accent. It's a thriving business in multicultural Canada, where new immigrants often need help in mastering not just the words, but the sound of English as it's commonly spoken.






"I will always have an accent, but I need to improve it," Dion says, "because my aim is to be sure that when you are listening to your radio, and you're in your car, and it's very noisy around, and you have a clip of Dion, you understand what he means."

Dion is on a quest this summer to sell his controversial "green-shift" tax plan, which would see taxes go up on environmentally unfriendly carbon and down on personal and household income. It's a complicated program – as complex as a full budget, in fact – and not easy to explain in radio clips.

So above all, his summer project is a communications exercise and Dion, who can be difficult to understand in English (and sometimes in French), is going to need all the help he can get.

Bonnie Gross, a Toronto speech therapist, says she has been quietly approached in the past six months – twice, in fact – about possibly giving Dion the kind of help he needs. Gross has been told to expect a phone call, but at the moment, the Liberal leader is working with his own language instructor.

"I have a professor, a teacher, and she's insisting on the intonation a lot," Dion says. "Even though I would try to get rid of my accent, I will fail. I'm not concerned about that, just concerned that my accent will not be too heavv. to the point where it's distracting."

-  [Email story](#)
-  [Print](#)
-  [Choose text size](#)
-  [Report typo or correction](#)
-  [License this article](#)

[+ BOOKMARK](#) 

Speech therapy is not the same as language instruction. There is some overlap in the area of pronunciation, for instance, but speech therapists are more intensely focused than language teachers on how the students' words land on listeners' ears.

"It's not (teaching) English. I'm not sure I'd know how to do that ... It's about getting your muscles to work in a new way – your speech muscles – and getting the person to be able to hear the difference," Gross says. "It's auditory discrimination and having an auditory memory, which all of us develop as children for our own language."

Gross works with a special computer software program, which allows people to "see" their own voices, illustrated as sound waves. It allows her to show students what normal pronunciation looks like – where the syllables get extra stress – and where their own speech is missing the tonal mark.

That's high-tech. But she also has good, old-fashioned tools at her disposal too. Yes, like Professor Higgins and Eliza Doolittle in *My Fair Lady*, speech therapists do use rhymes and music to improve speaking skills. Maybe not the "rain in Spain," in Dion's case, but Gross says she does use nursery rhymes and other simple poetry.

"I wouldn't want to say that I'd have him singing anything, to be honest," Gross says. "But I've listened to him a lot. He doesn't hear the differences between the way he pronounces certain sounds ... I'd work on not only pronunciation skills, but hearing the difference in the word rhythm."

Maria Scaringi is a speech-language pathologist at Kidspeech and Family Rehabilitation, and a member of the Canadian association in charge of her profession. She is also someone whose first language is Italian, is fluent in French and in English and who has no discernible accent at all when she speaks on the phone.

She, too, uses rhymes and music.

"These are used to train the ear to hear sounds. If you don't hear it, you can't produce it," Scaringi says.

Dion doesn't ask for much – he just wants people to understand him when he is on the radio.

Scaringi, when asked what advice she'd give the Liberal leader, is blunt and to the point – and very similar to the counsel contained in that *Star* column.

"The advice would be the same as I would give to any other client: Schedule an appointment with a speech-language pathologist," she says.

