

**Voice and vocabulary**

To start, let's define the terms:

**Voice** - the sounds made when we speak or sing.

**Vocabulary** - the range of words we know and use.

Our *voice* is one of our most recognisable features – it is a central part of our personal brand. It is also our main means of communication. Depending on how we use it, our *voice* can be a valuable asset – but for some it can also be a handicap.

Along with our voice, our *vocabulary* is another core part of our personal brand. The range of words in our *vocabulary* will have much to do with our experiences, our aspirations, our intentions, and our connections.

Together, our *voice* and our *vocabulary* form our '*vocal image*'.

**The messages we send**

Whenever we speak, there is a message in *what* we say, and there is also a message in *how* we say it. While the first of these is intentional, the other is usually not. Our pitch, pace, tone, volume and accent all reveal something about us – e.g. our emotions and also our nationality. Our *vocabulary*, which delivers the intended message, will reveal something about our knowledge, intelligence, and possibly our education.

As soon as we start to speak, those hearing us begin to make judgements about our credibility (e.g. confidence, knowledge, authenticity). By the time we have spoken barely a dozen words, people will be forming an opinion about us – and once formed, that can be hard to change. Of course, when the roles are reversed, we do exactly the same to others.

**Body language and first impressions**

Whenever we meet with someone, even before a word is spoken, each party forms an opinion about

the other from observing body language and appearance. When we do speak, no matter how well groomed we are, if our voice does not match our appearance, our impact will be diminished.

'Face-to-face' communication comprises spoken words, tone of voice, and various other non-verbal actions. When there is an inconsistency between spoken words and non-verbal messages, the audience is more likely to be influenced by the non-verbal messages than by the spoken words. In situations where face-to-face connection is not possible, such as a telephone conversation, the only channel available to present ourselves is our *voice*. The initial impression of our *vocal image* will be based on the pitch, pace, tone, volume and accent of our voice; any of these can become a barrier.

Once someone has 'tuned in' to our pitch, pace, tone, volume and accent, they can focus on our message, i.e. the spoken words. Their ability to comprehend what we are saying will be affected by our *vocabulary* and our clarity, particularly when they are not able to observe our body language. Clarity is about how correctly words are sounded, and also how effectively words are used to express ideas, etc. *Vocabulary* (and clarity) is also part of our *vocal image*.

**Does voice overshadow content?**

A 2013 article in the Wall Street Journal [1] cited research by communications company Quantified Impressions showing how 'content' has a substantially lesser influence on an audience than does the sound of a person's *voice* (11% versus 23%). While this article has been referred to by numerous *voice* coaches (and others), because the original data and context of the research is not readily available, I am hesitant to declare it 'definitive'.

That said, there is a certain plausibility to the proposition. From my personal experience, I can

certainly recall situations where a person's *voice* compromised their message. Several years ago, while working on a job redesign project, I was assigned a Subject Matter Expert to help me. I had heard about her work, and she had a very sound reputation. When we first met, I noted her to be a tall, well presented lady. Then she spoke – the pitch of her *voice* was rather high, and she also had a quite strong Australian 'twang' (the broad, nasally sound known affectionately as '*Strine*' to Aussies). It took me several moments to attune to this delivery – the visual impact was positive, but the initial *vocal image* was something else.

Over the years I have encountered a number of instances where a person's *vocal image* has been a barrier. Generally this has to do with my ability to comprehend what is being said, e.g. a fast-paced delivery, especially when combined with a high-pitched *voice*, or even a strong accent, can be very difficult. A colleague once experienced a challenging situation at a Brisbane airport security check – he could not comprehend the officer's rather heavily Scots-accented questions, which were spoken at a quite fast pace. Eventually the rather frustrated officer and equally frustrated traveller achieved some sort of 'understanding' and peace prevailed.

**Developing our voice**

For most of us, speaking/talking comes easily – we just allow our *voices* to express our thoughts and emotions. And we do it all of the time – sometimes without any 'thinking'! Again, for most of us, unless we had apparent speech problems at school, our *voices* and vocal 'behaviours' will have developed relatively naturally, with little or no intervention such as *voice coaching* or elocution.

Our 'natural development' has probably been strongly influenced by our environment (family, friends) and by our 'idols' (media personalities). As

young children, we tend to mimic those around us – particularly parents and older siblings. As we grow older, we may be influenced by our friends and those we look up to. As teenagers, we often adopt the mannerisms of various cultural ‘idols’, such as social media celebrities, movie/television actors, entertainment and sports stars. Examples of this are ‘uptalk’ and ‘vocal fry’ [2].

There are many ‘voice coaching’ practitioners offering their services via the Web. Several years ago I worked with a two such experts on a *voice skills* program for contact centre agents [3]. The program enabled agents to understand how to manage and use their *voices*, not only as *voice* professionals, but also in their personal lives. What was very noticeable was how the attitude of individual agents largely determined the level of success they achieved. Two key points for me were correct breathing and *voice* ‘warm ups’. Overall, the program was quite effective – I would commend this sort of thing to anyone who wants to develop their *voice skills*, whether for professional purposes, or otherwise.

### Voice properties

Today, most of us will hear a number of different *voices* – family, friends, colleagues, co-workers, strangers, media, etc. Some of these *voices* will be easy to understand, and some will not (even when we know the language). Some *voices* will be pleasant to listen to, others will not. Every *voice* is unique, with its own set of properties. Even when we cannot see someone, we can use the sound of a *voice* as a means of recognition.

There is quite a range of terms and definitions in use for voice skills and various *voice properties* (aka features/characteristics/qualities/etc.). This can make it quite challenging to conduct research. Here is my take on some of the more common terms related to *voice properties*:

- **clarity** – how we combine sounds and words to give meaning, involves:
  - ... *enunciation*:- forming sounds into words;
  - ... *pronunciation*:- sounding whole words correctly;
  - ... *articulation*:- expressing something in words (i.e. using our *vocabulary*)
- **pitch** – the frequency range (high ↔low) of our *voice*
- **pace** (aka tempo) – the speed at which we speak
- **volume** (aka loudness) – how loudly we speak
- **tone** (aka timbre, colour) – the emotional content of our *voice*
- **accent** – a distinctive way of pronouncing words

Other *voice properties* include:

- **energy** – variation in the pace, volume, tone and pitch of our *i*
- **intonation** – variation in pitch to express surprise or pose a question
- **inflection** – variation in pitch or tone
- **rhythm/cadence** – variation in the flow of our spoken words
- **resonance** – the depth of sound in our *voice*
- **emphasis** – stress applied to particular words
- **pause** – used for emphasis, to help our audience keep up with us, and for us to breathe
- **dialect** – geographical variations in how a language is spoken, e.g. ‘*Singlish*’

### Our vocabulary

Whether we opt to use a ‘conversational’ *vocabulary* of well-known words, or we prefer a wider (say - intellectual or academic) ‘lexicon’, our personal *vocabulary* is likely to continue expanding throughout our lives as we encounter new words. Effective communication does not necessarily require an extensive *vocabulary* – for example

(according to TalkEnglish.com [4]), knowledge of just 2000 English words will allow someone to speak fluent English.

When speaking, shorter sentences (<20 words), are invariably easier for an audience to comprehend. Comprehension is further aided when the actual words we use are in common usage. Conversely, use of less commonly used words will hinder our audience’s ability to understand our message. This is particularly so when members of our audience are not native speakers of the language we are using. Many English words have multiple meanings, which can be a source of frustration for non-native speakers, e.g. check out the word ‘[articulation](#)’.

### Our ‘vocal image’ – asset or liability?

In face-to-face communication, our body language also contributes to our message; however when there is only one channel available (e.g. telephone), we rely totally on our *voice* and our *vocabulary*. It is very easy to ‘lose’ our audience because of how we sound or what we say, i.e. our ‘*vocal Image*’. In particular, our *voice* pitch, pace, tone and clarity, and even our accent, can all be barriers which inhibit our audience from actually hearing our message. Our *vocabulary* can also be a barrier – especially if we choose to use words that our audience is not familiar with.

### Worth a look

Our free nugget for this Post is the Toastmasters International resource page “[Your Speaking Voice](#)” – this page offers PDF downloads about understanding and improving your voice (in a number of languages).

### Coming next

Getting your ideas across - from concept to fruition  
<http://freezapnuggets.com/wordpress/?p=1404>