

Speech Presentations

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When we listen to a spoken presentation, how are we affected - physiologically, psychologically, and how is meaning conveyed?

These are concerns that naturally would capture the interest of the linguistic scholar, but in a more relevant real-world sense are of great interest to a teacher, seminar trainer, counselor, stage performer, religious minister, corporate spokesperson or politician.

It is important to first take note of what the elements are that comprise a presentation. This will be followed by how the elements of content and style are professionally embellished by the speaker and subsequently, how the listener is affected by these presentation adornments, or as is quite often the case, the absence there-of.

I FOUNDATIONS OF A SPEECH

A presentation is "the way in which something is said, offered, shown, explained to a group of people."(1) Regarding a speech presentation, its formation begins with a chosen theme and is brought to life by its integration with the speaker's fundamental core beliefs. The core beliefs are one's primary thoughts, assumptions and life values. They are the cornerstones in forming personality and determining personal action. In essence, core beliefs are what the audience wants to see, feel, and understand in the speaker...otherwise they could just remain home and read the presenter's speech.

A speech presentation has the discernible function of imparting information along with the subtle, yet highly prized, purpose of developing trust and confidence in the speaker. As has been verified many times through my university class questionnaires and corporate speech seminars conducted in many countries, when listening to a speech the audience makes a curious association. The quality of the presentation, the presenter, the lecturer's subject/product/service, and the company are symbolically the same. A poor presentation is subconsciously equated with a boring subject, undesirable product or inept service. It takes a person of great insight to see the value of what is being presented hidden behind the flaws of an unclear, non-inspirational or misdirected presentation.

A speech presentation is also an attempt to communicate ideas to an audience in a coherent fashion. In the context of a speech, communication is the response that the communicator elicits. To a great extent the responsibility falls upon the communicator to insure that his* message is being understood. If the one who is listening interprets the message differently from what was intended then what is understood by the listener is the communication. In my surveys at Osaka Prefecture University, from 1994-1997 students were asked to write a report about "How to Improve the Quality of Teaching and Learning in a Classroom Environment." Their number one suggestion has been to improve the communication skills of the professors. In corporate America, for the past several years, communication abilities has consistently been a major factor in hiring and firing employees.(2)

*for brevity and simplicity I will use he or his when referring to either 'he or she' or 'his or her' respectively though acknowledging that in today's social climate it may not be the most politically correct form for describing one who is spoken about.

A speech presentation has primarily two components - CONTENT and STYLE. Content is what the speaker wants to say. Style is how he says it...the form through which the message is understood.

II CONTENT

Under the category of CONTENT there are three areas that one must focus on: 1. the Message, 2. the Intention and 3. Structure. For the theme to be highlighted audience appropriate words are used to convey the speaker's message which, in turn, is shaped by his intention and systematically presented by his structure.

The message is what the speaker wants the audience to understand about the theme.

The intention is one's purpose for giving a presentation. The acronym IPEI can be used to clarify the different forms that intention may take: I - inform, P - persuade, E - entertain, and I - inspire. The following may serve as an example... A college professor has been asked to give a speech (or lecture) on the theme "Stimulating Student Learning." His message is "Listening is the Key." His intention to (I)inform is to tell his audience about why listening deeply to a student improves student/teacher relationships, allows the professor to adjust to the needs of the student, and in turn, encourages the student to take greater interest in the subject that is being taught; to (P)persuade would be to receive audience agreement with the speaker's message that "listening is the key;" to (E)entertain serves the purpose of energizing the body, stimulating the mind, elevating the emotions, and opening the audience up to receiving new and what, at times, may be challenging information to accept. This is achieved by way of humor, storytelling, poetry reading, and at times song; and last, is to (I)inspire - to uplift and motivate the audience to take action. In this given case, for example, the teachers in the audience will set aside 10 minutes at the end of each class to listen, in an informal manner, to the concerns that students have about the subject being taught or the difficulties of being a student or, the speaker may want to inspire his audience to buy his newly published book "Listening is the Key."

Once the message and intention have been clarified, the structure of the speech is formed by an Opening, Body and Closing.

The opening introduces the theme. It tells the audience the essence of what they are going to hear. The body develops the theme by building and leading towards a climax - the moment when all the energy of the speech comes together around the message. It is usually towards the end of the speech. The closing summarizes what they have been told.

The purpose of the speech opening is to gain the attention of the audience. The use of attention getters can be very effective e.g. "Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something", Plato.

The body is the heart of the presentation. It is comprised of a series of assertions that are logically arranged and move toward the most important key point, the climax. It is within the formatting of the body, and in turn, its presentation (STYLE), that meaning, understanding and communication takes place.

The closing is vital as the audience senses that the end of the speech is near and responds by being more attentive. This is the time when the speaker's message is summarized and brought together into a sharp focus. In a well developed speech, the message imbedded in the closing is what audiences tend to remember the most.

III STYLE

The other inextricable ingredient to a presentation is STYLE. Style is the area that offers the most exciting challenge for the speaker. It is where his inner traits are developed thereby animating his personality, and as a secondary benefit, he is physically strengthened. Vladimir Horowitz, the great pianist, symbolically serves as a good example of this phenomenon. In the latter years of his life, it was becoming difficult for the meister to move and to speak. But once he got on the stage, bowed to his audience, and sat before his grand piano, his body surged with new found energy that uplifted his audience. Great speech presenters, in turn, are forever held in esteem for speaking with conviction and moving with distinction. Style, therefore, has two primary and necessary parts: 1. Syntax and Expression. Syntax is composed of the creative and clear combination of words to highlight the message. Expression is the combination of a) how the voice is used and b) body movement.

Syntax is the love and joy of great orators. Very slight shifts in word positioning can be fun and thought-provoking for the listener...."Then you should say what you mean," the March Hare went on. "I do," Alice hastily replied: "at least...at least I mean what I say...that's the same thing, you know." Not the same thing a bit!" said the Hatter. "Why you might just as well say that 'I see what I eat' is the same thing as 'I eat what I see!' You might just as well say," added the March Hare, "that 'I like what I get' is the same thing as 'I get what I like!'" "You might as well say," added the Dormouse, which seemed to be talking in its sleep, "that 'I breathe when I sleep' is the same thing as 'I sleep when I breathe!'" ... all part of Lewis Carroll's delightful fantasy, "Alice in Wonderland."

Syntax and its affect on the voter has been made into a science by American politicians and their marketing consultants. At the beginning of 1984, Richard Wirthlin, the presidential pollster, was hired as a staff consultant by Ronald Reagan. Wirthlin developed what came to be known as the Speech Pulse.(3) In 1984, every presidential speech phrase was first test marketed before being used on the campaign trail. Forty to eighty people from the central States, representing the political middle, were placed in a room with sensitive computer dials. Their instant responses to what the President said were charted as: a)positive/negative b)interesting/boring c)understanding/confusion and d)speaker's credibility. In processing this, the President's speech was in one column and the number measuring the second-by-second approval ratings were in the other. The data, in turn, measured the effect of syntax, or in this case rhetoric, on the audience's mood. The most effective lines in altering public opinion, what became known as power phrases or resonators, were then used to determine what themes to emphasize in upcoming speeches, what phrases to use again, and the speech tonality that fit their goals. Together, with Reagan's remarkable speech delivery skills, syntax and expression proved to be a winning combination for the President for swaying public opinion even during the times when the content side of his speeches was sorely lacking.

Of course these tactics of using power phrases for driving social change and influencing thought have been with us for a long time as in Plato's, "Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something" or more recently in Martin Luther King's, "I have a dream" speech, and in J.F.Kennedy's "Ask not what your country

can do for you, but what you can do for your country" theme that has been re-invented endlessly by politicians. And to an almost inescapable extent, we have all been affected by the use of power phrases in advertising e.g., "I Feel Coke" from a few years back and today's "Smiling Ford." These phrases give anthropomorphic-like qualities to products, thereby allowing the consumer to emotionally identify with them.

The spoken word in the form of a speech requires different syntax than the written word. First of all, the language of a speech must be familiar to the audience. As a lot of information is usually given in a speech it is necessary to: stay with one idea per sentence, e.g. "The secret to being a bore is to tell everything", Voltaire; use no more than one dependent clause per sentence; make frequent use of transition words, e.g. in order to, so that, whereas; and use conversational language, e.g. contractions, short words, sentence fragments, simple sentences, questions, action verbs, personal anecdotes, and stories.

A well chosen and crafted story, positioned near the climax of the message, has a great power to penetrate the normally guarded psyche of the listener. This provides a fertile setting for learning. Stories are composed of densely packed layers of meaning that, when well-told, become deeply imbedded in the memory. These layers of meaning arise to the forefront of the conscious mind during similar situations that reflect the essence of the message. Through time, the meaning of the symbols of the story gradually unfold revealing themselves in the light of wisdom.

Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, a psychoanalyst and Cantadora - keeper of the old stories in the Latina tradition suggests that stories exist for 3 reasons: *Unitas*, *veritas*, and *humanitas*. (4) Story given and understood in a learning context as with teachers for instance, can teach a person *unitas*, to remain whole, complete and secure. Stories effectively teach children and young adults *veritas*, the truth of becoming wise, by way of example that shows how to release their naivete through looking deeply into matters... all foundation-building for overcoming perceived obstacles in life. Story can also uplift, heal, and expand the listener into *humanitas*, the great heart of love, which causes one to graciously move out into the world in serving others.

Dr. Carter-Ligett, a clinical psychologist, has conducted research that has consistently shown that when people listened to traditional fantasy theme stories brain chemicals associated with memory and learning dramatically increased as compared to the Control (or Story Reading) Group that did not show any significant change in brain chemistry. Dr. Carter-Ligett states, "Besides the cognitive component (reading), with the (story)teller you get visual and auditory impact as well, which can be both subtle and also profound, depending on the skills of the teller." (5) She has also found correlations between the listener liking the style of the speaker and brain chemical responses for learning... 'if the style is not liked, the listener tends not to relate to the story, and in turn, there is no chemical response.' The Style of syntax carried by the vehicle of expression is paramount for the message to be understood.

This leads us to the other major component of Style, which is Expression. A variety of research (6) has substantiated that the meaning conveyed by the speaker's use of 'voice and movement' expression are remembered by the audience long after the words spoken have been forgotten.

Expression brings forth one's *personae*, the personality a person presents to the world. (7) The ancient Greeks described *personae* as 'a sound speaking through a mask.' How

does the speaker effectively communicate his true intentions and feelings? The Noh drama of Japan appropriately symbolizes the dissolving of tension between the inner and outer self. This occurs when the mask worn by the actors and the sound coming through the mask made by the actors become one in expression. In the case of Noh, all feelings and intentions are clear. The mask symbolizes the mood. The directed body movements bring the mood to life. Feelings are given texture and depth through the intonation and variation of the sounds expressed by the actors and the accompanying music.

When sounds, words, thoughts, emotions and actions are blended into a congruent message trust, confidence, and in turn, learning naturally follow.

The first part of expression is voice. The voice is an instrument of incredible power; used skillfully, it can move an audience deeply. Voice has two aspects that the speaker can use to his advantage and quite naturally to the benefit of his audience -

1. voice quality and 2. voice dynamics.

Voice quality integrates:

a) breathing b) projection, c) resonance and d) timbre.

Breathing is the use of diaphragmatic and abdominal control to produce power, consistency and ease of expression. Projection is a clear, strong, sound that starts at the diaphragm. This is counter to a shout which is harsh and comes from a dramatic tightening of the throat. Resonance is a deep, continuing vibration originating in the trunk of the body creating a sound, which at times, is viscerally felt by the listener. Timbre is the most personal and what is perceived as, the most important characteristic of voice quality. We are able to distinguish a difference in timbre between two individuals though both may be speaking with the same pitch and force. Ronald Reagan's smooth, textured, cheery voice; Toshiro Mifune's gravelly, terse growls; and Diet member Takako Doi's rich, rolling, resonance are remembered as much as their faces.

Breathing and projection are used to focus the voice and thereby effectively reach the listener. Resonance surrounds the listener with sound vibration that at times seems to unite him with the speaker. Such a voice resonates with objects in a room like an opera singer's voice or a Buddhist monk practicing his morning chants. Timbre is the quality that most influences one's listening pleasure.

Voice dynamics is a combination of: a) variety b) control and c) flexibility.

Variety is the many ways that you use your voice and consists of:

1. range 2. pitch 3. tempo and 4. force.

Range is the span of sound over which your voice plays from its lowest to its highest octave. There's a common trait in Japanese businessmen and science professors to speak within a very small range, which at times, engenders a response from the audience that the speaker is without feeling.

Pitch is the musical note (tone) you sound on each syllable you make. Generally speaking, lower pitches are stronger, warmer, and carry more authority. A higher pitched voice though, may be used to convey information in a non-threatening way as it carries with it a sense of courteously serving another. Within the cultural context of Japan, many such examples by women abound: business-service related announcements in a department store, answering the telephone, or TV broadcasters enthusiastically telling the viewers of upcoming program specials. Inflection is one of the most expressive uses of

pitch. It is the changing of pitch within a syllable or word. There are three kinds of inflections: a) downward b) upward and c) double (up and down). Downwards inflection at the end of a statement or on a key word convey certainty and authority. Listen to newscasters. Upward inflections suggest there is uncertainty around an issue and can be used to create hope, or doubt. ! John F. Kennedy's upward inflections and controlled tempo carried a sense of hope within what otherwise would be considered serious and somber issues for the American public to hear. Double inflections are used to convey complex meanings such as irony, sarcasm and astonishment.

Tempo is the rhythm of speech. Reflected in a slower, more measured form of speech are; wonder, doubt, awe, reflectiveness, or sadness. In the case of the formal, controlled, purposeful speech of members of the Japanese imperial family dignity and honor are exemplified. With more speed the following tend to be delivered: exuberance, enthusiasm, anxiety, anger or excitement.

Force, in engineering terms, is the "sound power" of the voice. It is registered by the listener as loudness or amplitude. Too much singling out of words or phrases with greater force often conveys lack of control. A controlled build-up of force can, however, express great conviction and increase the interest of the audience. Moderate contrasts of soft and loud, and crescendos or diminuendos can also be effective as long as they don't sound mechanical.

Kyogen, a traditional Japanese drama reflecting everyday social conditions, often making use of mime and comical conditions, uniquely uses the power of pitch. The tempo is kept constant, but the range, pitch and force are stretched to their limits. The voice rises and falls through-out each expression, thereby adding to the humor and at times absurdity of the situation.

Control, the second aspect of voice dynamics, is "mastery" of the voice, and is not to be confused with "restraint." Breathing has a major influence on voice control, as experienced in 'poetry read aloud' or kabuki theatre. In Kabuki the actor pauses to breathe for affect or to carry a series of dramatic phrases, on the extended breath, that often gain in power up to their finality.

Flexibility is the ability to permit vocal musculature to change pitch, timbre, force and tempo rapidly. This produces the often sought after goal of a lively, animated voice.

IV PROBLEMS

A few common examples of voice problems follow.

Excessive softness is apparent when others are straining to hear you. Improvement requires diaphragmatic breath support.

Excessive loudness is often heard by Japanese politicians standing in front of train stations prior to an election shouting short phrases that sound more like battlefield commands than policy statements. In this case, the voice center needs to be brought from the throat down to the abdomen.

Excessive speed is talking too fast. If prolonged, it creates exhaustion in the listener who may be having difficulty in consciously absorbing everything.

Excessive slowness over a continued period of time induces sleepiness in the listener...and sometimes in the speaker.

Fading is when your voice trails off into silence at the end of a sentence. Whining inflections remind the listener of crying sounds. This is often associated with crankiness

on the part of the speaker. At that point, the speaker needs to project the voice more directly and forcefully.

In mastering the voice, many have developed the richness of a concert organ, or have learned to stir the spirit of others as Winston Churchill once did.

For the voice to be effective in carrying the underlying meaning of the message, it must be congruent with the expression of body movement; the audience wants both, together. There's a stage saying that goes, "Turn the lights up. I can't hear the speaker."

All too often, in a negative sense, others make judgments about our character and trustworthiness by observing our movement patterns. This is not a reference to what has come to be known as "body language." Body language is a culturally induced static posture that holds a special meaning within a well-defined social group. Movement patterns on the other hand refer to the quality of the body movement in expression, or a body attitude that is the result of a long held emotional feeling.(8)

Movement patterns are contagious e.g., yawning, laughing or crying. In presentations or in informal groups people will mirror each other's posture.(9)

When speaking, if the shoulders and head are down and forward, and the chest drawn in, the listeners sense a feeling of unworthiness or depression.(10)

Pulling the shoulders back, tightening the back muscles, pulling the chin in, then walking around can create an atmosphere of emotional defensiveness and non-communication.

Carrying the shoulders up too high looks anxious or fearful.

Walking with the head leading far out in front of the body looks like someone who has been studying too long and has lost emotional touch with his environment.

These are but a few examples that subtly project what may be the wrong message. Without facial expressions which genuinely reflect states of mind and without articulate body movements that convey feelings, people cannot participate fully in the world, nor be clearly understood by others.

There are other parts of a presentation that are important and at times vital but are used primarily to provide support. These would include clothing, grooming, lighting and sound, stage setting, along with multi-media back-up systems.

This paper has focused upon the speaker as being an integral part of the message. His creative style, when performed naturally, gives meaning to the message. In a speech presentation, when the speaker delivers content that holds value for the audience and a style that captures their attention and interest through-out then it is deemed professional, and in turn, he is respected for his views along with all of the services, products, and organizations that surround him.

Notes:

1. Dictionary of Contemporary English, Longman (1987)
2. Hellen Hemphill, Ph.D and Ray Haines, Discrimination, Harassment, the Failure of Diversity Training: What to do Now!, Greenwood Publishing (1997)
3. Jane Mayer and Doyle McManus, Landslide, the Unmaking of President Reagan,, Fontana publishing

(1989), p. 73-74, 299. 4. An interview by Elizabeth Hill with Dr. Clarissa Pinkola Estes, "Words," Storytelling Magazine, (July 1997) p.14 5. Angela Wampler, "Take a Dose of Story," Storytelling Magazine, (July 1997), P.6 6. a) Dr. Kevorkian at the University of Pennsylvania, b) professional speech trainers in the National Speakers' Association in America, along with c)research carried out by Joseph Britton in university classes and in corporate seminars held in America, Japan and Southeast Asia. 7. Oxford English Dictionary, Second Edition 8. Joseph Heller and William Henkin, Bodywise, Jeremy P. Tarcher, Inc., (1986) 9. John Deamond, M.D., Your Body Doesn't Lie, Warner Books (1979) 10. This conclusion I have made along with the few posture analyses that follow are the result of questionnaire responses given by university students and corporate executives from the U.S.A., Japan and several southeast Asian countries when observing speakers.