Watch Your Mouth: Self-Monitoring Suggestions for Speakers

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I do enjoy writing: I have a chance to go back, restructure a sentence or paragraph, or even an entire thought. No one sees the poorly worded first draft (or second, third, etc.). If I have problems with spelling, I have a chance to check a dictionary or use (cautiously) spell check in my word processing program. And, if I still have uncertainties, I can ask a friend or colleague to double-check my material before I submit it. Sometimes I wish speaking was as fool-proof. But it's not, and most of us can identify a number of fools who think that getting in front of an audience (or camera or webinar attendees) does not require the same care as writing one's words of wisdom. (Just this morning we were watching the weather reporter spout some of his opinions, obviously off the cuff and without thinking, and are now wondering if he will still have a job tomorrow.)

In the field of speech communication (which focuses on the art of public speaking) we use a term called "self monitoring." This means, quite simply, the monitoring of oneself in the process of an interaction (one-on-one, in a small group, or in a public forum) and making adjustments as needed. These adjustments can include nonverbal behaviors (inappropriate scratching, eye contact, nervous shifting, etc.) as well as the verbal part of communication (pronunciation, grammar, correct word usage, etc.). For many speakers, just getting up in front of an audience can be a stressing event and many unplanned experiences can result. Of course, there is always the annoying repetition of "ah" and "um," but other oral goofs can also slip out (e.g., when the computer freezes or the projector bulb blows, the temptation to let go with some choice words of displeasure can make or break a speaker's future, depending on the demeanor and make-up of the audience).

The high self-monitor is constantly aware of his or her behavior and word choice. Even a disaster, such as the table collapsing under the speaker's expensive equipment, would result in an expression of dismay and/or horror, but would still fail to provoke words of an offensive nature. Not so with the low self-monitor, who is much less concerned with the opinions of those in the room than with his or her personal comfort (often aided, for some, by a string of expletives that, while not changing the situation, gives the speaker a sense of release of the stress of the moment). As far as research into these types of people, many have looked at it in correlation with self-concept, communication anxiety (stage fright), communication satisfaction, and other elements of a person's psychological makeup. Self-monitoring is measured on a continuum, so there are also many who fall in middle ranges or whose self-monitoring is situationally dependent: higher monitoring around prospective in-laws or employers; less around long-time friends, etc. (OK, stop thinking of all the people in your life and trying to assess their level of self-monitoring. Some who may appear to be low self-monitors may actually be just the opposite: swearing to fit in, for example.)

As speakers, I propose that we consider being high self-monitors when in front of an audience and also when we are within hearing range of those whose admiration keeps us booked. And that takes practice (more for some than for others). Consider the sports celebrity who is being interviewed by the reporter who is asking some basic questions, but nothing that has been rehearsed. I am pleased that they are often careful about the expletives, but it is frequently too clear that some have had little education in the area of grammar and just general behavior when in the spotlight.

When I write a paragraph, I can look back to see if I have overused a particular word. If I see "ancestors" appearing more than twice in a single paragraph, I go back and make changes. "Forebears," "multi-great-grandparents," "those who have gone before," etc., are all options and will make a passage easier to read. Do we do the same

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when we give a presentation? For most of us, the only way to know for sure is to record a presentation. (Remember, the recording in the living room addressing a congregation of a spouse, the family dog, and empty chairs will be far more polished than the recording made in the lecture hall —and that's the copy people are buying and listening to over and over.) Record your lecture, for your own use, when you are presenting in front of a society or other group, then check your words, grammar, and pronunciation.

We all have our pet peeves when it comes to words and word usage. When I was teaching public speaking, I took pains to get my students to come up with synonyms for "basically," a much over-used adverb that had become a filler, similar to "you know." Today I am bombarded with mundane things that are assessed as "awesome" (really? Is the article in that magazine truly "awesome"?) and "amazing." These adjectives have become so common that they cease to have meaning. Whatever can we say when something is truly awesome or amazing if every dinner, movie, novel, weather condition, and person has already been judged as such? As speakers, we need to search our vocabulary and find those repetitive words or phrases that may seem natural to us but could possibly drive the listener insane! (I just did some focused self-monitoring and was irritated to find that I used the term "little" to define a number of things, many being less than diminutive: "little document," "little phrase that said . . .," "little name right here," "little credit card number to order . . .") Caution: once you discover your own areas of repetition, you will hear them over and over and sometimes repeat them more frequently before you start cutting them out of the monologue. This can be due to the fact that you are more sensitive to them but have not yet found adequate replacements.

Another area of verbal goof is grammar. Are you prone to particular grammatical errors? Be alert to them. Self-monitor (or ask some of your friends who have listened to you speak in public arenas) to learn what might be issues for you. Dangling modifiers, split infinitives, double negatives, informal speech ("ain't" instead of "isn't"), etc., can become triggers for audience members, who may just tune out whatever you have to say: if the topic is not important enough for proper grammar, perhaps the information provided is just as flawed. True, not everyone will come to such a generalized conclusion, but if the person who is considering booking you for a major conference is one who is turned off by poor verbal skills in a speaker, you have no idea what it might cost you.

Finally, let me briefly address the topic of pronunciation. A simple mispronunciation can destroy a person's credibility. I cannot forget the student I taught in a public speaking class many years ago: she was going to inform us about the Nobel Prize, its beginnings and winners. I confess that, even as the professor who was grading her, I had a great difficulty following her speech because she kept pronouncing it "noble." Others also said that it was hard to believe that she knew what she was talking about since she did not even know how to pronounce the subject of her speech! When we speak about locations, knowing how to pronounce their names will add to our credibility (note: Cairo, Egypt, and Cairo, Illinois, are *not* pronounced the same. For the Illinoisian who hears a lecturer pronounce the name of the Illinois location as if it was a half a world away, the presenter suddenly becomes less credible). So double check those pronunciations. Use a dictionary, friends (who might have a clue), Google, or even call the library in the town, to be certain you have the emphasis on the right syllable and the vowels and consonants all properly pronounced. When talking about cities in other countries, make certain you know if the "LL" is to take the "Y" sound, "L" sound, or maybe even something you have never heard of. It takes so little time to double check, and much less time to destroy your "expert" status in the eyes of your audience.

Watch your mouth—it can get you in trouble, or it can make you one of the most sought-after speakers in the Guild. The words we choose, how we use them, and how we pronounce them can make all the difference.

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