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WHAT GOES ALONG WITH THE WORDS*

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All of us have mannerisms to some extent. Seemingly by compulsion, we habitually do certain peculiar things unconsciously for no apparent reason; we just keep on doing them. Mannerisms are not necessarily unpleasant or annoying to others. They may pass almost unnoticed, or even be subtly attractive as somehow an inseparable part of an individual personality. When they are conspicuous, however, they tend to distract attention, and when frequently repeated they may become insufferable.

The kind of example we are likely to think of first is the use of peculiar gestures in talking. This is something quite distinct from the traditional "standard" gestures which seem to fit naturally with respective situations. Different languages have widely varying sets of hand, head, or body movements as accompaniment to speech. Each language has its own characteristic gestures which appear to come automatically when it is spoken in the native manner. With the older languages they are generally graceful and somehow add force or effectiveness to what is being said.

Watching a speech through a sound-proof window, and with no attempt at lip-reading with one of the easiest languages to lip-read, one should be able sooner or later to identify a native speaker of French by his gestures alone. Without being exaggerated, in fact relatively slight movements, they would be recognizably characteristic.

Typical Italian gesturing usually seems more conspicuous, more sweeping, and more continual. French people used to say playfully about Italians: "Ils ne peuvent pas se faire comprendre dans le noir." (They can't make themselves understood in the dark.)

One time many years ago I listened to a lecture by a psychologist friend of mine who developed the theory that for profoundly psychological reasons certain gestures seemed instinctive. His favorite example was the shaking of the head in saying "no." Having lived several years in what we used to call the Near East, I had to take him to task afterward about *that* idea. With various languages in that part of the world, the instinctive negative gesture is raising the

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head, lifting the eyebrows, more or less closing the eyes. It seems to fit perfectly, for instance, with Arabic *la* or Turkish *hâir* (higher). Shaking the head just as naturally means "I don't quite understand," "I don't get you."

Now English, at least as we know it in modern times, does not carry with it an equipment of typical gestures as many other languages do. Many years ago, well before World War I, an illustrated article in a then popular magazine dealt with the different ways of gesturing habitual with people according to the language they spoke. The last of the illustrations, entitled "when the American speaks," showed a man standing with his hands in his pockets. At that time it seemed obviously true to life. Within the last generation or two, however, a considerable change seems to have taken place. Nowadays most Americans, especially when they speak in public, are inclined to use their hands a good deal. Unfortunately, the movements are too often awkward, pointless, and monotonously repetitious, grabbing or chopping at the air or meaningless waving at nothing in particular. They can become painful to watch. What we see is not any kind of appropriate reinforcement of speech but mere nervous fidgetiness, a lack of self-control.

About the time Dale Carnegie's book, *How to Win Friends and Influence People*, was new and on the crest of the wave, I happened to read it by accident. I was accompanying a friend who had a date with a dentist. The book was lying on the table in the waiting-room, and I picked it up. It was not a thick book; my friend's time in the dental chair was quite long enough for me to read it through.

In the town where I then lived, every year the local teachers' association sponsored a series of lectures and entertainments. One of the numbers that year was a speech by Mr. Carnegie. As I listened to it, I recognized it as an absolutely textual reproduction of the book, even with the same jokes, and including the irrelevant tirade against the teaching of Latin. This last item was a beautiful example of how to win friends; the chairman of the committee which had engaged his services was head of the Latin department in the high school.

His delivery was good—clean-cut, smooth, easy to follow. The detail which stands out most distinctly in my memory, however, the only departure from the text of the book, was a would-be dramatic gesture of which he seemed to be fond; pointing at us vigorously with the words "Now *look!*" For my part, I don't like being ordered around. That gesture, with the accompanying command, affected me about the same way as grabbing my coat-lapels. I rebel against violent means of getting attention.

Perhaps we should face the apparent fact that gestures, while they *may* be helpful, are not really necessary, and had better be avoided entirely or at least kept to a minimum unless they are clearly and positively effective. A good practice in self-discipline for anyone preparing to speak in public—or to act a part in an amateur play—is to rehearse the speech with his hands hanging limp like wet dishcloths. Eventually he may have a feeling for natural gestures at certain points, but he will avoid distracting attention by senselessly pawing the air.

In years gone by, a source of mild dissension in my family was my lack of admiration for Eleanor Roosevelt. Her syndicated column, "My Day," seemed to me an almost unbelievable example of how words could be smoothly and confidently strung out to considerable length without really saying anything. In speech, her pronunciation seemed to me affected. On one occasion, however, Mrs. Roosevelt finally won my respect for one thing at least. Seated at the end of the balcony near the proscenium arch, I looked almost directly down upon her as she gave her address. So I could see that her hands were lying completely relaxed on the podium in front of her. She had no compulsion for irrelevant gesticulation.

Along with gestures as we ordinarily think of them, people can become enslaved to ridiculous mannerisms of various sorts. We have all suffered from the annoying exercises which sometimes make it hard to keep our mind on what the speaker is saying. It may be repeated hair-brushing or cheek-caressing, or prolonged playing with handy pieces of equipment such as eyeglasses. In reports of speeches by Marshall McLuhan one thing regularly mentioned is his continually "twirling his glasses." In defense of the audience, somebody ought to snatch them away from him, taking the bull by the horn-rims.

The worst example I can think of is the behavior of a college teacher in whose classes I was once enrolled. Every class-hour began with a ceremony which was always repeated as exactly as anything can be that is done awkwardly. He would enter the room with a somewhat diffident, apologetic air, usually carrying a pile of books which were mere stage properties; he seldom opened any of them, though he might later move them to half a dozen different places on his table. Walking rather quickly and yet stiffly he would reach the haven of his desk and get safely behind it. Having arrived there, with a jerky movement he would pull out the lowest right-hand drawer. Thus, with his chair turned at a certain angle, he had a place to prop his foot. Then with his right hand he would pick up

the nice, new, long yellow pencil (you couldn't keep your eyes from following it) which he used in gesturing. With these indispensable preparations, and glancing vaguely over the top of his spectacles at the first few rows, he was ready to begin.

Like many "self-made" public speakers, he was in complete bondage to a small set of pointless gestures which he repeated continually. Always irrelevant, instead of enforcing anything that he had to say, they merely distracted attention because they were too conspicuous to be ignored. They were awkward movements, timid and negative, never aggressive or suggestive of any power or thought behind them.

More distinctly than anything else about him, I remember his *hands*. Any person's hands, I think, have a kind of natural beauty when they look capable of *doing things*. His, however, had as little of that appearance as any that I can recall ever having seen. Though he was rather slender than otherwise, his hands looked fat; they seemed stiff without strength, lacking in any suggestion of physical force and without any sign of grace or delicate dexterity to make up for it. He always had to be picking up some article and holding it, and his hand always looked as if it were made to be holding something else, though you couldn't imagine what. His inevitable gestures, which might have been bothersome enough anyhow, constantly made more inescapably obvious that unattractive part of his physique. I think of him as exemplifying just about everything that a public performer should learn *not* to do.

Against any such unedifying exhibition a captive audience does have a defense, though it seems unfair that it should be required; instead of watching the speaker you *can* look in some other direction. You have no convenient escape, however, from what you cannot help *hearing*. You have no protection against the boresome repetition of superfluous pet phrases to which the speaker is irresistibly drawn. And the worst of all audible annoyances is surely the commonest, what has been euphemistically called "vocalized pauses," the continual interlarding of sentences with "uh." Oliver Wendell Holmes, in *A Rhymed Lesson*, put final emphasis on avoidance of that fault as a most important point:

"And when you stick on conversation's burs,

Don't strew your pathway with those dreadful *urs*."

He spelled *uh* "ur," but of course the *r* meant no more there than in "burs." Other ways of spelling the non-word include "er" and "ah" as well as "uh." Since the vowel is vague anyhow, one may take his choice.

In our day an indignant protest has been made by a professor who, having attended innumerable scientific conferences, has suffered from this scourge to the limit of his endurance. What finally prompted him to speak out strongly on the subject was a symposium in Paris where he listened to many papers in French, which he understood as easily as English. "The speakers," he said, "varied in eloquence, clarity, and audibility, but every talk possessed a quality of smoothness and directness whose origin I was unable at first to identify. Eventually it became trivially simple: Every sound uttered by a speaker was part of a French word."

He was struck by the extreme contrast with scientific meetings in the United States. "I await the day," he says, "when an unusually honest speaker of *Ah-ah-ese* will begin his talk with: '*a-a-aum!* The—*uh*—insignificance of my—*uh*—remarks will—*uh*—be—*uh*—minimized, or—*uh*—concealed, by the—*uh*—*uh*—braying noises I am—*uh*—*uh*—*uh*—emitting.'" He would like to have speakers "cut out the noise, pronounce nothing but English words, and remain silent during the birth-pangs of the next inspired phrase." (1)

If it seems that the "uh" habit is an occupational disease of teachers, it should be emphasized that they have no monopoly of it. Plenty of speakers at business conferences or other non-academic gatherings are equally addicted. Among the worst perpetrators are many people from all walks of life whom we hear interviewed on the radio. It seems to me that orchestra conductors and art critics are among the very worst. A distinguished writer on human behavior has referred to the "hesitating 'er'" as being in his estimation "the most universal and also one of the most exasperating mannerisms of speakers." He went on to say: "Hesitation in a speech is not a bad thing. In fact, in a speech, he who never hesitates is lost. Rattling on without a stop gives the effect of something learned by heart. But when the speaker pauses between his words or sentences, as if to formulate more clearly his idea, let him, in the name of all that is artistically wholesome, not slip in the distressing 'er.'" (2)

Of course we do not forget that many of those who make us suffer needlessly in this way may be the finest kind of people in many respects. If we must forgive them, however, at least we should take to heart their lessons in *what not to do*. We can resolve for ourselves that we shall never, *never*, NEVER allow ourselves to become enslaved by this vicious habit which is totally unnecessary.

References

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2. H. A. Overstreet, *Influencing Human Behavior*, New York, W. W. Norton & Co., Inc., 1925, p. 81.