

## **Word ... Words ... Words**

**(Literary Club – 3/17/14)**

Words can motivate. Words can kill. Words can soothe. It is estimated that verbal communication has been used for some one hundred thousand years. But it is only recently, some three thousand years before Christ, that the Egyptians formalized speech into written form.

Certain phrases stick to the mind and memory. “I regret that I have only one life to give for my country” – Nathan Hale, speaking from the scaffold before being hanged by the British as a spy during the American Revolutionary War. “No pasarán” (they will not pass) – La Pasionaria from Madrid during the Spanish Civil War...She supplied the grit and determination for the loyalist troops defending the capital from the surrounding forces of Franco. “Give me liberty or give me death” – Patrick Henry shouting in hyperbole from the floor of the Virginia Assembly as they debated the issue of declaring independence from Britain.. “The only thing we have to fear is fear itself” – Franklin D. Roosevelt. These words from FDR’s inaugural address to Congress and the nation in 1933 set the tone as his administration faced the economic disaster of the depression. “Mr. Gorbachev, tear down this wall” – Ronald Reagan. This was Reagan’s famous call in Berlin to set free the captive populace behind the Iron Curtain. It helped set afoot the forces that led to the wall literally crumbling in 1989. “Ask not what your country will do for you – ask what you can do for your country” – John F. Kennedy’s stirring words in his 1961 inaugural address to activate the country, particularly the youth, to selfless service for the good of the nation. It also happens that he borrowed this statement from the motto of Choate School

where he studied before entering Harvard. “All I have to offer is blood, sweat, and tears” – Winston Churchill, although what he said was more extensive, but the press cut it to the shorter version. And the recorded ramblings of Adolf Hitler just before his suicide contained the following, “I was nothing ... a penniless, hungry artist in Vienna. Everything I ever achieved came by words.”

These are short, pithy, and effective comments that demonstrate the power of words. But the language used by these leaders and ourselves is seldom so clear and concise. Linguistic studies conclude that people say an average of fifteen thousand words each day. They also estimate there are 1,500 verbal errors, or 10% of the time.

And what do these disfluencies consist of? There are a lot of starts and stops, repeats or rephrasing. But the principle problem lies with the universal “ers” or “ums” that pepper our speech.

Verbal blunders have been around for as long as humans have been speaking. When you talk, you hesitate, you stop, you repeat, you repair, you fix, and often you utter the wrong words and confuse them in the most ham handed way. You say “er”, you hesitate on "um". All sorts of verbal errors can be found in our sentences like bubbles in champagne. The next time you say something, listen carefully to yourself. The bulk of these go unnoticed or brushed aside. They are so common that they are ignored by listeners.

But verbal blunders are rich with meaning. They exist in all the world languages, even in the

speech of the most golden-tongued. A verbal blunder is an indelible mark of humanness. It is one behavior that cannot be simulated by computers. There are two common types – one is a momentary loss of control called a “slip of the tongue”. The other is an interruption in what we think should be smoothly flowing statements, called a speech disfluency. Human behavior is full of what is called “momentary control problems”. A concert pianist may have rehearsed for months, but still hits the wrong notes on opening night. A skilled baker puts in a tablespoon not a teaspoon of salt. These unplanned errors can result in air disasters, medical mistakes, auto accidents, even walking into another room and forgetting why you did it. Because of this unpredictable human element, we have sought to design around them with devices such as antilock brakes and robot surgeons. Meanwhile, our errors prevail, hobbling the continuity of speaking. Smoothness is an ideal like glossy locks of hair or smooth clear skin. But without special effort, it escapes us.

Transcribers at the Federal News Service in Washington encounter large quantities of errors every weekday morning. Their job is to turn into written form the words from White House briefings, Federal agency press conferences, congressional hearings, and corporate speeches from yesterday. For eight hours a day the transcribers turn speech into text, making ordinary words into a commodity posted on websites and sold to hundreds of clients. These transcripts have to be readable, so the language is cleaned up by in-house rules that proscribe “don’t type ‘um’, ‘ah’, ‘er’ or partial words.” The style guide also stipulates that a false start or starts consisting of only one or two words should not be included, if the omission does not affect the meaning.

Only one exception is allowed. “Do not clean up major policy makers, including the president.” The reason is that not only what they say but also how they say it often makes the news.

When George H. W. Bush (George the First) was president, he gave a speech commemorating Pearl Harbor but mistakenly gave the date as September 7, so the Federal News Service kept September 7. Later the White House corrected the error to December 7. During his administration George W. Bush (George the Second) praised the efforts of a national counterism director. The Federal News team left “counterism” intact. The veteran transcribers are so used to eliminating from a transcript the “uh” and “um” in speeches that they don’t register in their minds any more. However, the extraneous phrases “like”, “you know”, “I mean” still irritate.

In the early 1990s a team of researchers in Menlo Park, California, developed a robot named Flakey. It was a three foot tall black box that could roam around their offices like a large mobile single minded filing cabinet. It could move out of the way of walking humans and also navigate obstacles. It was programmed to understand spoken commands to retrieve objects from various places. Problems arose if you ordered Flakey to go on a mission and you didn’t know for several seconds if he had understood what you had said. The robot would sit there, humming, while it processed the command. So sometimes individuals repeated themselves, which gave the robot two commands to process and confused it, making it stall. The solution came from a speech researcher who was studying how the extraneous sounds of “er”, “uh”, and “um” function in communication. The suggestion was made that Flakey be programmed to say “uh” after receiving a command. This pause filler was an effective signal to the human that the robot was not broken down and eased the interaction between the individual and the machine.

During the 2000 presidential campaign, George W. Bush's speech was ridiculed by the media. Whether you sympathized with Bush's politics or not, the critics of his verbal style took humorous liberties in telling us what he was really saying. Why did we care about how Bush talked? Do we care what any president says? Of course, we do. Americans expect their political leaders to speak in a particular way – though they seldom do.

Surprisingly, Bush's speaking, blunders and all, turned out to be more of a political asset than a liability. The American voters seemed willing to accept his errors as an authenticity that they found lacking in smooth-tongued politicians. The quirky and casual, whether it is intentional or spontaneous, can often inspire more trust than the slick and polished. It all depends on how you say it.

On an opposite tack, one linguist treated his own pauses and restarts and “ers” as deviations. He slowed down his speech to try to avoid them. He was reasonably successful. His new, and to himself, more ponderous approach in selecting words set him apart from others. The result was that individuals paid more attention to his comments and new-found sagacity. He was dumbfounded.

Lurking behind the wall of “ers”, “uhs”, and “ums” lay the embarrassing verbal blunders of metaphasis. This involves the transposition of words and syllables that turn an ordinary phrase into an often humorous mistake. The man whose name is most associated with this type of blunder is William Archibald Spooner of Oxford University. His errors have been immortalized

in poems and songs and particularly by lending his name to a type of slip of the tongue he was unusually prone to make. For Spooner these embarrassments ran from mild to wild. Toasting Queen Victoria at dinner he said, “Give three cheers for our queer old dean”. He also greeted a group of farmers “as noble tons of soil”. Once he scolded a student for “fighting a liar in the quadrangle”. In anger, Spooner berated a student by saying, “You have hissed all my mystery lectures. In fact, you have tasted two whole worms and you must leave Oxford this afternoon by the next town drain”.

At Oxford, Spooner was beloved. His nickname was “The Spoo”, and the term “Spoonerism” became common around 1885 after he had been a fellow at New College for some twenty years. He was in demand as a professor, in large part because the students were anxious to hear him issue one of his famous metaphases. He had some outstanding students who admired his intellect. Among these were Julian Huxley and Arnold Toynbee.

His reputation grew and grew, even outside of England, and was carried by newspaper joke columns, funny pages, and clips and quirks sections. An American writer took advantage of the mixed up language of his time to issue his own “Book of Blunders”. Although it didn’t mention Spooner by name, the book piggy backed on his reputation and offered its own selection of slips of tongue. One of the examples was a French cleric who was greeted at the train station by a funeral bier – intended for him – because the translating operator had mistaken “Pere Ligier et moi” (Father Ligier and I) for “Pere Ligier est mort” (Father Ligier is dead).

The public's taste for outrageous statements certainly predated Spooner. Think of Mrs. Malaprop in Richard Sheridan's play *The Rivals* that was seen on the London stage in 1775. But Spooner's statements appeared so often and widely that his name was the one attached to this screwy language around the English speaking world early in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. Such slips of tongue are not limited to English. They have also been observed in Latin, Croatian, German, Greek, French, and probably other languages. Spoonerisms always work the same way, i.e. the reversed sounds come from the beginnings of the words rather than the end and very often from the syllable that carries the stress. Consonants are more often transposed than vowels. These slips of tongue indicate that in the rapid process involved in thinking and speaking the individual inspects a word as a whole in his brain, not as a sequence of specific words. Thus a word that feels right to the mind will be cleared for pronouncing. This bias for Spoonerizing results in real, not invented, words. The patterns and tendencies share strong resemblance to the language itself. Slips with sounds tend to appear as sequences that are very plausible. What we plan to say only a few seconds in the future can often trip up what we are saying in the present. Spoonerisms became legends. Students delighted in inventing them. For example, "a camel passing through knee of an idol".

Another angle in explaining such errors was taken by a psychiatrist in Vienna, who felt such slip-ups were more fundamental in explaining human desires and dangers. Sigmund Freud would found a new school in psychiatry that proposed that a slip of the tongue was a sign of truth normally hidden in the subconscious. But that is another story.

Back to the most common blunders of fillers like "er", "uh" and "um". An English speaker can

also fill language pauses with phrases like “well”, “so” and “you know”. Even sign language has a way to indicate such mental pauses. Signers usually look there listeners in the eye when transmitting their thoughts. When pausing, they break this gaze or they can also freeze.

Each one of us has a speech problem. The academics call them disfluencies. Books and surveys abound on the matter with various explanations and, in some cases, rationalizations.

The manner of speech that got me started is called the “er” or “um” factor. We can’t seem to put words together while speaking and avoiding this peculiarity.

The “er” is an unconscious space filler in conversation or speeches not from a prepared text. The best explanation of this “disfluency” is that the human brain cannot keep up with the human voice. For example, one can start talking with a simple declarative sentence such as, “The forces of the Allied Powers triumphed in WWII”, but at that point the mind is for a split second sorting through various ways to continue, such as, “due to overpowering industrial strength” ... or “because of military mastery on land, sea and air” or some other plausible ending. But while that thought is being selected and processed for speech, there is a slight pause. And that’s where the “er” or “um” filler pops up. Like most of us I was not aware of this disfluency in the speech of others or myself. But I had an epiphany starting two years ago.

It was then when I joined a Toastmasters Club. I had heard secondhand stories of the organization and was curious to see if I could find something useful to sharpen my public speaking skills.

Toastmasters is a self-help public-speaking club founded ninety years ago. The market for improvement in public speaking is vast, mainly because in many organizations, both private and public, employees can rise only if they can present information effectively. And Toastmasters has become over time the gold standard for such effort.

Toastmasters currently has over 200,000 members in 180 countries. Membership is 50-50 men and women, and eighty-two percent have a college degree. It's said that millions have taken part in the program. Overall, there are about 10,000 clubs, mostly affiliated with companies. There are even 71 sponsored by prisons, where inmates learn to make arguments and deliver speeches.

Thirty percent of the membership resides outside the United States. The fastest growth rates have been in Asia, where people want to practice speaking English. For that is the only language spoken at Toastmasters.

What I encountered at my initial meetings was an average group of 10-15 in size with ages ranging from thirty to fifty. I am the greybeard of my club, but have been enthusiastically adopted as a non-traditional member.

The format of each meeting is very formal, even if the content is anything but. The time span is sixty minutes with meetings usually held once per week.

A designated General Toastmaster raps the group to order and then introduces the individuals and their roles for the day. It is axiomatic that each person present has a speaking assignment.

Generally, there are two regular speeches of five to seven minutes in length. The subject is up to the speaker. Following each talk, an evaluator takes the floor to discuss the content and delivery employed. These analyses are gentle and positive in nature but always contain at least one suggestion for improvement.

The next segment is for ad-lib talks. A designated leader offers some general comments on a common subject. An example could be “Winter can be a time of pleasure or danger.” Then the leader looks over the group and identifies one member with the query. “Please tell us about an experience you had in Winter that illustrates this.” The selected member then must rise and start speaking, organizing his thoughts as he goes along. His comments can be no more than two and one half minutes and no less than one minute. The process is then repeated with a different subject and query for successive speakers.

There are usually a total of three to five ad lib talks – each on a different “surprise” subject. Designated evaluators then come forward to point out the strengths and weaknesses of each speaker. How well was it organized? What gestures, appropriate or otherwise were used? Was it convincing, interesting, coherent?

At the close of each meeting the official “ah” counter of the day stands up and reports the number of “ah’s” and “um’s” that each speaker used plus false starts, and crutch words like “you

know”, “so”, “yeah”. While each participant is aware of the goal of eliminating such speech fillers, it is a rare meeting that any one escapes unscathed. Each speaker works hard to cut them out.

Finally, the timer of the day reports on the length of each talk in specifics of minutes and seconds. These results are important as each segment has a minimum/maximum target.

Such discipline is key, particularly in regional competitions with other clubs. In a humorous speech contest I attended, our club rep had a very funny talk that was clearly superior to his competitors from eight other clubs. But he was disqualified for going three seconds over the limit.

The one hour weekly session ends with the “General Evaluator” going over the entire proceedings with his or her brief comments, outlining specific pros and cons, aimed at both encouragement and improvement.

You do this week after week, and you become aware of your skills and weaknesses- and concentrate mightily on eliminating the latter.

A side effect is that you automatically judge any speech you hear outside of Toastmasters. You not only hear the content but also assess the delivery.

Another aspect of Toastmasters is the way it stretches and exercises your brain. In today's world we are constantly made aware of the need for physical exercise. Health centers have sprung up like mushrooms across the country. And the basements of many homes are clogged with weight machines, stationary bicycles, and other paraphernalia aimed at promoting better health.

But somehow the brain gets left behind in the process. One of the speakers in a recent Toastmasters World Championship outlined how the brain can also be exercised to improve performance. A neuroscientist illustrated this in a group study.

Each member of the group had a brain scan to determine the structure of their brains. Half of the participants were asked to learn a three-ball cascade juggling routine in the following three months. They all succeeded in the task. The other half were told to live as usual. Next all participants underwent a second brain scan.

The jugglers' brains showed an increase in the number of neurons, particularly in areas connected to motion sensitivity and visual spatial attention. The brains of the non-jugglers showed no change.

The jugglers were then told to abstain from juggling for three months. A follow-up scan demonstrated how brain growth shown previously in this group was lost after three months of no juggling. The adage of "use it or lose it" describes it well.

Brain fitness follows the same pattern as physical fitness. You may exercise regularly for years, but when you stop for a couple of weeks or a month – whoosh – fitness is lost. Plus, getting it back is never as quick and easy as losing it.

The Toastmaster competitor who related this story then outlined his personal experience. For some months he had to miss all meetings. When he returned, he fumbled his words and made errors as the timer. It took awhile before he again hit his mental stride. His conclusion was that active participation in the Toastmaster meetings was a good workout to activate many parts of his brain.

As a result of the Toastmaster experience, one automatically critiques any speech he hears, not only for content, but also for presentation.

Last Summer I listened to the president of a small, respected college in St. Paul, Minnesota, deliver an important message to a large group of financial supporters. He is a very capable leader who had cogent thoughts to deliver. But he lost me. I counted over forty “ums” and “ers” before I tuned out his message. This was probably my fault, since I had become overly sensitive to these interruptions.

But if one can discipline his mind to eliminate the “ers” and “ums”, a speaker will add to his presence, credibility, and, yes, gravitas. As an example, try listening to yourself in normal conversation. If you are like most people, you’ll soon realize you repeat these disfluencies with regularity. Then listen to others. They do the same thing. Next make a special effort to avoid or

even eliminate them. You'll find it's a strain. Instead of the filler words, just stay silent for that half second your brain is searching for the next phrase. You will start to speak more slowly and probably distinctly. As you train your mind to this new rhythm, you will be able to step up your rate of speech. And your listeners will be impressed.

There are speech practitioners amongst us who rely on sincerity and plausibility. And they are practically "er" less. It would be a poor preacher who "umed" and "ered" his way through a sermon, speaking with or without written notes. Leaders in any field usually avoid them. And what politician, be it from the left, right, or center, has this problem. They live by words, which are the bullets of government strife.

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And now I turn to the words of our beloved Literary Club. For thirty-nine weeks every year we hear an eclectic list of papers read from this very podium. But sadly, some good material loses its effect due to challenges of delivery. This is unfortunate, given the inordinate amount of time required to prepare a good paper. I'm sure each of us can recall a case where how we heard the message got in the way of the subject itself.

Several years ago then President Bob Dorsey asked me for suggestions to avoid such problems. A list was pulled together for distribution to new members. Recently, our current leader, John McDonough, requested that I review and update these points for the new crop of members. On the chance that they might even be worth consideration for veteran Literarians, I'll spell them out now.

The first point is to make sure the text is readable. Sounds simple, but on occasion the speaker squints in embarrassment at words crowded onto his script. When we read a book or a newspaper, our eyes are some twelve to fifteen inches from the page. But on this dais that distance can be doubled. To avoid this, it's wise to use a typeface and size that can be seen clearly when standing upright at the podium. Double or even triple spacing will usually do the trick. Dark type is also advisable.

The second suggestion is to be sure you can be heard. The microphone can usually do the job, yet even this cannot overcome drops in intensity or swallowed end sentences. An over soft voice also cannot be rescued by a mike. One has to speak up! But do not yell!

I heard a professor at a drama school state that an audience can forgive an actor for occasional muffed lines, memory lapses, or blips caused by unforeseen noises. But the unforgiveable sin is not to be heard. A good example of talking loudly enough without shouting is provided by Jack McDonough.

Next on the list is voice level. Monotones are sleep producing, and there are some of our members who need no excuse for dozing off. Try to vary the pitch between high and low tones as appropriate for the text.

Equally important as volume and voice level is enunciation. Speaking distinctly and clearly is key to audience comprehension. To this end, a slowdown is usually helpful. Anxiety of the moment can raise blood pressure and produce sweaty palms. Along with this stress comes the

urge to speak faster. Recognizing this danger, a measured pace can improve the clarity of one's message. Listen to the enunciation of Allen Winkler as a guide.

A more subtle but effective way to sway the audience is phrasing. Certain groups of words complement each other and strengthen the thought process. This becomes obvious when the paper is read aloud for practice. Also, the speaker can impose his own interpretation by use of phrasing. Scoring a text with vertical lines to indicate key passages can be helpful.

Another extra is pacing. While slower is often better for comprehension there are times when faster delivery of key points can put a punch in the narrative. A good practitioner of this is Harry Santen.

Along with these techniques is the use of the dramatic pause or silence. If not overused, it can add an extra dimension to your remarks. Silence puts an audience on edge, anxiously awaiting the next words.

Now turning to stage presence, one should employ good posture to radiate confidence to your audience. Specifically, it's advisable to stand straight and not hunched over. It's easier to do this if the paper has a typeface and sizing for easy readability, which you will recall was the first suggestion on the list. Watch and listen to Chris Miller on this point.

An intangible but controlling factor for the audience is the speaker's use of voice and body language to show that he is truly interested in the subject and not just reading a document to

fulfill a requirement. Your fellow members will quickly sense and appreciate an enthusiasm for the topic. There is no one better at this than Gibby Carey.

A corollary to the earlier point on posture is ease of manner. A speaker who acts as if he is comfortable can warm up an audience. One way to show this is by eye contact. It is challenging while tied to a microphone and reading a text, but it is possible. Some breaks can be worked into a presentation so the speaker can raise his head a little higher and scan the audience. Two types of eye contact are worth consideration. One is to pick out a few attentive faces on the left and right sides of the audience and direct some phrases to them periodically. Another is to look a couple of feet above the crowd (they'll think you are looking at them).

The reverse is scalp contact, which is to be avoided. This occurs when the speaker, keen to read his paper, lowers his head and delivers his words into the dais. The only thing the audience then sees is the top of his cranium. This is usually not inspiring.

By custom the length of a paper is flexible with a minimum of thirty minutes and a maximum of forty-five. Too short means disappointment, and too long risks boredom. Eighteen to twenty pages double spaced at a moderate speed will usually suffice.

Practicing out loud is vital. Read your work of art to your wife, a friend, the mirror, your dog. You may find awkward phrases to change. You can verify the time length. Plus, there are other unknowns that will pop up once you go oral.

The stress of the event and other factors can produce a dry mouth that needs moistening to speak well. Water breaks can cure this, but they have their negatives. The time you take to do this interrupts the flow of the presentation and can diminish your intensity and the sense of participation by the audience. A best practice would be to take that gulp of water before the start in order to refrain from a break during the reading.

Finally consider yourself an actor who occupies center stage every two years. Use all the devices you can to attract, hold, and stimulate your fellow Literarians. You have worked hours and hours and hours preparing your paper. So give it a convincing oral presentation.

If any of you are interested in any of these suggestions, I have some pocket sized summaries. While designed primarily for new members, they might provide a refresher for some current ones as well.

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In summary, tonight has been a brief tour of our use of words. It has covered some common disfluencies such as “er”, “ah” “you know”, etc. and the measures required to eliminate them. It has treated the curious mismatch of words or syllables that produce unintended meanings, often humorous. The role of the Toastmasters group in promoting better speech was outlined. And lastly some specific ideas on delivering papers at our own Literary Club.

I started this paper with curiosity on public speaking in general plus ways to enhance its effectiveness. My first foray to the library in search of material drew the response from the

librarian that the Cincinnati system had over 500 books on the subject. So you can see that my remarks have only scratched the surface.

If I can leave you with one thought, it is this. The words you use count, but the way you use them often counts even more.

~ 30 ~

Kingston Fletcher  
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