

Coaching Corner



Beauty is in the vowels, passion in the consonants

November 2014

Diction is important in being understood. Diction is also important in setting the mood at any point in your talk. Has anyone ever complimented you on the passion you bring to your presentations? Has the opposite ever happened? How you say your words makes a big difference in the perception of that passion.

Vowels and consonants

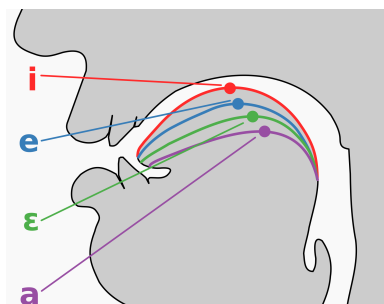
Most native English (American or British) speakers have grown up learning that our language contains vowels (a, e, i, o, u, and sometimes w and y) and consonants (all the other letters and letter combinations). If speaking expressively involved only textbook pronunciation of each of these, it would be a simple discipline indeed.

But ask any non-native speaker how difficult it was to learn all the nuances of English pronunciation and you will quickly discover that it is much more complicated than that to learn how to speak effectively. A simple focus on vowels or consonants can entirely change the mood of your message. A musical friend of mine once told me "Beauty is in the vowels;

passion is in the consonants". We'll take a little closer look at this characterization and its wisdom in this article.

The beautiful vowels

If you listen to someone singing, the melody or harmony you hear is the pitch of the vowels being sung. Since most consonants have no pitch, they don't contribute to the melody or, consequently, the beauty of what you are singing or speaking.



While each vowel has its own unique mouth shape and tongue position, the mouth is always open on a vowel. And singers learn that a more open space brings more resonance and richness to those vowels. I discuss resonance in another article, but if you want your voice to sound beautiful, pay attention to keeping your mouth open and relaxed.

The beautiful consonants

There are a set of consonants called the singable consonants - l, m, n, r, v, w, z. These singable consonants are different than the others because you can actually put pitch on them. If you hum a song to yourself, it's often on the "m" vowel ("mm-mm-mm").



Because these consonants have pitch just like vowels, you can use them to emphasize a word while still retaining the beauty of a vowel. An example might be "I just LLL-ove this town", adding extra duration to the "l" in "love" for emphasis. Elongation of singable vowels can be very effective in adding emphasis to your message while retaining warmth and friendliness.

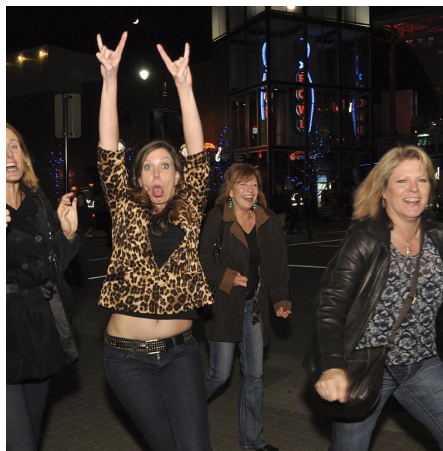
The powerful consonants

In contrast to the beautiful consonants, there are a set of consonants that bring real power to words. These are the hard unvoiced consonants - f, k, p, s, t. Because these consonants have no pitch, and

thus no beauty, they can bring intense passion and real strength to your message. Also because they have no pitch, they really can't be elongated. So to use them for emphasis, you must amplify their volume. Try saying "trouble" as you would in normal conversation and then "**T**rouble" with much more emphasis on the initial "T". You'll instantly see how much more powerful the second is and how this "**T**rouble" may have a much stronger meaning than just normal "trouble".

The in-between consonants

This leaves one last set of consonants - b, d, g, j. These are called voiced consonants because your voice is engaged but they still aren't consonants you can hum a tune on. Like the unvoiced consonants, they can't be elongated. They can only be emphasized by making them louder. An example might be "That was a **G**reat concert." The extra emphasis



on the "G" of "Great" adds some real enthusiasm to your message but not quite the more intense passion of "That was a **K**iller concert."

Use sparingly

One last piece of advice - Like anything powerful, use of elongated or emphasized consonants should be used sparingly unless you're trying to start a street riot. Decide



your overall mood and set your vowel/consonant mix accordingly. Then intersperse different emphasis to make key points more strongly. Pick the spots in your speech that really need a little extra snap, and see how you might use the techniques presented here to bring your message to life.

Summary

If you want to bring more beauty, more passion, or just more effectiveness to your next speech, pay attention to how you deliver the words you use to bring your message to your audience. Some very simple adjustments to your diction can make all the difference in the world.