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BUT HOW DOES IT SOUND?

Louis Foley

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In preparing for an eventual business or professional career, there is one basically important area which appears to be largely overlooked. Educators everywhere are perennially concerned with methods or devices for improving the teaching of reading, which is generally accepted as the most useful of all "tools" for continued learning. Prominent people in business and industry emphasize the importance of "communication," which is usually understood to be in the form of writing. Little attention seems to be given, however, to the elemental skill without which reading and writing must rest on a weak foundation: the ability to *speak* well. Schools and colleges do give courses in public speaking, and many students have found these very profitable, but they have the disadvantage of beginning at the wrong end. The basic matter is one's *private* speaking, the quality of his ordinary conversation in everyday affairs. There is where occurs the formation that makes the difference. And it is not to be had by "taking a course."

To anyone who is at all observant or sensitive to implications, a speaker may unconsciously communicate a good deal besides his intended "message." Obviously there is the matter of vocabulary. The mere fact that he unhesitatingly employs a certain word or turn of phrase may reveal much about his background of knowledge and experience. His natural choice of terms may indicate an attitude or a prejudice. The structure of his sentences will show how well he sees an idea as a whole, whether he thinks straight through a statement or whether his thoughts are put together on slipshod patterns. These are elements of the real *content* of what he has to say. Inseparable from that in the total effect, however, is how he actually says it—the way his words sound as he utters them.

No doubt all of us are affected by certain voices which we find more or less pleasant than others, perhaps because of some seeming resemblance to ones that were familiar to us in our childhood. For better or for worse, the peculiar *timbre* of a person's voice is something beyond his power to change. It is amazing how we instantly recognize—over the telephone, for instance—voices that we may not have heard for years. Nevertheless *any* voice, whatever its particular quality, can be made easier to listen to, and much more pleasant in its effect, when one simply pronounces his words correctly and distinctly. This has to be done easily, as a matter of course, without strain, not distracting attention by "making a production of it."

Too often people's efforts to improve their speech have missed the point entirely. It is *not* a matter of picking out certain words and saying them in an affected manner copied from an unfamiliar dialect, or from the snobbish distortions of people who are trying to "show off." This mistaken notion was thoroughly exemplified by teachers of "Speech," after World War I, when there was a considerable vogue of aping British ways. They drilled students in the telescoping or jamming-up of a certain number of words which in this country have been less corrupted in their spoken form. So in the midst of sentences otherwise in natural American accent, *circumstances* would become "circumstnces," *secretary* would be "secretry," and so on. It would have been wiser to work on words which English people enunciate *more* distinctly than Americans are likely to do—*La-tin* not "Latn," or *Mar-tin* not "Martn"—or the ability to say quickly and yet completely such phrases as "What are you doing?" or "Where are you going?," not "Whatch do-un?" or "Wheh go-un?"

Any person of ordinary intelligence who truly desires to make his speech more pleasing and effective can achieve vast improvement by applying a few simple principles. Of course it is a discipline which has to be strictly maintained until habits are so well established that they require no conscious effort. It has to become part of one's way of life. Everyone has constant opportunity for practice, which can be done silently in one's mind as well as audibly, or with the aid of a tape-recorder, though such equipment is only a convenience not a necessity. It is important, however, to exercise oneself especially in complete sentences as well as with individual words. In the first place it is necessary to see very clearly just "what the thing is all about."

What makes the difference between clean-cut and sloppy pronunciation is the treatment of *syllables*, which are the real units of speech, not "words" as such. Now unfortunately, as it may appear, English is naturally spoken in a way which seems very peculiar from the point of view of other languages, and which lays it open to easy corruption as other languages are not. We put a strong stress on accented syllables, and allow the unaccented ones to subside into a blur. This, incidentally, is the principal reason why people make so many mistakes in spelling. Whatever so-called "vowel" we write in an unaccented syllable, it tends to bog down to "uh," and in the most careless speech it easily disappears entirely. *Grammar* is pronounced simply "gramr," and only in a longer form where the accent shifts, *grammatical* or *grammarian*, do we see why there is an *a* in the second syllable; likewise in these the *first* *a* subsides into "uh." In extreme contrast

is the utterance of French, in which all syllables are equally distinct, are pronounced separately, and whenever possible begin with a *consonant*, whereas in English *Ca-na-da* becomes "CANuhduh," or *Ma-da-ga-scar* becomes "MADuhGASKur." Needless to say, the rather hectic, galloping manner of English speech which sets it apart from other tongues is not going to be changed. What we can do, however, is to keep from exaggerating it.

The limit in mistreating syllables is leaving them out altogether, and this is precisely what causes many of the crudities of speech that we hear every day. It distorts *real* into "reel," *family* into "famy," *accidentally* into "axdently," *usually* into "uzhly," *power* into "par," *parents* into "pairnts," *water* into "wahr," *winter* into "winr," or *government* into "guhmnt."

What we call "words" are often rather artificial divisions of thought. Generally we think and speak in phrases, clauses, or whole sentences. It is in these natural groupings that the neglect of syllables really shows up. Instead of *out to* (or *at*) *the lake*, the careless speaker says "out thlake"; for *look at the book*, "look tuh book"; for *put it in the car*, "put-t-nuh car"; for *listen to her*, "lissn toor." Possibly the commonest example is the wearisome corruption of *going to* into "gonnuh." Complete elimination of the last-named blemish might be a good starting-point for anyone who realizes that his speech is not what it should be, and who "means business" about making it less offensive even to only slightly sensitive ears.

One item which deserves special attention is the vowel *u*, in places where it is correctly pronounced like the pronoun "you." In many words, of course, even the worst speakers take care of it well enough, as in *use*, *abuse*, *excuse*, *cure*, *cube*, or *human*. Yet in a considerable number it comes in for negligent treatment. Even before dignified audiences, we sometimes hear lecturers not *introduced* but "inter-dooed." *Reduce*, *illusion*, and *institution* often degenerate similarly. Anything from "literatoor" to "lit-t-chr" passes frequently for *literature*. But where this vowel *u* suffers worst is in unaccented syllables. There it almost disappears entirely, so far as some people are concerned. *Regular* will be corrupted to "reglr," *particular* will slump into "pticlr," *accurate* will bog down into "acrut," *perpendicular* will slip into "perpndiclr," *temperature* becomes "tempechr," *manufacture* will be jumbled into "manuhfakshr."

Originally the combination *ew* represented quite logically the sound of *e* as in *get* plus the sound of *w*. For centuries, however, it has been equivalent to *u*, as in *few*. As a rule no one thinks of pronouncing it

otherwise. *Hew* is not confused with *who*, or *mew* with *moo*—any more than people confuse the cat and the cow whose respective calls are so named. Yet *new* and *knew* get warped into “noo.” If nobody confuses *use* with *ooze*, *mute* with *moot*, or *pure* with *poor*, then surely there is no need to make *due* or *dew* sound like “do.”

If a person allows himself to hurdle syllables *at all*, the thing soon becomes a habit which shows in every mouthful of words that he utters. It makes a profound difference in the *rhythm* of one's speech. Instead of the pleasing cadence of well-spoken English, there is a harsh jolting effect. The whole tone will become less agreeable. A different “atmosphere” is created.

On the positive side, anyone who will take the trouble to cultivate clean-cut pronunciation will accomplish a great improvement in the effect of what he has to say. His hearers may not realize just what it is that makes his speech better, but they will find him easier to listen to. In any kind of business situation, surely this is a very practical matter. You can hold people's attention if they *like* to hear you talk.

A person who has well-established habits of clean-cut enunciation in his ordinary, everyday speech has the best kind of basic preparation for occasions when he is called upon to speak in public. The first obligation of anyone addressing an audience is to make himself *heard* . . . easily, without any special effort on the part of his listeners. This does not call for shouting. Distinctness of utterance counts for far more to make easy listening than having a “strong” voice or merely increasing the volume, which tends to make the words *less* distinct. This is true because of a peculiarity in the ways of our language. Whereas in French, for instance, emphasis is given by stressing consonants so that the emphatic word is more sharply defined than usual, in English the stress goes on the accented vowel and the consonants are dimmed. Notice how a person says “*damn*” when he is really angry; all the force goes onto a dragged-out “a.” If someone is yelling across a field at the top of his lungs, it will sound the same whether he says “bat,” “cat,” “rat,” “fat,” or “sat.” The people who speak the most loudly are not necessarily by any means the easiest to understand.

There is something to be said for the moral aspect of good speech. Making one's words crystal clear is a way of showing consideration for those who are expected to listen. It is a means always at our command, day after day, to contribute toward making this world a pleasanter place in which to live.