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Chapter 8 Intonation and Variety

Every speaker is passionately interested in what he or she is saying: and every listener is interested in many other things, as well. I suppose most speakers think that every word they utter is heard by everyone in the room. When you speak, it is hard to imagine that everyone else is not listening, too. But the facts are different. The best evidence I can offer, is to think about your own experience as a listener. We know, from inside our heads, when we have been listening and when we haven’t. From outside it is less easy to see, for nothing may change on a listener’s face when his mind silently changes subject. But we all know that when we listen to a talk, we are not listening all the time. Perhaps you thought that you were unusual, inattentive, in some way bad, and never mentioned to anyone that your mind wandered off sometimes when listening to a presentation. I used to think that my lapses of attention, when I suddenly came to with a jerk and found I had been thinking of something else for a few minutes, while the talk had gone on without me, were some personal failing. But I have since discovered that everyone does the same. An audience’s average span of uninterrupted attention is perhaps only five to ten minutes. This statement may sound extreme; but the fact is that we all day-dream briefly every few minutes. Other factors, too, make attention a less simple and reliable component of the communication equation than we would like to think. One reason for the unevenness of attention is the big discrepancy between the number of words per minute a human being can speak, and the number of words per minute needed to fill our attention. The mind can process words much faster than the mouth can pronounce them; 129130Effective Speaking rather in the same way that the Input/Output of a computer is much slower than the electronic processes inside it. There is therefore not always enough information content in spoken language to absorb the whole of the listener’s attention. The effect is that the speaker must provide other stimuli if he wishes to hold the attention of the audience. If he does not their minds will wander: nature abhors a vacuum, and this is true even of the most vacuous minds. One of the ways in which this hunger for enough stimulation manifests itself is the ease with which people let themselves be distracted. If there is anything in the room (or out of the window) to look at, the audience will watch it, just because they need something to fill the spare capacity of their minds. But the vagaries of a listener’s attention are not something irreversible and inevitable. The clever and effective speaker makes sure that this spare capacity is filled with other versions of his message, not with irrelevant distractions. The purpose of the chapters on non-verbal communication and visual aids, for example, is to suggest ways in which the message of the talk can be supported by other kinds of information, so that the listeners remain fully awake and attentive. The greatest enemy to attention is not the audience’s day-dreams, for they can always be interrupted if something interesting happens; the main risk for any speaker is becoming monotonous. The moment boring sameness creeps in, the listener’s mind will wander. The only way to prevent this is to provide enough variety to engage their interest. In Chapter 11 I will discuss ways in which visual aids can provide this variety. But it is not necessary to show pictures to keep an audience awake; the good speaker does it by providing variety in his own voice and actions. Try listening critically to a good actor on T.V. Do not listen to what he or she is saying, but to the way it is said. The actor’s voice is an instrument of great flexibility, continually varying, continually exploring the range of expression. I am not suggesting that every speaker should turn into a professional actor (though good acting is part of every good speech). Indeed, the requirement to act is probably one of the main reasons why the more modest and reserved of us find speaking a harrowing experience. We are frightened of the need to display our personality, to control and manipulate the audience through the force of that personality. But every speaker can learn something from watching the professionalism of good actors. Watch not only for what an actor does with his voice, but also for the way it affects you, the listener. Notice how your interest and feelings areIntonation and variety131 drawn after the changes in the voice pattern; notice how easy it is to listen to the tones of a good speaking voice; notice how the words are shaped and given meaning by the rise and fall of the intonation. You may not be, and may not want to be, an actor: but there is a lot to learn from their skills. The most important of these lessons is the value of introducing variety into your voice. There is an explanation for this. Variety increases stimulation, and therefore increases arousal and attention. Television networks use variety in news bulletins to prevent the listeners’ attention wandering. You may not realize it, until it is pointed out to you, but in a news broadcast, the audience’s attention is carefully manipulated. Almost every minute there is a change of picture or of voice, which is one of the reasons why most people find the news easy to concentrate on. Few speakers will achieve these standards of variety, but some change every few minutes is a minimum if audience attention is to be held. There are a number of what linguists call ‘paralinguistic’, or ‘extralinguistic’ variables, which can be changed at will in addition to the content and actual words used. These are things such as pitch, tone, timbre, and patterns of stress. These components of a speaking voice are as important as the letters (vowels and consonants—or what linguists call ‘phonemes’) we use to form words. We use these extralinguistic variants to give shape and emphasis to our meaning, to express attitudes, and to recognize emotions in others. Listeners are so sensitive to these extra signals in the speaking voice that Knower was able to show in an experiment in 1941 that: ‘emotions in speech played backwards were still recognized at better than chance levels.’ 1 An effective speaker must not forget the power of inflection to communicate commitment, enthusiasm, disdain or uncertainty. A speaking voice in which these patterns have been reduced to a monotonous flatness communicates only boredom. There are a number of simple components in speech variety, a vocabulary of intonation. These components can be incorporated in everyone’s speech. But before discussing the main ways of doing this, I must first stress the overriding importance of being heard. The most eloquent speaking instrument in the world is of little use to the listener who has to strain to work out what is being said. Clear enunciation Intelligibility when speaking is the same as neatness and legibility when writing. No manager or administrator would issue a document132Effective Speaking with blurred, smudged, or faint characters. Neither should you talk with faint, smudged, or blurred enunciation. Your primary responsibility in communicating is to ensure that the physical encoding of the message is easy for the audience to receive and decode. In less technical terms, it must be audible. If the receiver of the message is using most of his mental energy to recognize the words being used, he will have less time for thinking about the content of the message. As with many of the basic requirements of effective speaking, this is such a simple and obvious point that it is often overlooked. Yet I would guess that three-quarters of the talks which fail, do so for the simplest reasons. And one of the simplest reasons is that it is unintelligible. It is difficult to judge how clearly you need to pronounce the words, because you are closer to your own voice than the listeners. What sounds pedantic and laboured to you, standing on top of your own voice, may well be just clear and comfortable at the back of the room. An added problem is that you know what you are saying, and therefore recognizing the words is trivial: but others do not know what you are saying, and need to recognize all the words. Spoken language usually slurs over some sounds, and misses others (called elision ), to smooth and speed the flow of syllables. This makes it difficult to understand foreign languages when they are spoken, for instance. Similarly, the attempt to get a computer to recognize English speech reliably has defeated scientists, despite large American research projects. For the same reason, if an audience is going to understand what you are saying, from the back of the room, you need to pronounce each word clearly. There is no need to sound like a school-marm, but speakers do need to pronounce words rather more carefully than we typically do in everyday speech. Linguists have described in detail the vocal features that ensure comfortable and correct decoding at a distance. What are those features? I don’t think a speaker needs a lesson in linguistics, but I do think he or she needs to have thought about the requirements of intelligibility. They are principally a matter of keeping the head up, sounding the ends of words, not dropping the voice at the ends of phrases, and not swallowing the vowels. All the major phonological features must be made fully articulate and explicit. The speaker must emphasize those features of the message which in normal (face-to-face) speech are conventionally glossed over in the interests of speed. Of course, the size of the audience affects how deliberate your enunciation must be:Intonation and variety133 A very large auditorium will have a decided effect upon the rate of speech—that is upon the amount of daylight needed between the words to permit the sound to carry to the farthest parts of the auditorium without serious interference from reverberation and the overlapping of sound…. Anyone who has had military training will recognise the devices that are used to obtain greater carrying power for audible signals. The infantry command ‘right oblique’ becomes ‘rhit-ho-blhik’ 2 I am not suggesting that you try to speak like a army officer, but so many speakers forget the need for the voice to be clear at the back of the room, that a speaker should, in general, speak rather more clearly than he or she thinks necessary. The bonus of clarity will be gratefully received by the audience. There are simple physical reasons why the voice doesn’t always carry well. Different frequencies, and different types of sound, carry over distance with differing efficiency. Many features of the voice, such as the stopping noises made by the tongue, and the ‘unvoiced fricatives’ which are mainly breathed, rather than sounded, all become difficult to hear at a distance. An example is the ‘p’ in jump’. Sounds like ‘f’, ‘j’, ‘p’, and ‘x’ may also be more difficult to distinguish; the difference between ‘click’ and ‘lick’, which depends on a faint liquid clicking noise before the ‘I’ in the first, and not in the second, word, may be lost. There are many features of spoken language which depend on such small differences in the sound, and these cannot easily be magnified. Try, for instance, shouting the ‘c’ in ‘click’! It is quite easy to increase the volume of the ‘-ick’ component; but impossible to increase the volume of the ‘cl-’ component much. The solution is to increase the silence that precedes the ‘cl-’, so that it becomes more distinct. It is this kind of manipulation which is the essence of intelligibility. In practice language users are able to increase the clarity of their voice at will. What is usually missing is the will, or the knowledge, of what and why the voice must be made clearer. Remember that in their struggle to hear, listeners may also have to contend with echoes. Few of us realize, too, how much we depend on being able to see the speaker’s mouth. Lip-reading can contribute a surprising amount to the clarity of speech, and this is difficult from any great distance. So a certain percentage of the normal sound pattern is lost when we listen to a speaker in a large auditorium. This means that an audience may find difficulty in understanding unless the speaker deliberately saves those features which are slurred in134Effective Speaking casual and intimate speech. In sound, as in most areas of speech, language has a measure of redundancy. It is not necessary to hear 100% of the speech sounds in order to comprehend. But if too much is lost, understanding may demand large amounts of brain-processing on the part of the listener. He gets tired, and soon begins to miss larger and larger chunks of the message. If the speaker is aware that features which make the message intelligible from close by are lost at a great distance, he or she can ensure that they compensate. Varieties of intonation I have already said that a good actor uses variety in the intonation of his voice to create interest and emotional excitement. Normal speakers, too, use intonation to convey meaning. Try saying ‘You are going tomorrow’ with the voice falling at the end of the phrase. Now try saying the same phrase with the voice rising at the end: You are going tomorrow. Without changing the words themselves, the phrase has been changed into a question, simply by the intonation. Intonation is a powerful tool in the speaker’s armoury. A linguist summarizes the importance of intonation patterns like this: The pattern of pauses, stress and pitch is really part of the verbal utterance itself. Pauses provide punctuation (instead of saying ‘full stop’ as when dictating); stress and pitch show whether a question is being asked and provide emphasis, thus showing which of several possible meanings is intended…. The same words may be said in quite different ways, conveying different emotional expressions, and even different meanings, as when ‘yes’ is used as a polite way of saying ‘no’. 3 This system of intonation patterns is not just an auxiliary to meaning. It is often the determiner of meaning: it is also the way in which we give life and interest to our voice. When we say a speaker has a deadpan voice, we are pointing to the absence of intonation variety in the voice. If words are spoken in a flat, monotonous, way they soon become boring to listen to. If you listen critically to speakers, you will find that the ones who are interesting, and easy to listen to, have a rich variety of intonation; the ones who are boring and dull have aIntonation and variety135 level, unchanging intonation. The variety, flexibility, and mobility of the voice is one of the main keys to interesting talking. The inexperienced speaker, or the person whose chosen field is technical or professional, is not likely to compete with Richard Burton, just by being told to increase the variety of intonation in his or her voice. But all is not lost: there are simple ways in which you can consciously vary your speaking voice. I have found over the years that paying deliberate attention to these features can transform a dull voice into an interesting one. The key is variety. I distinguish six rules of thumb to introduce variety into a speaking voice, six dimensions along which the voice can be manipulated. You should not, of course, use only one, and, for example, talk alternately faster and slower throughout the talk, while maintaining the same monotonous tone. Nor should you work through the types of change one by one, while ignoring the content of what you are saying. The aim is to introduce variety, so that a natural expressive flexibility charms the audience. This is done by being aware of all six possible dimensions of change, and trying to remember to use all of them in various combinations through the talk, as seems appropriate. I can assure you that the result will be surprising, for I have seen these simple tactics transform the most tedious of speakers into someone to whom it is at least possible to listen! 1. Pause Silence is a more important factor in speech than most speakers realize. Silence is, for instance, the main ingredient in a comedian’s timing. The audience savours the carefully judged length of the pauses before the punch line is delivered. Similarly, in informative speaking varied pauses counterpoint the meaning. Silence is a powerful way of communicating; leaving a gap gives time for the meaning of what has just been said to sink in, and it clears the way for the importance of what is to come. But a nervous speaker unfortunately finds it difficult to leave silence. Terrified of the echoing pauses, nervous of losing the audience if he or she stops for even a moment, they rush breathlessly on, filing every nook and cranny of time with sound. The result of continuous speaking is that the audience’s minds become clogged with information. They are thinking over one fact, when the next one comes in, and then the next. There is no time to absorb, and soon the audience’s minds are drowning in information. An experienced speaker, though, knows the value of silence. I do not136Effective Speaking mean long embarrassed pauses, when the speaker is struggling tongue tied for something to say, or shuffling through his notes in desperation. It is the carefully judged pauses, the fractions of seconds of meaningful silence, which tell. Nothing increases the impression of confidence and control as much as the ability to stop talking for a calculated pause, before a change of subject, a vital point, or a surprising fact. Try to make use of the pause as a deliberate item in the articulation of your message. Some speakers are terrified of stammering, or even uttering a single ‘er’ or ‘um’. They seem to think that a talk should be delivered as a continuous, smooth, glossy and uninterrupted flow of sound. Not so. As is pointed out in chapter six, all speech has hesitation phenomena: pauses, fillers such as ‘er’, ‘um’, and ‘like’, false-starts, repetitions, and even stammering are all natural. There is evidence that they make speech easier to listen to, as long as they don’t become intrusive. They can also be effectively used as pauses to articulate the flow of information. One of my friends is distinguished by a slight, but persistent stammer. Despite treatment, he continues to be hung up on a word every now and again. A handsome man, possessed of great charm, he makes the best of it, and has a firm and confident manner which openly admits his stammer, and refuses to be embarrassed about it. He has became a successful salesman, and has had a succession of strikingly attractive partners in his life. His stammer seems to raise interest and expectation in his listeners, and his speech has a remarkable emphasis and variety. Even stammering can be used to effect: no hesitation, if you make use of it, is necessarily bad. New speakers are understandably nervous of any silence, but a firm grip, and a deliberate pause between each point, will help steady their nerves. It increases the audience’s perception of the speaker’s control of the situation. Silence is a great asset in a talk; make use of it to add variety to your presentation. 2. Pace The second dimension along which the voice can be varied is speed. The pace of the speaking voice, along the whole range from slow and deliberate emphasis to rapid enthusiasm, can be consciously varied. Highly charged points can be made word by word; amusing anecdotes can rush on to their punch-line. It is usually easy to see where slowing down would be appropriate; most speakers talk too fast. TheIntonation and variety137 best way to change the pace of the presentation is to mark places in your notes where there is need for special emphasis, or deliberate clarity. When you get to these points, force yourself to slow down. When you relax the restriction your voice will rapidly regain its normal speed. Of course, if you normally speak slowly, you will need to deliberately hurry up from time to time. Conscious use of varied pace adds to the attractiveness of the speaking voice; monotonous regularity of speed increases the risks of boredom. It is, incidently, very rare for listeners to complain that a talk is going too slowly. The nervous speaker usually talks too fast. Not only is it tedious if the pace never changes, it also leads to over rapid unloading of information. Varying the pace can reduce the strain on the audience, as well as introducing a refreshing variety. 3. Pitch Nervousness contracts and tightens the muscles around the throat and voice box. The effect is that the average pitch of the voice rises. The nervous speaker produces a typically ‘strangled’ sound, which is unpleasant, and tends to evoke anxiety responses in the audience. If you are aware of this problem, then the pitch of your voice must be consciously lowered. Pleasant actor’s voices are usually lowpitched and ‘gravelly’, and actress’s voices ‘husky’. The hearers interpret this as representing confidence and calmness, although it may be nothing more important than the chance construction of the voice box. Because it relaxes and reassures the listeners, and because it increases the variety of the talk, pitch should be deliberately varied, and usually lowered. It is not as difficult to control as many speakers think. A little practice in speaking at higher and lower pitches, perhaps with a tape-recorder, can soon educate the voice into a more conscious flexibility. Try repeating the same word into the microphone at various pitches: for example say ‘tomorrow’ in low, medium low, middling, medium high and high pitches. When you have practised this a few times, and listened to the results, try the same pitches with a full sentence. Say ‘I’m going out tomorrow’ in low, medium, and high pitches. When you have listened to this, and educated your voice so you can consciously control the pitch, try a longer passage. You might try saying: ‘I’m going out tomorrow, and I hope the weather is fine, don’t you?’ It is almost impossible to say this without the voice rising and falling to follow the natural138Effective Speaking intonation demanded by the meaning. You will probably say something like: I’m going out tomorrow, and I hope the weather is fine, don’t you?’ This sort of practice is just like doing scales on the piano. It can be tedious, and it needs a lot of discipline. It’s purpose is to increase your control over your own voice, and to make you more conscious of what you are saying. Like piano scales, it greatly improves performance. If you think such practice is pretentious, don’t try it. But you will find that varying the pitch of the voice is a useful technique. For example, a well known trick which can have a dramatic effect is the sudden lowering of the speaker’s voice to emphasize an important point. 4. Tone We all recognize an angry tone of voice, a worried one, or a confident one. It is too detailed for our present purpose to analyse the exact components of these tones. In any case most people can pretend to anger, or other emotions, when needed—when sending the children to bed for instance. For most people, an awareness of tone is not difficult to develop. It is one way of introducing variety into a voice. Try putting directions such as ‘sound surprised’, ‘sound pleased’, ‘sound concerned’ beside relevant points in your notes. The talk will come to life in a surprisingly effective way. 5. Volume The fifth source of variety is a change in the loudness of your voice. You should, of course, in any case be adjusting the volume of your voice to the size of the room in which you are speaking. There is a natural mechanism which controls the volume of the voice; a speaker adjusts the level of his or her voice, depending on what he thinks is needed. Greeting someone walking along the opposite pavement produces a volume of sound many times greater than intimate conversation. The speaker does not need to think about this consciously; it is one of the ways in which the brain automatically adjusts behaviour to the needs of the outside world. The sensible tactic for the speaker is to use this natural ability. What is it, then, which causes the volume of our speech to be adjusted? The answer is,Intonation and variety139 awareness of how far away the other person is. If we look at someone some distance away we automatically adjust the volume of our speech to the appropriate level. Thus if a speaker looks at the back of the room the volume of sound he or she makes will be appropriate. But if he avoids looking at his audience (or only glances at the front row), the voice will be inaudible to the majority of the room. The volume of the speaking voice is also affected by assertiveness. Self-confident people tend to have louder voices. Shy people, partly because they fail to look steadily at the back of the room, have quiet voices. Another physiological factor which affects the control of the voice is our own perception of our voice. We are usually unaware of how important this perception is. We hear our own voice in two ways: partly through the air passages connecting ear and throat (it is these passages which relieve the popping in your ears when you swallow as a plane climbs to cruising height). The second way is through vibrations in the bones in the head. This method of transmission greatly alters the quality of the voice we hear, and is one reason why people have so poor an idea of what they really sound like. There is also a third source of the sound of your own voice—reflection off the walls of the room you are in—though this is insignificant in a large room. Since we are so close to the source of our voice, we often judge it to be much louder than it really is. It is therefore doubly important to look some of the time at the furthest person in the room in order to stimulate the production of a firm, clear voice. We adjust our speech from our own perception of it: ‘It is easy to demonstrate how important to a speaker is the sound of his own voice. If his speech is delayed a fifth of a second, amplified and fed back into his own ears, the voice-ear asynchrony can be devastating to the motor skills of articulate speech’. 4 A cruel experiment, but it does demonstrate how important hearing our own voice is. Once adequate volume is assured, the next element can be explored; loudness can be varied to give variety to the talk. Emphatic statements can be spoken in a louder voice. Relaxed discussion can drop back to a quieter voice. This contributes again to the relief of monotony, the great enemy of effective speaking. 6. Intonation It is difficult to be aware of the exact intonation of one’s own voice. There are two reasons for this. Firstly, we hear our own voice, as has already been pointed out, through the balancing air passages between140Effective Speaking mouth and ear, through the bone structures of our head, and partly through reflection from surrounding objects. None of these paths gives a realistic impression of the sound. Secondly, we know what we are intending to express, and therefore are unable to make judgements about the exactness with which our voice communicates that intention. We hear what we think we said, not what others hear. It is probably this fact, more than anything, which contributes to the lifeless monotony of some speakers’ voices. They themselves hear variety, emphasis and intonation, whereas others hear only sameness. For this reason, the only really effective way to educate the intonation in our voices is help from others in the assessment, and improvement, of the way we speak. Technically, ‘intonation’ is used to describe the way in which the voice rises and falls with the type of sentence being uttered. The voice rises at the end of a question, and falls at the end of a statement. But these changes are often small, and intonation can be increased by conscious attention to variety. The best aid to this is a critical and attentive friend but a good alternative is to use a tape-recorder. Most of us have some idea of what our voices sound like, but few of us have ever listened critically. Indeed, some people refuse to believe the sound of their own voice. I remember my first introduction to this strange phenomena. We had a lad at school who had a pronounced Yorkshire accent, which was sorely obvious in a south-western school. He was, in the humane manner of little boys, persistently teased about this. I don’t think anyone ever spoke to him without a mocking music-hall version of a north country accent. Being a man of spirit, even at twelve, he fought back. But it wasn’t until I saw his reaction to the first tape-recording of his voice he heard that I understood. He was horrified. “But”, he said, “it makes me to sound as if I’ve got a Yorkshire accent!” He was convinced that he spoke Queen’s English. He obviously thought we were all being grossly unfair in teasing him, but doubtless put it down to the evilness of human nature, not to the reality of his accent. I have seen similar responses on many people’s faces since; that is why it is necessary to be so carefully objective in judging the sound of your own voice. I recommend selecting a couple of passages from your prepared talk, or even reading from the daily paper, into a tape-recorder. Listen very critically to the results, noting expressive features, and picking out uncomfortable features. Then read the same passage again, with an more varied intonation. You should be aiming to incorporate all the features mentioned: pause, changes of pace, flexibility of pitch, a meaningful tone, and a controlled and varied useIntonation and variety141 of volume. Above all, try to inspire life into the passage. Make the words those of a living, feeling, being, not a speech synthesizer. If you practice this you will be surprised at how quickly your voice will acquire the precious variety that keeps audiences listening. It is true that some people have naturally interesting voices. But they are few; and they usually become actors, not research scientists. One of the most outstanding faults in the 2,000 or so short presentations I have seen and discussed while teaching speaking has been the lack of life in the voice. Partly through tradition, partly through diffidence, partly through the wrong image of the intellectual man as unemotional, most managers and scientists speak in a dull voice. Careful attention to intonation will soon raise your standard of speaking skill. The shifting sands of accent A final point which I should mention under the general heading of intonation and variety, is the sensitive question of regional accent. One of the encouraging changes in social life in the decades after the Second World War was the acceptance of regional accents in intellectual and professional life. In the sixties, it became fashionable to have a regional accent, and many people adopted the accents of their upbringing, who would previously have disguised their voices in a veneer of poshness. Linguists had a large hand in this change of attitude. Various studies demonstrated that regional speech was not a debased form of British English, but the remnants of older versions of the language. The historical and political factors which led to the domination of the accents of Southern England were shown up, and the absurdity of deciding on politico-economic reasons that one way of pronouncing a word was ‘better’ than another was widely accepted. None the less, there remains some unsureness about regional accents, and if a speaker feels that his or her accent may be incorrect, it will undoubtedly interfere with his confidence. On the opposite coast of the USA, a New England ‘twang’ may be obtrusive, just as a Southern ‘drawl’ might be in Boston. But the moral is simple: do not worry much about the effect of accent; only try to interfere with your natural way of speaking if it is a barrier to the acceptance of your message. It is useful to be aware of the phenomenon which linguists call ‘style-shifting’. It is the tendency unconsciously (or deliberately) to alter our accents up or down what we think of as the social scale in order to fit in with other people’s valuation. It is a sort of chameleon142Effective Speaking camouflage; and has little more significance than wearing a suit to visit the bank manager, and jeans in the bar. It is dressing up the voice, putting a collar and tie on our accent for formal occasions, and a sweat shirt on our voice for the familiar. The public-school boy, working on the building site during the holidays, will style-shift downwards. The lower-middle class mother, visiting the doctor, will probably style-shift upwards, sounding rather posher than normal. These remarks are not intended as social criticism; they are a fact about the way language is used. Undoubtedly, when facing an audience, your style will be different from your style when telling jokes round the bar. If you are aware of this, and accept it as normal linguistic behaviour, you are more likely to hit the right tone. Everyone style-shifts, and accent, whether genuine or acquired, should not be allowed to interfere with confidence. A different problem which affects the comfort of the audience is the aesthetic quality of the voice. An audience may be disturbed by the presence of undue mannerisms of pronunciation. Some people swallow the last syllable of each word, some tail off in volume at the end of each phrase or sentence, some have a nasal delivery, and some whistle like a kettle. Wilcox suggests that: ‘If the ‘s’ sounds tend to whistle, this can be stopped by a conscious effort to put less stress on the ‘s’ sounds (this sentence, for example, will show up the whistling difficulty if there is one…Practising reading aloud a sentence like ‘Wasps build nests on fence posts’ will help.’ 5 These are all minor points, and you certainly should not let your confidence be shaken by over-sensitivity. But it is wise to be aware, and to have thought about the various idiosyncracies which we all have. Listening to your tape-recorded voice will help you identify any obtrusive phonetic characteristics. Better still, get a friend to listen. Explain that you want to know about any obvious mannerisms in your pronunciation which might disturb your audience. Then he or she will not feel shy about being objective, rather than kind. Incidently, the person you ask to do this critical listening for you must be a friend. That is, they must be someone you can accept criticism from—not necessarily your partner. As I said at the beginning of this book, criticism from others, based on objective observation of what you do, and frank reporting of the faults as well as the successes, is one of the quickest and best ways to improve your ability as a speaker.