

WHAT KIND OF SPEAKING VOICE TURNS PEOPLE ON?

PLEASANT QUALITY

A top-notch speaking voice has a pleasing quality.

Quality is the timbre, tone color, or texture of a voice. If a clarinetist, a trumpet player, and a violinist stand behind a screen and play "Dixie" in the key of C at the same rate of speed and the same degree of loudness, you'll have no problem recognizing which is which. Each instrument has its own personality or timbre. Similarly, if you overhear two friends talking in an adjoining room, you can invariably tell one from another.

As one expert says, "Like fingerprints, each of us has a one-of-a-kind voice."

You already know a great deal about yourself, but primarily from the inside out. It may come as a bit of a shock to you to be told that you come across to others as arrogant, cranky, sarcastic, or bitchy, especially when you really don't have the slightest desire to create that kind of an impression.

"There is no index of character so sure as the human voice," British Prime Minister Benjamin Disraeli once remarked.

Here is a list of undesirable vocal qualities:

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|-----------------|---|
| Breathy | Feathery, fuzzy, and whispery. Breath seems to be escaping noticeably. The voice is almost always too soft and doesn't carry well. The late Marilyn Monroe had a downy, wafer-thin little voice. In most of her cozier scenes, Sharon Stone readily slips into breathiness. And one TV reviewer described an award-winning soap opera actress as "having a voice so soft that it sounds like a gas leak." |
| Strident | Hard, tense, brassy, and sometimes relatively high-pitched. The voice seems tight, as if it were produced by a pressure cooker. Joan Rivers has this spiky quality. To some, Barbara Walters is acid and abrasive. ABC News Commentator Carole Simpson has springy articulation but a steel-edged voice. |
| Harsh | Rough, raspy, gravelly, and sometimes quite low-pitched, reminding you of rusty hinges and creaky doors in slasher movies. Nick Nolte has a growly bass. George C. Scott uses a barbed-wire voice to great effect playing Scrooge in Dickens's <i>A Christmas Carol</i> . |
| Nasal | Talking through the nose—a nasal clang. The voice has a foghornlike and sometimes a wailing or whiny quality. Singers of country music, such as George Strait and Dwight Yoakam, like it. Jay Leno and Ross Perot are nasal. |
| Denasal | A cold-in-the-nose, stuffy quality. The voice sounds bottled up. Actors use this one to play plug-uglies or the boxer with the too-often-broken nose. Robert DeNiro uses it occasionally and Sly Stallone, in his <i>Rocky</i> movies, bases his characterization on denasality. |
| Throaty | Hollow, muffled, dullish. A voice-from-the-tomb quality. These voices show up quite often on TV's "Tales From the Crypt." Freddy Krueger, in <i>Nightmare on Elm Street, XXX</i> , and his spooky cousins in other slice-and-dice horror films, love throatiness. |
| Hoarse | Noisy, scratchy, raw, strained. The voice suggests that its user either has laryngitis or needs to clear the throat. Ubiquitous election year politicians often become hoarse. |

Quite a few actors and entertainers owe some of their fame and fortune to rough, twangy, or squeaky voices. Some of these voices are apparently natural, but in other cases, they are deliberately acquired. The *femme fatale* type of voice of certain actresses, who specialize in playing sultry roles, is undeniably enhanced with a smoke-scraped quality.

One charismatic actor, Liam Neeson, admits that he won an Oscar because he deliberately portrayed his character with a "cigarette-and-cognac" vocal quality. Alec Baldwin likes to describe his own voice as a "soft, hoarse purr."

Do not, however, use most of these people as role models! Evidence shows that many of these unusual voices prematurely fail or "give out."

CLEAR ARTICULATION

A first-rate voice is distinct, intelligible, and easy to understand.

Articulation involves movements of the lips, jaw, tongue, and velum (soft palate) to form, separate, and join individual speech sounds.

Articulation must be as sharp and incisive as a laser beam. (*Articulation, enunciation, and diction*, for all practical purposes, mean the same thing.)

Feeble articulation is our numero uno problem as far as voice and speech are concerned. Lazy lips! The word *mumbling* is often used to describe careless, sluggish articulation. The more you gobble your words, the more indistinct you become. Mumbler don't open their mouths. Their lips, which have as much spring and bounce as two pieces of stale liver, never move. These wordwreckers drop or omit sounds:

A reporter specializing in small businesses called a real estate broker.

Receptionist:

"Gummenendawanda."

"Would you repeat that, please?"

"Whoja wanna talkta?"

"No one at your firm, thank you."

Potential loss to firm—\$5,000 in commissions.

give me is heard as *gimme*

thinking becomes *thinkin'*

going to changes to *gunna*

understand turns to *unerstan*

Or as Rambo tells it: "*I just gotta do what I gotta do.*"

Garblers are first cousins of mumbler. They mangle sounds or add extra, unwanted sounds:

These, them, with are heard as *deze, dem, wit.*

Length, strength alter to *lenth, strenth.*

Athlete, across become *ath-a-lete, acrost.*

An *iggle* is an *eagle*. A *paramour* is a *power mower*. *Arnjoos* is *orange juice*. *Orals* are a baseball team.

The most saluted man in America? Richard Stans: "I pledge allegiance to the flag and the republic for Richard Stans."

The only aquatic reptile to be honored in a hymn? "Lead On, O Kinky Turtle." ("Lead On, O King Eternal.")

One popular movie star (he pays himself \$25,000,000 per picture) loves to play the underdog who battles his way to the top. A representative of the shoot-now-mumble-later school of acting, he's the only performer who can mumble and garble simultaneously. He doesn't speak his words; he gargles them.

A TV movie critic remarked about one of the star's recent sizzling hits:

The problem with [him], said the critic, is not that he can't act. It's that he can't speak! Most of the time he sounds as if he has a mouth full of wet Kleenex. In his most recent film epic, he emits Tarzan-like grunts and yowls through most of the movie. This is okay with audiences, because they do not expect grunts and yowls to be intelligible. But then at the very end of the picture, he delivers a message to give the film social significance, and at this point the movie stumbles and falls flat on its face, along with anybody in the audience who tries to figure out what the man is saying.

APPROPRIATE LOUDNESS

An outstanding speaking voice is easily heard.

Loudness refers to intensity (sound level), volume, projection, or force.

"What did you say?" Do your friends often ask you that? Maybe you're muttering. It's more likely that you're not talking loudly enough.

Ever attend a student government or a city council meeting? There are almost always a number of under projectors at these sessions who insist on asking questions, making comments or speeches, and who simply can't be heard. Microphones and P.A. systems aren't always available or aren't functioning, and the would-be orators are greeted with choruses of "Louder! Louder! We can't hear you." And many individuals with vocal mufflers show up in classrooms, on both sides of the lectern, too.

You might have beautiful enunciation and still be unable to reach your listeners. A voice that is excessively faint or frail annoys most people. It also labels you as timid and weak-kneed.

EXPRESSIVENESS

A superfine voice is animated, expressive, and well-pitched.

Expressiveness means vocal variety: the pitch level at which we speak, our vocal movements from pitch to pitch, our rate of speaking, phrasing, emphasis, and contrast.

A lively, vivacious voice suggests a colorful and energetic personality. A dead, ho-hum monotone too often indicates a dull, dreary personality.

One late Broadway producer chose his actors on the basis of how much animation and sincerity they could inject into two lines: *I hate you!* and *I love you!*

Are you a one-note speaker with little pitch variation? You can put your listeners to sleep. If you have no fire in your voice, you can't warm others. A too-fast speaking rate may prevent your message from being understood, and a consistently slow and draggy rate is boring. Without phrasing, emphasis, and contrast, your conversation or speeches will sound stuffy and pointless.

An excessively high-pitched voice can earn you the wrong kind of attention. A chirpy little voice, even if trapped in Julia Robert's body, gets a negative response, as would a Michael Jackson voice emanating from an Arnold Schwarzenegger physique.

The pitch of your voice is often more significant than the words you're saying.

A voice of lower pitch is an advantage for both men and women. According to popular psychologist Dr. Joyce Brothers, "While pitch is probably more important in a woman's rise up the ladder of success, a male with a very high voice is going to have trouble being taken seriously. A high, thin voice is a distinct disadvantage to a man."

UNOBTRUSIVE PRONUNCIATION

A good voice doesn't attract undue attention to itself.

Good pronunciation should be appropriate to the speaker, to the area in which the speaker lives, and to the speaker's audience.

Oddly enough, a single mispronounced word not only stands out like a zit on the end of your nose, but it can snap the thread of your listener's attention. After a recent inaugural speech by a new college president, most of his audience ignored what he'd said. They were much too busy discussing a handful of words that he'd mispronounced: *axe* (for *ask*), *ad MIR able* (for *AD mir able*), and *griev I us* (for *GRIEV us*).

DIALECT

Accent? Who, me?

You have one. Actually a better word is *dialect*.

Anything that is said in this book about accent or dialect is not intended as a negative put-down. Humorous examples are given, but there is a vast difference between humor and ridicule. If you've been told that your accent or dialect is quaint, or if people complain that it's hard to understand you, put your accent on a sliding scale and *modify* it.

If you send a greeting card to your *mudda* on *Mudda's Day*, if you spent your weekend on *Lon Guyland*, or if you avoid strolling through Central *Pock* at night, you might be from the New York City area.

If you're invited to a *cahktail potty* and the host invites you to sit on a *sofar*, maybe you're in Massachusetts.

If you're a *boid-watchuh*, possibly you live in New Jersey (Joisey?)

If you say to your host, "*Ah nevah drink bear*," and tell him all about your recent tour of the *Watt* house in Washington, you could be from Alabama, North Carolina, or other Southern states.

If you're a couch potato and watch lots of *Tay Vay*, or if you add a drop of mountain color to *right here* and come up with *ri-cher*, you've spent some time in West Virginia, Western Maryland, or Tennessee.

If you announce that you were born in *Merlin*, we'll understand that you're referring to Maryland.

If you meow when you say an oldie so that it sounds like *hee-ow nee-ow*, *bree-own cee-ow*?—you're possibly an Easterner. Unfortunately, this meowlike sound has crept into other sections of the country—even Texas and California.

If you live in a certain eastern city, your neighbors will understand you when you say *Fluffya Inkwire* and *Fluffyadailynooz* for *Philadelphia Inquirer* and *Philadelphia Daily News*.

Dialect is a variety of language that is distinguished from other varieties of the same language. It is used by a group of speakers in a certain area who are set off from others geographically and socially. There are at least four regional dialects in the United States.

General or Standard American

Spoken by approximately 135 million Americans. Boundary lines between various dialects are not sharp and rigid. In general, however, this dialect is most commonly spoken in the Midwest (as far south as the Mason-Dixon line), in the West, in Alaska, sporadically in Hawaii, and in parts of the East and the Southwest.

Bear in mind that General American is spoken in a large geographical area. The speech one hears in Boise is not identical to the speech in Bismarck or Beverly Hills. Detroiters don't sound exactly like Denverites. But they're all classified as speaking General American.

One city or area doesn't necessarily have "better" speech than another city or area. Because regional dialects are dissimilar doesn't mean that they're defective.

Preeminent punster Richard Lederer, America's most colorful and entertaining word expert, says, "Most of us tend to feel that the way 'we' talk is right and the way 'they' talk is funny. 'They,' of course, refers to anyone who differs from us." [Copyright © 1994 by Richard Lederer. Reprinted by permission of Pocket Books, a division of Simon & Schuster, Inc.]

Nevertheless, a majority of outstanding educators and social and civic leaders use General American. Prominent network newscasters, commentators, and talk show hosts such as Tom Brokaw, Dan Rather, Katie Couric, Connie Chung, Oprah Winfrey, David Letterman, and Peter Jennings (with a dollop of Canadian color) use the General American dialect. It's the nationally preferred pronunciation for TV and radio speech.

Most movie and TV actors and actresses use it. General American is, as one dialect expert has said, "Classless but classy."

A colorful exception—Westerns. The casts in these shoot-from-the-hip Billy the Kid/Wyatt Earp sagas generally use a dialect that's a compromise between Texas Panhandle and Hollywood Hills.

Eastern

Spoken by approximately twenty-two million. It includes the Middle Atlantic states, although the dialects of New York City, Newark, and Baltimore are touch-and-go and not always easy to locate specifically. Some dialect authorities believe that New York City deserves its own category, and, for sure, some quite unique speech can be heard in Manhattan and its adjacent burroughs.

Apart from movies and TV shows about cops and mobsters, according to an article in *The New York Times*, "... on the playgrounds and in the offices of daily New York life, the pungent dialect that brands New Yorkers in the popular American imagination seems to be fading into history."

New England

Spoken by approximately thirteen million. It includes Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut, Vermont, New Hampshire, and Maine. But here again, fishermen from Massachusetts and Maine accuse each other of having "accents."

Southern

Spoken by approximately sixty million. It's used in the region roughly equivalent to the states of the Old Confederacy. It extends as far west as Arkansas and into sections of Texas. Both Bill Clinton and Ross Perot are labeled as southerners, but there are obvious differences in their dialects. Researchers have identified twenty-five different Southern dialects.

The Wall Street Journal reports that Atlanta business people are flocking to a Yankee speech therapist to plunk down \$1,000 for "accent-reduction" lessons. This person promises to help them "lose" their Southern accents.

An editorial in an Atlanta newspaper said, "We'd always thought that Sherman's burning of Atlanta was the worst thing that ever happened to our city. But now something even more horrible is happening. Atlantans are being taught to erase one of their few remaining vestiges of Southern identity. And by a lady from New Jersey!"

No section of the United States has a monopoly on good or correct speech. Nor is there any reason why we should all sound alike any more than we should all look or dress alike. The late humor columnist Lewis Grizzard said it well:

If we all spoke the same, dressed the same, acted the same . . . this country would not be the unique place that it is, would not have the benefit of our spice and variety, and everybody probably would be in the Rotary Club.

An interesting feature story in a late summer issue of a Fort Worth, Texas, newspaper gave advice to Texas preppies getting ready to go to exclusive eastern colleges. "Worried about your Texas accent?" asked the writer. "Do not—we repeat—do not attempt to get rid of it. They'll absolutely adore it back east."

Where does all of this put you? You've heard the old saw "When in Rome, do as the Romans do."

Let's amend that one: "When in Rome, do as the Romans do—that is, *if the Romans do as they're supposed to do.*"

If you speak with an accent or dialect, should you be proud of it?

Yes, but . . . fair or not, prejudices in favor of General American dialect are very much with us. Numerous studies reveal that individuals with heavy dialects can be at a serious disadvantage in the job market. Paradoxically, it's also the truth that a genuine regional dialect can sometimes work to the speaker's advantage!

A large college in the metropolitan New York area offers an evening course: "Lose Your Brooklyn Accent." The class is filled to overflowing.

Dorothy Sarnoff, former star of theater and opera, and now a famed speech coach, has made a seventy-minute audiotape, "Cure for the New York Accent." Ms. Sarnoff insists that it can purge a New York accent in two days. She has sold hundreds of these tapes.

A South Carolina college offers a special evening course called "How to Control Your Southern Accent." There is a long waiting list of students who want the course.

If you're from the Boston area and say *flaw-r in the law-r* instead of *flaw in the law*, and you plan to move to Texas and run for mayor of Dallas, you may want to get rid of the tacked-on [r], or you may lose a few votes.

Or if you're a theater major in a southern university and move to New York and audition for the part of Juliet in Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*, you may lose the part if you say, "Good naw-uht, good naw-uht . . . aw shall say good naw-uht until it be morrah!"

It's essential that you try to sound like the enlightened and educated people in *your own area*. Emulate them! After all, imitation is the sincerest form of flattery.

LISTENING OBJECTIVELY

Prick up your ears: Listen!

There's a big difference between hearing and listening. Even a duck can hear, but a duck doesn't listen.

We spend approximately 30 percent of each day talking, 45 percent listening. College students may spend more than 50 percent of their communication time listening: instructors, friends, parents, stereos, TV.

The problem is that most of us don't listen too well. Perhaps we hate listening. Listening is so commonplace that, like breathing and walking, we take it for granted. Unfortunately, you can't fake listening. It shows. The shocker: Most of us comprehend only 25 percent of what we hear!

Why?

There are several reasons.

The brain can handle 400 to 800 words per minute, but most of us talk at a rate of 125 to 175 words per minute. This makes it rather easy and much more fun to let the mind jump ahead of the speaker or take a leave of absence and wander a million miles away and daydream about other things.