

VIVA voce!

DAVID CRYSTAL

It's only when something goes wrong that we realise what an amazingly useful and versatile instrument of communication we have at our disposal. "I've lost my voice" we whisper hoarsely, and glumly resort to frog-like croaking, energetic gesticulating, or - the last resort-writing things down.

The situation might last only a few hours or days, while a throat infection clears up. It is annoying, often painful, and may be extremely disruptive, but at least it goes away. In rather more serious cases, where a stressful situation makes people chronically anxious about whether their voice will stand up to what it has to do, the loss might be for weeks or months, and a whole life-style can be seriously disturbed. Professional voice users, such as teachers, clergymen and singers, are especially prone to such problems. And in the most serious cases of all, it is possible for people to lose their natural voice for ever.

When might such a thing happen? The commonest case, unhappily, arises from serious cancer of the larynx - one of the results of persistent smoking. If chemical therapy is not successful, it will be necessary to remove the vocal cords, in an operation called a 'laryngectomy'. When that happens, normal speech can never be regained.

Fortunately, this is not the end of the story. People who have undergone this operation can be taught to speak again, using a different system of voice production. Speech therapists teach them to suck air into the mouth, and to use the back of the mouth to start the air vibrating. This kind of speech is called 'oesophageal'. It can sound rather 'burpy', but in the best speakers it is fluent and clear. However, not everyone finds it easy to produce a new voice in this way. Some instead rely on an 'artificial larynx' - a small device which produces a battery-driven buzz. When this is placed against the neck, it

acts as a replacement for the vocal cords. If the speaker 'mouths' the sounds of speech, this artificial buzz is enough to make the sounds carry. The speech can sound a bit Dalek-like at times, but at least it solves the problem of basic communication.

The nature of the voice

What exactly have we lost, when we 'lose our voice'? In most cases, it is not the loss of the complete ability of our vocal organs to make sounds. We can usually rustle up enough noise to complain about our problem! A whisper, a whistle a click of the teeth or tongue ('tut tut, gee up') are all sounds which can be made without using the voice. So what precisely is 'voice'?

Voice is the buzzing noise made by our vocal cords. The vocal cords (also sometimes called the vocal 'folds') are two bands of muscular tissue which lie across the passageway from the lungs. Their position in the throat is just behind the Adam's apple - in a part of the throat called the 'larynx'. When air coming up from the lungs passes through the cords, they can vibrate, and this produces a typical 'buzz'. You can feel this buzzing if you close your ears with your fingers, then hum. Most of the sounds of English are made with the help of the vibrating vocal cords. These sounds are called 'voiced' sounds. All the vowels are voiced. So are most of the consonants. You can hear the difference if you do the fingers-in ears trick, and hiss an sss sound (as in Sue) followed by a zzz sound (as in zoo). There's no buzz with s: it just sounds like air escaping. It's a voiceless' sound. The buzz comes with z. That's why, when we lose our voice, it's difficult to make ourselves understood. If we can't make any vowels properly, and can't make the difference between such consonants as s and z, or f and v, we have a real problem.

The melody of speech

But it's not just vowels and consonants which are affected by the vocal cords. The melody of the voice is affected too.

Melody in speaking involves just the same features as melody in singing. First of all there is pitch - the ability of the voice to move between low and high. Then there's loudness - we can speak piano or forte, crescendo or diminuendo, if we wish. And lastly, we can vary the timbre with which we speak - as when we adopt a harsh, rasping, or breathy tone. When we lose our voice, all these possibilities are reduced to a single weak whispery effect.

The variations in pitch are especially important - what is usually called the 'intonation' of the voice. We can make the pitch of our voice rise, or fall, or stay level, and produce all kinds of combinations of these tunes. When we vary the voice in this way, we communicate some very important meanings. The difference between 'Anthony's outside?' and 'Anthony's outside!' is pretty important. In the first case, you're asking someone. In the second case you're telling them. The question-mark shows the way the intonation rises, as you ask the question.

Hundreds of emotions can be signalled by using the melody of the voice in this way. We can be curious, angry, sarcastic, sad, uninterested, keen, excited, bored, grim, delighted, querulous, definite, unimpressed, cagey, sexy, dispirited, and much more - all by modulating the way we use pitch, loudness, and timbre.

Special Effects

There are some important special effects which we can make with our vocal cords. A very common one is hold the cords tightly closed - as we do when we 'hold our breath'. If we then suddenly release the breath, we make a cough-like sound. In a real cough, this is noisy and explosive. In speech, we can make it quite quietly, and when we do, it is known as a 'glottal stop'. Many accents of English use a glottal stop as a consonant - most famously, Cockney, where a word like bottle is usually pronounced with a glottal stop replacing that sound.

Some other famous vocal effects arise when we make the cords vibrate in special ways. The voice can become creaky, or breathy or husky and many other things besides. The menacing, gravelly tones of Vincent Price in his horror-movie characters illustrate one kind of creaky voice. Louis Armstrong's voice is another. The 'bedroom' tones of many Garboesque filmstars of the past illustrate a breathy voice.

In everyday life, we use many of these tones to express our daily emotions and attitudes. If we tell a joke, we might slip into the tone of voice we associate with one of the characters. If we are ribbing someone, we might ape the way they speak by exaggerating their tone of voice. Indeed, many people find they do this quite naturally. Fred from Yorkshire meets Eric from Berkshire, and suddenly Eric finds himself putting on some of Fred's accent. If Fred notices, of course, he might not be too pleased!

But it is in the theatre that the full versatility of the speaking voice becomes most apparent. It takes a long time to train an actor to use the voice to maximum effect. There are various vocal styles, of course. Some actors adopt a declaiming style; others are more conversational. But all are conscious of the need to 'project' their voice into the auditorium, and to control it so that slight changes in intonation, loudness, and timbre are able to convey subtle differences of meaning. These contrasts are especially critical in radio drama, where the auditory medium has to stand alone.

This year's theme

This mention of theatre brings me to the arts festival which is an ideal setting to obtain a sense of the glories of the human voice, and the first Llandudno Festival has certainly done justice to its chosen theme, presenting a remarkable range of vocal settings. Most obviously, there is the distinction between speech and song, both well represented. We find song both in

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"IT AIN'T WHAT YOU SAY, IT'S THE WAY THAT YOU SAY IT"

FRIDAY, 21ST OCTOBER 1994 11.00 AM
MARINE HOTEL, LLANDUDNO

David Crystal's hilarious elucidation of the way we speak, like.

David Crystal works from his home in Holyhead as a writer, editor, lecturer, and broadcaster. Formerly professor of linguistics at the University of Reading, he now has honorary affiliation to the University of Wales, Bangor. These days he divides his time between work on language and work on general reference publishing. He has written over 40 books in the field of language, including *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of Language*. He is also the editor of the general reference book *The Cambridge Encyclopedia*, and of other encyclopedias in the Cambridge University Press family. His next major book is *The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language*, out early next year. On the arts side, he writes poetry, and regularly appears at arts festivals. He is also the director of the Ucheldre Centre, Holyhead's new development for the arts.

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solo form and in group or unison form, in duets and choirs. These last effects are not very common in speech; we do not usually speak as a duet! Unison speech is more likely, but only in very special settings when speech comes closest to music.

A very special occasion arises when authors allow us to hear their written voice, as in the reading by R S Thomas. Poets are not necessarily the best readers of their own work, but their performance is always exciting and intriguing, because it gives us glimpses of the personality which we perceive in their writing. Another special occasion comes whenever someone tries to capture the 'voice' of a famous personality, as in Prunella Scales' remarkable portrayal of Queen Victoria from youth to old age.

When we experience performances of this kind, we begin to appreciate the fundamental role of the voice. The term may stand for the whole person, as when we talk about the 'voice' of Queen Victoria or 'Great Voices of the 20th Century'. It is so basic to our way of thinking that we can even apply it to the non-human world. We might hear Elinor Bennett's playing described as 'the voice of the harp'. Indeed, I would not be surprised if

people at the Festival Lunch did not begin to talk about the voice of the soup and the intonation of the wine.

LLANGOLLEN CHORAL CONCERT

This event is being held at the Royal International Pavilion for the first time next May. The event is intended to become an annual Choral Festival.

Next May the concert will celebrate the VE Day anniversary and will be the largest concert of its type to be held in the principality.

There will be a total of 20 Male Voice Choirs from North Wales and the North West. Currently we are estimating a combined total of 750 voices; making the event the largest Male Voice Concert to be held in North Wales. The two-hour programme will highlight two of the top soloists from this year's National Eisteddfod.

The full programme and ticket availability will commence in November 1994. All enquiries should be directed to the Festival Office.

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