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Siren Calling

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Politicians aren't the only ones who can vary their vocal qualities to display their personality, arouse emotions and influence others. You can, too.

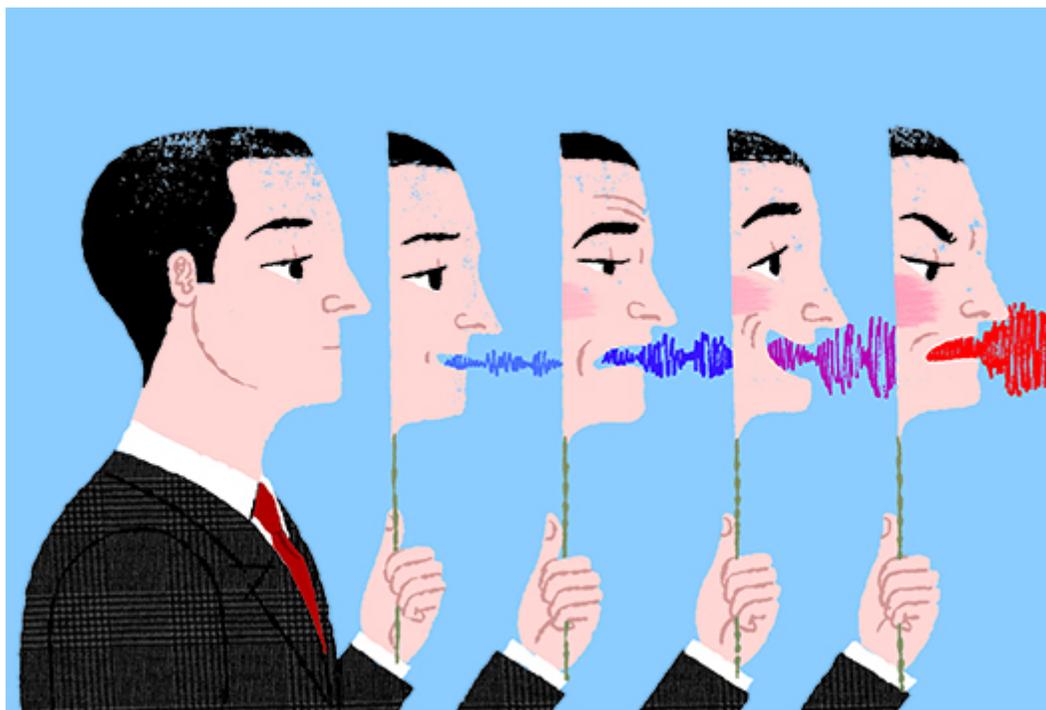


Illustration by José Merino.

In the heat of the battle for the presidency, you might think that searching for common ground in the speeches of the two major candidates would be futile. But Rosario Signorello, a postdoctoral researcher in the Department of Head and Neck Surgery at the David Geffen School of Medicine at UCLA, finds plenty.

Signorello, who studies the vocal characteristics of political leaders, has concluded that successful politicians share vocal qualities that influence how their audiences respond to them, unrelated to the meaning of their words or the ideas expressed. That goes for

the principals in the current campaign. For all their substantive differences, Signorello insists, Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump adhere to similar speaking fundamentals.

Employing scientific measures that have been developed in the speech acoustics field, Signorello measures vocal qualities that include pitch frequency, range and loudness; strategies such as pauses and hushed tones; and how different groups perceive these. “Voice is one of the most reliable and efficient behaviors speakers use to display their personality, to arouse emotions and to influence others,” he explains.

Politicians, who speak in a wide range of settings to every conceivable audience, are ideal subjects for Signorello’s research. So, to learn more about the speaking strategies that transcend partisanship and gender, during the 2016 primary season he analyzed the vocal characteristics of four candidates in three contexts: addressing followers at large rallies, engaging in discussions with other leaders, and appearing in nonpolitical conversational settings, such as talk-show interviews.

Signorello found that the candidates he studied — Trump, Clinton, Carly Fiorina and Bernie Sanders — shared fundamentally similar vocal tendencies, depending on the audience, despite the vast differences in the substance

of their rhetoric. When speaking to large, diverse voter audiences, they used a wide pitch range as part of a strategy to seem charismatic. In addressing other leaders — Clinton speaking to a United Nations commission, Sanders before the U.S. Senate, Trump and Fiorina at the New Hampshire Republican Leadership Summit — they stuck to a lower pitch and a narrower pitch range to send a message of power. And in the informal interview settings, the candidates varied their pitch even less, using their “healthy” voice without any stretching of frequency or decibel level.

Talented politicians tend to be especially skilled at modulating their speaking style to fit the moment and the audience, using the multiple layers of the charismatic voice to convey the desired subtext, Signorello says. But he is quick to add that these skills are available to anyone. “Voice manipulation can be learned,” he insists. “People think that public speakers who have an amazing delivery were born that way, but that’s false.” In fact, Signorello suggests, we can all benefit from using some basic vocal strategies in personal and professional settings.

Perfect Your Pitch

Are you looking to portray yourself as kind and approachable, even vulnerable? Or as an authority figure who commands respect, and perhaps engenders a bit of fear? Signorello has found that across languages and cultures, speakers who adopt a higher pitch are seen as more caring and compassionate, but as soon as they lower their pitch and narrow their voice frequencies, they’re viewed as more dominant and authoritarian.

Coming across as charismatic requires meeting diverse expectations. “You need to please everyone, so you modulate your voice, going from a low pitch to a high-pitched falsetto,” Signorello says. But he cautions that if you sound dramatically different from what your listeners expect, you may come across as weak or ineffective.

Consider Your Audience

Politicians take into account who’s listening. Although it wasn’t part of his study, Signorello suspects that less educated and more male-dominated groups are more likely to respond to a speaking pattern that conveys strength — which would mean a low pitch — while more feminine and better-educated audiences might prefer the compassion associated with a higher-pitched frequency. If you’re out with friends, a diversified delivery can help you become the life of the party, but in a job interview, remember your audience. A “creative” job may call for varied vocal delivery, but someone interviewing a future chief financial officer may want a lower, controlled delivery that communicates seriousness and competence.

Know What You’re Talking About

Mindful of how audiences will perceive different approaches, you can tailor your pitch to the topic you’re discussing. Do you want to come across as confident or caring? “A politician may want to sound authoritarian when discussing foreign policy, for example, and more benevolent when addressing health issues,” Signorello says.

Make Adjustments

Read your audience and don’t hesitate to adjust. “The best speakers adapt their voices to their listeners, context and culture,” Signorello observes. “Charismatic leaders monitor audience reaction and possess the emotional intelligence to change their vocal delivery mid-speech to obtain the response they want.”

Keep Up to Speed

The speed at which you talk can also influence how people perceive you, Signorello says. And on a related note ... well-timed pauses also have their place. Signorello has found that speakers who use longer rhetorical breaks are seen as more intelligent and competent, whereas shorter pauses are associated with authoritarian, charming and dynamic leaders.

Don't Fill the Voids

If you do pause — rhetorically or simply because you're thinking about what to say — don't fill the silence with sounds. “When you say ‘uhhhh’ or you don't know how to respond so you go ‘mmmmm,’ it gives the impression that you are not eloquent,” Signorello says.

Speak Your Mind

Signorello argues that whether you're trying to get a job or angling for a second date, you shouldn't underestimate the importance of your vocal delivery. “Voice is used to lead the audience, like a maestro leads an orchestra,” he says. And after a disclaimer that he's not referring to anyone in particular, he observes: “Some politicians don't even know what they're talking about, but they are so good at using their voice and facial gestures that the content becomes less important.”