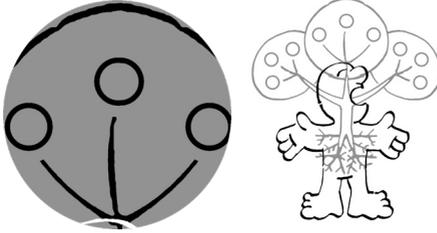


GROW YOUR VOICE TO SPEAK WITH CONFIDENCE

Petro Janse van Vuuren





Week 4

Fruit: Meaning and expression

We often refuse to accept an idea merely because the tone of voice in which it has been expressed is unsympathetic to us.

Friedrich Nietzsche

Saying what you mean and how you mean it

What is worse?

Being shouted at by an arrogant brat?

or annoyed for life by a nagging wife?

Being bored to death by a one-note drone

or being lulled to sleep by a sing-song tone?

As with everything else in life, if you stop attending to your voice, it will organise itself to follow the path of least resistance. For your voice,

that means it will either not go anywhere and stay on one note, or it will fall into a sing-song pattern that overshadows the meaning of the words. One's notes can be high pitched and like an assault, or low and rumbling like an engine. Either way, they do not communicate.

Think of the excited teacher whose voice becomes sharper and more annoying the harder she tries to make herself heard. What about that university professor in the after-lunch class that has everyone sleeping soundly while he drones on about Hellenistic traditions or biochemical formulas. It is impossible to stay awake even when they move the class to early in the morning. Do these pedagogues not care enough for their students to try and break open the magic of their subjects with interest and variety?

What about the airport announcements that always follow the same intonations? Do they have a contest to judge which hostess can intone the melody the most convincingly? She is almost as adorable as the preschool girl who sing-songs her way through a nursery rhyme. The problem is that my safe and punctual arrival at my next appointment is not expedited by the nursery rhyme.

By the way, when I taught drama to pre-schoolers I used a trick I learned from a local

writer, director and producer, Louise van Niekerk. I recorded myself performing the rhymes on audio tape so that the cute little girls could break the sing-song pattern and communicate the real meaning of their poems (provided of course they imitated me and not their well-meaning mothers).

Expression and meaning are the fruits of your tree. Those fruits can include welcoming shade or beauty, food or inspiration. It all depends on what you want your words to accomplish. How you say your words reflects whether or not you care enough about your audience to help them get your message.

Lack of rhythm in speech, which makes a phrase start off slowly, spurt suddenly in the middle and just as abruptly slide in a gateway, reminds me of the way a drunkard walks...

Konstantin Stanislavski

Objectives

- to discover how the voice reflects who you are and how you connect with others
- to discover how meaning is created and structured in speaking – phrasing, using pause and stress

Questions to stir your thinking

- What is meaning?
- What is expression?
- What is the role of the voice in creating meaning?
- What are the things you can do with your voice to express this meaning?
- How does a voice sound when the speaker intends to connect with others versus when a speaker is only connecting with the material?

***Note:** For this session you need to keep a piece of text handy, like a poem, a piece of writing you like or a speech you are going to make. If you are a radio DJ, this includes live reads or links. It is great to use words that you may be performing or presenting yourself. If you have nothing to work with, use the sample texts at the end of this chapter.*

Exercises

Exercise 1: Changing volume without changing meaning

1. Stand in perfect posture or lie on your back. Take a deep breath and sigh out loudly and contentedly. Repeat.
2. Change the sigh to an 'AY' sound.
3. Repeat three times turning more breath into sound each time.
4. Do it again, but this time keep the vowel sound on the same note.
5. Do it again, keeping the vowel on the same note, but starting softly and gradually increasing the volume. Make sure you do not increase the pitch of the note.
6. Repeat using the sound 'YAH'. Repeat it in short strong bursts starting softly and then gradually increasing the volume without increasing the pitch.

'yah, yah, yah, yah' (increasing volume without increasing pitch)
7. Say a piece of text starting off on an intimate, conversational tone, gradually increasing the volume without increasing the pitch.

Exercise 2: Open chest and text

1. Sit up straight with your hands behind your head. Open your chest and lift your ribcage.
2. Pat your ribcage with your hands like a guerrilla and sing out the sounds ay and ai.
3. Still patting your chest, say a piece of your text.
4. Put your hands behind your head, lifting your ribcage, and sing a piece of your text on one note. Keep your ribs open and keep your voice rooted.

Exercise 3: Body text

1. Stand in perfect posture.
2. Start walking around the room, speaking a piece of text.
3. Hit the pause button and do it.
4. Repeat, but this time every time you see a comma (,) in the text do a little hop, and at every full stop (.) change direction.
5. Next, find a sentence that expresses a sense of urgency. When you come to the sentence, break into a run.
6. Finally, look at the central concept or idea of

the text. When you come to it, sit down on the floor and stand up in complete silence before saying it. Say it, then sit down and stand up again at the very end before continuing. Even do this when the central idea is said at the very end. Sit down and stand up before breaking your concentration.

7. Repeat the whole exercise complete with hops, turns, runs and sit-downs.

8. For the last time, stand in neutral and say the text while hopping, turning, running and sitting down in your mind only.

Note: If you are doing a poem and there is no full stop at the end of a line, do not stop. Continue right through it to the next line and only stop at the full stop – even if that full stop is in the middle of a line.

Exercise 4: The fun escalates

1. Stand up straight in perfect posture. Sing your text as an opera singer would, using some of the dynamics discovered in the previous exercise.

2. Repeat the text saying it rhythmically while jogging heavily in one spot. Play with it like it is a rap song.

3. Now just deliver your text comfortably and confidently.

Why work on meaning and expression?

Curbing tension, excitement and fatigue

Speakers often end up in situations where they need to increase their volume because of outside interference. Other times their own sense of nervousness, excitement or fatigue prompts them to try and speak loudly.

If you increase your volume for whatever reason, your untrained voice will go higher in pitch and sharper in tone, unless you know how to counteract this effect.

Remember the teacher with the high pitch? The same effect is achieved when your voice becomes tired from long hours of talking, or if the audience is noisy, or if there are noises in the background for you to compete with.

The problem with this higher and sharper tone is not just that it becomes tedious to listen to, but it is less flexible and responsive to the subtleties of meaning and your ability to express your intention. A speaker, therefore, must be able to increase volume without increasing pitch and sharpening the tone. Your voice must remain conversational, inviting and engaging at all times.

The only way to achieve this is to relax your throat even more and work even harder with your

diaphragm. This is contrary to the body's instinctive reaction to tighten the throat and force the voice through a narrower opening.

If you master the technique of increasing your volume while remaining conversational and engaging, you will be able to connect with your audience more powerfully and engage them with your material in spite of distractions like background noise, nervousness or fatigue.

Breaking the deathly drone

Other causes of disinterest and disconnection come from the danger of the one-note drone and a habitual vocal pattern.

To keep an audience interested in your words you must work both from inside the word, using your voice to reveal its meaning and from outside the word investing it with your intention. If you do not purposefully pay attention to both these processes, you may fall into one of two traps. First, you may drone along reading your material without varying your tone or pace. Second, you may fall into habitual rhythms and melodic vocal patterns that impose themselves on the words and rob them of individual meaning and expression of intent.

The only way to overcome the temptation to either bore or sing your audience to sleep, is to

break open the melody and rhythm of your voice and the text so that you discover rhythms and melodies you are not accustomed to. In this way you get to play with the text, both investing it with unexpected expression and unveiling surprising meaning in the words.

Unless you go to the trouble of purposefully trying to communicate, you will ‘check out’ and allow the words to sing themselves without your attentive investment. This immediately creates the impression that you care neither for your words, nor for your listeners.

*When you least expect it, someone may
actually listen to what you have to say.*

Maggie Kuhn – Activist

Inviting interest and connection

If you can keep tension at bay and resist the temptation to drone or sing, you can then purposefully invest your intention and reveal the meaning of your words. You do this by playing with phrasing, inflection, emphasis and pause.

Phrasing is how you group words together. Phrasing can change the meaning of what you are saying. The end of a phrase is most often, but not exclusively, indicated by a comma. Example: The

slogan for one of South Africa's cell phone companies used to be "Cell C, for yourself." different phrasing can change the meaning: "Cell, C for yourself" (sounds like "Sell, see for yourself").

Inflection is how your voice goes up or down either within a single word or across a phrase. Upwards inflections can indicate a question, or that a list is not complete yet. Downwards inflection can indicate a statement, or the end of a list of things. Commas and full stops are indicators of inflection changes. A change of inflection is like a change of direction in the flow of your speech and creates meaning and interest.

Usually inflection comes naturally, but you can make a terrible mess of it if you are reading a text without preparation for the first time. Inflection can also change the meaning of a phrase if, for example, you make it sound like a statement when it was a question. But inflection is much more subtle than just what these examples show and I recommend that you play with the ends of sentences and phrases using song and melody to discover what you can do with it.

Emphasis is making a word or phrase stand out as important. In a written piece of text, you may underline it or use bold letters. If you speak, you do this by increasing your volume, punching out the

words more sharply and increasing your pitch. This is like breaking into a run. I said earlier that you should not increase your volume and your pitch, but that relates to your general tone of voice, just like you wouldn't underline or bold an entire essay. However, you can use bold text and underlining for effect. Just so, you may absolutely use pitch and sharpness for effect, when needed.

*The most precious things in speech are
the pauses.*

Sir Ralph Richardson

Pausing is another way of drawing attention to certain parts of your message. A pause before a word or phrase creates anticipation for what you are going to say and draws attention to it. That is where the idea of a 'pregnant pause' comes from. It is pregnant with the promise of what is coming. A pause after something that is important gives the audience time to let it sink in, increasing its effect even more. Pausing before and after something really lets it stand out.

Pausing everywhere for emphasis because you think your whole message is important, will have the opposite effect. It will slow you down and create breaks in your phrasing and flow, thus causing the audience to be annoyed or bored.

There are many more things you can do to create interest – change the rhythm, increase dynamics, pace and intonation. But all these things are part of the art of speaking, which cannot be mastered by analysing it with your brain. There is no wrong or right, really. There is just pleasing or not pleasing, like in any other art form. Play with these effects and discover your own genius.

Body, mind and voice integration

If meaning is what you are saying, i.e. revealing the content of a word. Expression is how you are saying it, i.e. using your body, face and voice to convey that meaning. Nerves, disinterest or inexperience shows itself most prominently in the lack of integration between what you are saying and what your body (including your face and voice) is doing.

If you are relaxed, standing in neutral, breathing properly, controlling the phonation and resonance of your voice, articulating with care and using both the individual sounds and the overall phrasing of your words, your body will be responsive to the meaning of your words and the intention of your mind. Your gestures and facial expressions will flow naturally and your audience will be riveted by your performance.

Exercises that involve your body in playing with and discovering meaning helps greatly in overcoming any leftover disjunction between your words and your body. It helps to iron out any remaining nervous twitches, unconscious swaying, shifting of your weight and other unintentional physical habits.

*Stand before the people you fear and
speak your mind – even if your voice
shakes.*

Maggie Kuhn – Activist

**Meaning is what you say,
expression is how you say it. And
when the two work together, you
communicate confidently and
connect with your audience.**

Sample texts

Napoleon Bonaparte – Farewell to the Old Guard

Following the failed invasion of Russia and defeat by the Allies, April 20, 1814

I bid you farewell. For twenty years I have constantly accompanied you on the road to honour and glory. In these latter times, as in the days of our prosperity, you have invariably been models of courage and fidelity. With men such as you our cause could not be lost; but the war would have been interminable; it would have been civil war, and that would have entailed deeper misfortunes on France.

I have sacrificed all of my interests to those of the country.

I go, but you, my friends, will continue to serve France. Her happiness was my only thought. It will still be the object of my wishes. Do not regret my fate; if I have consented to survive, it is to serve your glory. I intend to write the history of the great achievements we have performed together. Adieu, my friends. Would I could press you all to my heart.

A Whiting And A Snail

Lewis Carroll

'Will you walk a little faster?' said a whiting to a snail.
'There's a porpoise close behind us, and he's treading on my tail.
See how eagerly the lobsters and the turtles all advance!
They are waiting on the shingle - will you come and join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?

'You can really have no notion how delightful it will be
When they take us up and throw us, with the lobsters, out to sea!
But the snail replied 'Too far, too far!' and gave a look askance -
Said he thanked the whiting kindly, but he would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not, could not, would not join the dance.
Would not, could not, would not, could not, could not join the dance.

'What matters it how far we go?' his scaly friend replied.
'There is another shore, you know, upon the other side.
The further off from England the nearer is to France -
Then turn not pale, beloved snail, but come and join the dance.
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, will you join the dance?
Will you, won't you, will you, won't you, won't you join the dance?'

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