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The Throat and The Voice: Part 2, Chapter 8: Defects of Voice

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the waves of sound are directed too much towards the back part of the throat, instead of towards the front of the mouth. The peculiar attractive tones of the Italians are due to their custom of directing the waves of sound towards the lips. The guttural character of the tones of most English-speaking people is due to their habit of directing the sound-waves too much towards the back part of the throat. When the sound-waves issue from the mouth, as if they were, their shape or form is more regular than when they issue more from the throat; and, as we have seen (p. 101), the timbre or quality of sound is due to the shape or form of the sound-wave.

CHAPTER VIII.
DEFECTS OF VOICE.

A GREAT defect in vocal utterance, the organs being healthy, is due to pitching the voice in too high a key, that is to say, in too high a portion of the vocal register. Prolonged efforts at public speaking in too high a key are fatiguing, painful, and injurious to the voice. The fault may be corrected by paying particular attention to one's utterance for a time, even in ordinary conversation, until the proper method gradually becomes habitual, so as not to require attention any longer. The so-called chest portion of the register is the proper one to use, especially for men; but care must be taken not to use the very lowest portion of the register, as that would develop a defect in the opposite direction. When we speak in such tones that the chest is felt to vibrate under the impact of the sound-waves, we are using the voice in the most efficient and agreeable manner; and if we endeavor to imitate the tones of the voice of a friend whose utterance is particularly agreeable to the ear, it will be evident, by our sensations, that the
vibrations of the sound-waves are being transmitted to
the walls of the chest. A person in fairly good health
can speak for hours, when necessary, in this portion
of the register, without becoming over-fatigued. If
unaccustomed to using the abdominal type of respira-
tion, it is essential that the habit of doing so be ac-
cquired. The most effective and pleasant character
of voice is produced with the use of the abdominal
type of respiration and the chest portion of the
register.

Speaking too loud is another common fault of
public speakers. It is often practised to overcome
the defect produced by speaking in too high a key.
The reach of the voice being less in the higher key,
forcible efforts are made to throw the sound of the
voice forward, as it were, so as to reach the auditors
at the greatest distance from the speaker. The effect is
disagreeable to the listener; and the effort is injurious
to the voice, and exhausting to the speaker. If the
respiration and the key-note are well managed, the
voice will reach the furthest limits of the largest
hall without any violent effort. A natural tone, such
as is employed in thanking a friend for an ordinary
courtesy, is the best one even for speaking from the
platform or reading-desk. Indeed, it is related of
one famous actor, that when going on the stage he
would ask some bystander the time of day, and, on
learning it, would reply "Thank you" in an ordinary
tone, which he preserved as his key-note in com-
mencing his address. It is only on certain occasions,
when it is necessary to overpower other noises, as when
many are speaking at once, that a public speaker is
compelled to raise his voice to command attention.
Otherwise, a voice but little louder than the tone em-
ployed in general conversation will suffice to fill a
large lecture-room or other auditorium.

Speaking too rapidly is another defect in the use
of the voice, which mars its efficacy. Very few public
speakers are deliberate enough in their utterances.
Rapid speech interferes with the elementary princi-
ples of acoustics. In the first place, sound-waves
require a certain length of time to travel from one
end of a room to the other. Then they undergo re-
flexion from the walls of the room and converge
towards the centre of the apartment, where they be-
come irregularly commingled with the direct waves,
and thus create a confusion of sounds which does not
subside on the instant that utterance ceases, but con-
tinues an appreciable period afterward. Due allow-
ance must in all instances be made for the resonance
of the apartment, and time be given for its subsidence.
If a series of sound-waves are generated from the
mouth of a public speaker in too rapid a succession,
each successive wave or impulse is liable to strike
against the rebound of those which have immedi-
ately preceded it, and thus to impair their precision
of oscillation, mechanically dampening the sound. Thus, only a more or less confused succession of vocal sounds are appreciable by the audience; a jumble from which, it is true, the impressions emanating from the speaker may be gathered, but only at the expense of a certain amount of disagreeable effort of attention. Each tone is not heard forcibly and distinctly. The minds of the auditors are diverted from imbibing the subject-matter of the discourse by very reason of the mental strain necessary to follow the jumbled and mumbled utterances of the speaker; and therefore the discourse itself fails to make that favorable impression it might be entitled to produce, if those who listened to it had an opportunity to concentrate their attention upon the theme. Slowness of utterance, free from drawl, and with well-balanced pauses, sufficiently long to await subsidence of the confused mingling of direct and reflective sound-waves, is essential to excellence in public use of the voice.

As well put by an astute critic,* "The great difficulty in elocution is to be slow, and not to seem slow; to speak the phrases with such distinctness, and such management of the breath, that each shall tell, yet due proportion be maintained. . . . The art is so to manage the time that it shall not appear slow to the hearer. . . . No sooner have they (actors) to express excitement or emotion of any kind, than they seem to lose all mastery over the rhythm and cadence of their speech. Let them study great speakers, and they will find that in passages which seem rapid, there is a measured rhythm; and that even in the whirlwind of passion there is as strict a regard to tempo as in passionate music. Resistent flexibility is the perfection of elocution."

Speaking through too contracted an opening in the mouth interferes mechanically with due play of the waves of sound, and renders utterance indistinct at any distance.

A bad habit with many speakers, consists in giving too much time to the consonants of speech, and too little to the vowels. The consonant sounds are, virtually, noises produced by certain motions of the constituent parts of the mouth, as the lips, teeth, tongue, and palate, which break the voice up into articulate speech. The chief vocal sounds are those of the vowels. The vowels may be compared to the sounds from the strings of the violin, the consonants to the noises produced by the movements of the bow. If the noises of the consonant sounds are too pronounced, and the music of the vowel sounds slurred, enunciation becomes proportionately indistinct. The consonants should just be touched, as it were, and the volume of sound be permitted to dwell upon the

*George Henry Lewes.
vowels. Indeed, at great distances, it is from the succession of vowel sounds that the sense of a word or phrase is gathered, the consonant sounds being too weak to be carried as far.* Care is requisite, therefore, to give due time to each vowel sound, avoiding prolongation of the sound into a drawling or sing-song style, which is disagreeable and ludicrous.

Another defect of voice is produced chiefly by an affected class of clergymen, who are anxious to impress their hearers with an excessive amount of solemnity of utterance in certain forms of admonition. The effect is somewhat similar to that which may be produced by speaking through the slightly closed fist held in front of the mouth. It is a reverberation of the voice produced by drawing the epiglottis down from its erect position, so that it stands obliquely over the top of the larynx, and thus catches the waves of sound and deflects them to the back portion of the throat. It is sometimes heard upon the stage in untrained actors who take the parts of the villains in certain melo-dramas and tragedies; and is not infrequent upon the platform. Excessive use of this method of utterance sometimes alters the position of the epiglottis permanently, and renders the defect very difficult to remedy.

A peculiar defect of voice sometimes encountered in men is a shrill, infantile, falsetto tone, or one somewhat like the treble of childhood, as if the usual change of voice had not taken place at puberty. As this is the sort of voice described as common to eunuchs, in whom the change is artificially prevented, the term eunichoid voice has been employed to designate it.

It is almost always a mere matter of habit. The individual is usually able, by an effort, to use his voice in the lower key, but he is impressed with the idea that this voice is unnatural. It sounds to himself so much deeper, by contrast, than what his voice really should be, that a great deal of persuasion is required to induce him to abandon the use of his false key, and adopt the natural one. The fault is best overcome by careful practice, in the lower key, under the supervision of a teacher of elocution, with immediate abandonment of the usual tone of voice, even if it be necessary for the time to resort to a whisper for ordinary purposes of conversation. Strangers will not notice anything amiss with the newly-acquired key of the voice, though it may appear unnatural for a considerable time to the individual and his immediate associates.

* Among the slaves of the cotton-fields, it used to be common for parents to give their children such names as Tom, Bob, Pete, and the like, so that they could hear their mammys call them at a great distance; a utilization of vowel sounds by the untutored negro, from which cultured whites may well learn a lesson.