

SPEECH AS A PERSONALITY TRAIT

EDWARD SAPIR
University of Chicago

ABSTRACT

Speech is intuitively interpreted by normal human beings as an index of personal expression. Its actual analysis, however, from this standpoint is difficult. Several distinct strands may be detected in what looks at first sight like an integral phenomenon. The social norm is always to be distinguished from the individual increment of expression, which is never discernible in itself, but only as measured against this norm. Moreover, "speech" consists of at least five levels of behavior, the expressive value of any one of which need not be confirmed by all the others. These levels are the voice as such, speech dynamics, the pronunciation, the vocabulary, and the style of connected utterance. Owing to the possibility of detecting conflict and other symptomatic reactions in speech, language behavior becomes a suggestive field for research in problems of personality.

If one is at all given to analysis, one is impressed with the extreme complexity of the various types of human behavior, and it may be assumed that the things that we take for granted in our ordinary, everyday life are as strange and as unexplainable as anything one might find. Thus, one comes to feel that the matter of speech is very far from being the self-evident or simple thing that we think it to be; that it is capable of a very great deal of refined analysis from the standpoint of human behavior; and that one might, in the process of making such an analysis, accumulate certain ideas for the research of personality problems.

There is one thing that strikes us as interesting about speech: on the one hand, we find it difficult to analyze; on the other hand, we are very much guided by it in our actual experience. That is perhaps something of a paradox, yet both the simple mind and the keenest of scientists know very well that we do not react to the suggestions of the environment in accordance with our specific knowledge alone. Some of us are more intuitive than others, it is true, but none is entirely lacking in the ability to gather and be guided by speech impressions in the intuitive exploration of personality. We are taught that when a man speaks he says something that he

wishes to communicate. That, of course, is not necessarily so. He intends to say something, as a rule, yet what he actually communicates may be measurably different from what he started out to convey. We often form a judgment of what he is by what he does not say, and we may be very wise to refuse to limit the evidence for judgment to the overt content of speech. One must read between the lines, even when they are not written on a sheet of paper.

In thinking over this matter of the analysis of speech from the point of view of personality study, the writer has come to feel that we might have two quite distinct approaches; two quite distinct analyses might be undertaken that would intercross in a very intricate fashion. In the first place, the analysis might differentiate the individual and society, in so far as society speaks through the individual. The second kind of analysis would take up the different levels of speech, starting from the lowest level, which is the voice itself, clear up to the formation of complete sentences. In ordinary life we say that a man conveys certain impressions by his speech, but we rarely stop to analyze this apparent unit of behavior into its superimposed levels. We might give him credit for brilliant ideas when he merely possesses a smooth voice. We are often led into misunderstandings of this sort, though we are not generally so easily fooled. We can go over the entire speech situation without being able to put our finger on the precise spot in the speech complex that leads to our making this or that personality judgment. Just as the dog knows whether to turn to the right or to the left, so we know that we must make certain judgments, but we might well be mistaken if we tried to give the reason for making them.

Let us look for a moment at the justification for the first kind of analysis, the differentiation between the social and the purely individual point of view. It requires no labored argument to prove that this distinction is a necessary one. We human beings do not exist out of society. If you put a man in a cell, he is still in society, because he carries his thoughts with him, and these thoughts, pathologic though they be, were formed with the help of society. On the other hand, we can never have experience of social patterns as such, however greatly we may be interested in them. Take so simple a social pattern as the word "horse." A horse is an animal with

four legs, a mane, and a neigh; but, as a matter of fact, the social pattern of reference to this animal does not exist in its purity. All that exists is my saying "horse" today, "horse" yesterday, "horse" tomorrow. Each of the events is different. There is something peculiar about each of them. The voice, for one thing, is never quite the same. There is a different quality of emotion in each articulation, and the intensity of the emotion, too, is different. It is not difficult to see why it is necessary to distinguish the social point of view from the individual, for society has its patterns, its set ways of doing things, its distinctive "theories" of behavior, while the individual has his method of handling those particular patterns of society, giving them just enough of a twist to make them "his" and no one else's. We are so interested in ourselves as individuals and in others who differ, however slightly, from us that we are always on the alert to mark the variations from the nuclear pattern of behavior. To one who is not accustomed to the pattern, these variations appear so slight as to be all but unobserved. Yet they are of maximum importance to us as individuals; so much so that we are liable to forget that there is a general social pattern to vary from. We are often under the impression that we are original or otherwise aberrant when, as a matter of fact, we are merely repeating a social pattern with the very slightest accent of individuality.

To proceed to the second point of view, the analysis of speech on its different levels: If we were to make a critical survey of how people react to voice and what the voice carries, we should find them relatively naïve about the different elements involved in speech. A man talks and makes certain impressions, but, as we have seen, we are not clear as to whether it is his voice which most powerfully contributes to the impression, or the ideas which are conveyed. There are several distinct levels in speech behavior which to linguists and psychologists are, each of them, sets of real phenomena, and we must now look at these in order to obtain some idea of the complexity of normal human speech. I will take up these various levels in order, making a few remarks about each of them as I proceed.

The lowest or most fundamental speech level is the voice. It is closest to the hereditary endowment of the individual, considered

out of relation to society, "low" in the sense of constituting a level that starts with the psychophysical organism given at birth. The voice is a complicated bundle of reactions and, so far as the writer knows, no one has succeeded in giving a comprehensive account of what the voice is and what changes it may undergo. There seems to be no book or essay that classifies the many different types of voice, nor is there a nomenclature that is capable of doing justice to the bewildering range of voice phenomena. And yet it is by delicate nuances of voice quality that we are so often confirmed in our judgment of people. From a more general point of view, voice may be considered a form of gesture. If we are swayed by a certain thought or emotion, we may express ourselves with our hands or some other type of gesturing, and the voice takes part in the total play of gesture. From our present point of view, however, it is possible to isolate the voice as a functional unit.

Voice is generally thought of as a purely individual matter, yet is it quite correct to say that the voice is given us at birth and maintained unmodified throughout life? Or has the voice a social quality as well as an individual one? I think we all feel, as a matter of fact, that we imitate each other's voices to a not inconsiderable extent. We know very well that if, for some reason or other, the timbre of the voice that we are heir to has been criticized, we try to modify it, so that it may not be a socially unpleasant instrument of speech. There is always something about the voice that must be ascribed to the social background, precisely as in the case of gesture. Gestures are not the simple, individual things they seem to be. They are largely peculiar to this or that society. In the same way, in spite of the personal and relatively fixed character of the voice, we make involuntary adjustments in the larynx that bring about significant modifications in the voice. Therefore, in deducing fundamental traits of personality from the voice we must try to disentangle the social element from the purely personal one. If we are not careful to do this, we may make a serious error of judgment. A man has a strained or raucous voice, let us say, and we might infer that he is basically "coarse-grained." Such a judgment might be entirely wide of the mark if the particular society in which he lives is an out-of-doors society that indulges in a good deal of swearing and

rather rough handling of the voice. He may have had a very soft voice to begin with, symptomatic of a delicate psychic organization, which gradually toughened under the influence of social suggestion. The personality which we are trying to disentangle lies hidden under its overt manifestations, and it is our task to develop scientific methods to get at the "natural," theoretically unmodified voice. In order to interpret the voice as to its personality value, one needs to have a good idea of how much of it is purely individual, due to the natural formation of the larynx, to peculiarities of breathing, to a thousand and one factors that the anatomist and the physiologist may be able to define for us. One might ask at this point: Why attach importance to the quality of the voice? What has that to do with personality? After all is said and done, a man's voice is primarily formed by natural agencies, it is what God has blessed him with. Yes, but is that not essentially true of the whole of personality? Inasmuch as the psychophysical organism is very much of a unit, we can be quite sure on general principles that in looking for the thing we call personality we have the right to attach importance to the thing we call voice. Whether personality is expressed as adequately in the voice as in gesture or in carriage, we do not know. Perhaps it is even more adequately expressed in the voice than in these. In any event, it is clear that the nervous processes that control voice production must share in the individual traits of the nervous organization that condition the personality.

The essential quality of the voice is an amazingly interesting thing to puzzle over. Unfortunately we have no adequate vocabulary for its endless varieties. We speak of a high-pitched voice. We say a voice is "thick," or it is "thin;" we say it is "nasal" if there is something wrong with the nasal part of the breathing apparatus. If we were to make an inventory of voices, we should find that no two of them are quite alike. And all the time we feel that there is something about the individual's voice that is indicative of his personality. We may even go so far as to surmise that the voice is in some way a symbolic index of the total personality. Some day, when we know more about the physiology and psychology of the voice, it will be possible to line up our intuitive judgments as to voice quality with a scientific analysis of voice formation. We do not know

what it is precisely that makes the voice sound "thick," or "vibrant," or "flat," or what not. What is it that arouses us in one man's voice, when another's stirs us not at all? I remember listening many years ago to an address by a college president and deciding on the spur of the moment that what he said could be of no interest to me. What I meant was that no matter how interesting or pertinent his remarks were in themselves, his personality could not touch mine because there was something about his voice that did not appeal to me, something revealing as to personality. There was indicated—so one gathered intuitively—a certain quality of personality, a certain force, that I knew could not easily integrate with my own apprehension of things. I did not listen to what he said; I listened only to the quality of his voice. One might object that that was a perfectly idiotic thing to do. Perhaps it was, but I believe that we are all in the habit of doing just such things and that we are essentially justified in so doing—not intellectually, but intuitively. It therefore becomes the task of an intellectual analysis to justify for us on reasoned grounds what we have knowledge of in pre-scientific fashion.

There is little purpose in trying to list the different types of voice. Suffice it to say that on the basis of his voice one might decide many things about a man. One might decide that he is sentimental; that he is extraordinarily sympathetic without being sentimental; that he is cruel—one hears voices that impress one as being intensely cruel. One might decide on the basis of his voice that a person who uses a very brusque vocabulary is nevertheless kind-hearted. This sort of comment is part of the practical experience of every man and woman. The point is that we are not in the habit of attaching scientific value to such judgments.

We have seen that the voice is a social as well as an individual phenomenon. If one were to make a profound enough analysis, one might, at least in theory, carve out the social part of the voice and discard it—a difficult thing to do. One finds people, for example, who have very pleasant voices, but it is society that has made them pleasant. One may then try to go back to what the voice would have been without its specific social development. This nuclear or primary quality of voice has in many, perhaps in all, cases a

symbolic value. The unconscious symbolisms are of course not limited to the voice. If you wrinkle your brow, that is a symbol of a certain attitude. If you act expansively by stretching out your arms, that is a symbol of a changed attitude to your immediate environment. In the same manner the voice is to a large extent an unconscious symbolization of one's general attitude.

Now all sorts of accidents may happen to the voice and deprive it, apparently, of its "predestined form." In spite of such accidents, however, the voice will be there for our discovery. These factors that spoil the basic picture are found in all forms of human behavior, and we must make allowances for them here as everywhere else in behavior. The primary voice structure is something that we cannot get at immediately, but must uncover by hacking away the various superimposed structures, social and individual.

What is the next level of speech? What we ordinarily call voice is voice proper plus a great many variations of behavior that are intertwined with voice and give it its dynamic quality. This is the level of voice dynamics. Two speakers may have very much the same basic quality of voice, yet their "voices," as that term is ordinarily understood, may be very different. In ordinary usage we are not always careful to distinguish the voice proper from voice dynamics. One of the most important aspects of voice dynamics is intonation, a very interesting field of investigation for both linguist and psychologist. Intonation is a much more complicated matter than is generally believed. It may be divided into three distinct levels, which intertwine into the unit pattern of behavior which we may call "individual intonation." In the first place, there is a very important social element in intonation which has to be kept apart from the individual variation; in the second place, this social element of intonation has a twofold determination. We have certain intonations which are a necessary part of our speech. If I say, for example, "Is he coming?" I raise the pitch of the voice on the last word. There is no sufficient reason in nature why I should have an upward inflection of the voice in sentences of this type. We are apt to assume that this habit is natural, even self-evident, but a comparative study of the dynamic habits of many diverse

languages convinces one that this assumption is on the whole unwarranted. The interrogative attitude may be expressed in other ways, such as the use of particular interrogative words or specific grammatical forms. It is one of the significant patterns of our English language to elevate the voice in interrogative sentences of a certain type, hence such elevation is not expressive in the properly individual sense of the word, though we sometimes feel it to be so.

But more than that, there is a second level of socially determined variation in intonation, the musical handling of the voice generally, quite aside from the properly linguistic patterns of intonation. It is understood in a given society that we are not to have too great an individual range of intonation. We are not to rise to too great a height in our cadences; we are to pitch the voice at such and such an average height. In other words, society tells us to limit ourselves to a certain range of intonation and to certain characteristic cadences, that is, to adopt certain melody patterns peculiar to itself. If we were to compare the speech of an English country gentleman with that of a Kentucky farmer, we should find the intonational habits of the two to be notably different, though there are certain important resemblances, due to the fact that the language they speak is essentially the same. Neither dares depart too widely from his respective social standard of intonation. Yet we know no two individuals who speak exactly alike so far as intonation is concerned. We are interested in the individual as the representative of a social type when he comes from some far place. The southerner, the New Englander, the middle-westerner—each has a characteristic intonation. But we are interested in the individual as an individual when he is merged in, and is a representative of, our own group. If we are dealing with people who have the same social habits, we are interested in the slight intonational differences which the individuals exhibit, for we know enough of their common social background to evaluate these slight differences. We are wrong to make any inferences about personality on the basis of intonation without considering the intonational habit of one's speech community or that carried over from a foreign language. We do not really know what a man's speech is until we have evaluated his social background. If a Japanese talks in a monotonous voice, we

have not the right to assume that he is illustrating the same type of personality that one of us would be if we talked with his sentence melody. Furthermore, if we hear an Italian running through his whole possible gamut of tone we are apt to say that he is temperamental or that he has an interesting personality. Yet we do not know whether he is in the least temperamental until we know what are the normal Italian habits of speech, what Italian society allows its members in the way of melodic play. Hence a major intonation curve, objectively considered, may be of but minor importance from the standpoint of individual expressiveness.

Intonation is only one of the many phases of voice dynamics. Rhythm, too, has to be considered. Here again there are several layers that are to be distinguished. First of all, the primary rhythms of speech are furnished by the language one is brought up in, and are not due to our individual personality. We have certain very definite peculiarities of rhythm in English. Thus, we tend to accent certain syllables strongly and to minimize others. That is not due to the fact that we wish to be emphatic. It is merely that our language is so constructed that we must follow its characteristic rhythm, accenting one syllable in a word or phrase at the expense of the others. There are languages that do not follow this habit. If a Frenchman accented his words in our English fashion, we might be justified in making certain inferences as to his nervous condition. Furthermore, there are rhythmic forms which are due to the socialized habits of particular groups, rhythms which are over and above the basic rhythms of the language. Some sections of our society will not allow emphatic stresses; others allow or demand a greater emphasis. Polite society will allow far less play in stress and intonation than a society that is constituted by attendance at a baseball or football game. We have, in brief, two sorts of socialized rhythm: the rhythms of language and the rhythms of social expressiveness. And, once more, we have individual rhythmic factors. Some of us tend to be more tense in our rhythms, to accent certain syllables more definitely, to lengthen more vowels, to shorten unaccented vowels more freely. There are, in other words, individual rhythmic variations in addition to the social ones.

There are still other dynamic factors than intonation and

rhythm. There is the relative continuity of speech. A great many people speak brokenly, in uneasy splashes of word groups; others speak continuously, whether they have anything to say or not. With the latter type it is not a question of having the necessary words at one's disposal; it is a question of mere continuity of linguistic expression. There are social speeds and continuities and individual speeds and continuities. We can be said to be slow or rapid in our utterances only in the sense that we speak above or below certain socialized speeds. Here again, in the matter of speed, the individual habit and its diagnostic value for the study of personality can be measured only against accepted social norms.

To summarize the second level of language behavior, we have a number of factors, such as intonation, rhythm, relative continuity, and speed, which have to be analyzed, each of them, into two distinct levels: the social and the individual. The social level, moreover, has generally to be divided into two levels, the level of that social pattern which is language and the level of the linguistically irrelevant habits of speech manipulation that are characteristic of a particular group.

The third level of speech analysis is pronunciation. Here again one often speaks of the "voice" when what is really meant is an individually nuanced pronunciation. A man pronounces certain consonants or vowels, say, with a distinctive timbre or in an otherwise peculiar manner, and we tend to ascribe such variations of pronunciation to his voice; yet they may have nothing at all to do with the quality of his voice. In pronunciation we again have to distinguish the social from the individual patterns. Society decrees that we pronounce certain selected consonants and vowels, which have been set aside as the bricks and mortar, as it were, for the construction of a given language. We cannot depart very widely from this decree. We know that the foreigner who learns our language does not at once take over the sounds that are peculiar to us. He uses the nearest pronunciation that he can find in his own language. It would manifestly be wrong to make inferences of a personal nature from such mispronunciations. But all the time there are also *individual* variations of sound which are highly important and which in many cases have a symptomatic value for the study of personality.

One of the most interesting chapters in linguistic behavior, a chapter which has not yet been written, is the expressively symbolic character of sounds quite aside from what the words in which they occur mean in a referential sense. On the properly linguistic plane, sounds have no meaning; yet if we were to interpret them psychologically we should find that there is a subtle, though fleeting, relation between the "real" value of words and the unconscious symbolic value of sounds as actually pronounced by individuals. Poets know this in their own intuitive way. But what the poets are doing rather consciously by means of artistic devices, we are doing unconsciously all of the time on a vast, if humble, scale. It has been pointed out, for instance, that there are certain expressive tendencies toward diminutive forms of pronunciation. If you are talking to a child, you change your "level of pronunciation" without knowing it. The word "tiny" may become "teeny." There is no rule of English grammar that justifies the change of vowel, but the word "teeny" seems to have a more directly symbolic character than "tiny," and a glance at the symbolism of phonetics gives us the reason for this. When we pronounce the *ee* of "teeny," there is very little space between the tongue and the roof of the mouth; in the first part of the *i* of "tiny" there is a great deal of space. In other words, the *ee* variation has the value of a gesture which emphasizes the notion, or rather feeling, of smallness. In this particular case the tendency to symbolize diminutiveness is striking because it has caused one word to pass over to an entirely new word, but we are constantly making similar symbolic adjustments in a less overt way without being aware of the process. Some people are much more symbolic in their use of sounds than others. A man may lisp, for instance, because he is unconsciously symbolizing certain traits which lead those who know him to speak of him as a "sissy." His pronunciation is not due to the fact that he cannot pronounce the sound of *s* properly; it is due to the fact that he is driven to reveal himself. He has no speech defect, though there is of course also a type of lisp that is a speech defect and that has to be kept apart from the symbolic lisp. There are a great many other unconsciously symbolic habits of articulation for which we have no current terminology. But we cannot discuss such variation fruitfully until

we have established the social norm of pronunciation and have a just notion of what are the allowable departures within this social norm. If one goes to England or France or any other foreign country and sets down impressions on the interpretative significance of the voices and pronunciation perceived, what one says is not likely to be of value unless one has first made a painstaking study of the social norms of which the individual phenomena are variants. The lisp that one notes may be what a given society happens to require, hence it is no psychological lisp in our sense. One cannot draw up an absolute psychological scale for voice, intonation, rhythm, speed, or pronunciation of vowels and consonants without in every case ascertaining the social background of speech habit. It is always the individual variation that matters; never the objective behavior as such.

The fourth speech level, that of vocabulary, is a very important one. We do not all speak alike. There are certain words which some of us never use. There are other, favorite, words which we are always using. Personality is largely reflected in the choice of words; but here too we must distinguish carefully the social vocabulary norm from the more significantly personal choice of words. Certain words and locutions are not used in certain circles; others are the hall-mark of locale, status, or occupation. We listen to a man who belongs to a particular social group and are intrigued, perhaps attracted, by his vocabulary. Unless we are keen analysts, we are likely to read personality out of what is merely the current diction of his society. Individual variation exists, but it can properly be appraised only with reference to the social norm. Sometimes we choose words because we like them; sometimes we slight words because they bore or annoy or terrify us. We are not going to be caught by them. All in all, there is room for much subtle analysis in the determination of the social and individual significance of words.

Finally, we have style as a fifth speech level. Many people have an illusion that style is something that belongs to literature. Style is an everyday facet of speech that characterizes both the social group and the individual. We all have our individual styles in both conversation and considered address, and they are never the

arbitrary and casual things we think them to be. There is always an individual method, however poorly developed, of arranging words into groups and of working these up into larger units. It would be a very complicated problem to disentangle the social and individual determinants of style, but it is a theoretically possible one.

To summarize, we have the following materials to deal with in our attempt to get at the personality of an individual in so far as it can be gathered from his speech. We have his voice. We have the dynamics of his voice, exemplified by such factors as intonation, rhythm, continuity, and speed. We have pronunciation, vocabulary, and style. Let us look at these materials as constituting so and so many levels on which expressive patterns are built. One may get a sense of individual patterning on one of these levels and use this sense to interpret the other levels. Objectively, however, two or more levels of a given speech act may produce either a similarity of expressive effect or a contrast. We may illustrate from a theoretical case. We know that many of us, handicapped by nature or habit, work out compensatory reactions. In the case of the man with a lisp whom we termed a "sissy," the essentially feminine type of articulation is likely to remain, but other aspects of his speech, including his voice, may show something of his effort to compensate. He may affect a masculine type of intonation or, above all, consciously or unconsciously, he may choose words that are intended to show that he is really a man. In this case we have a very interesting conflict, objectified within the realm of speech behavior. It is here as in all other types of behavior. One may express on one level of patterning what one will not or cannot express on another. One may inhibit on one level what one does not know how to inhibit on another, whence results a "dissociation"—which is probably, at last analysis, nothing but a notable divergence in expressive content of functionally related patterns.

Quite aside from specific inferences which we may make from speech phenomena on any one of its levels, there is a great deal of interesting work to be done with the psychology of speech woven out of its different levels. Perhaps certain elusive phenomena of voice are the result of the interweaving of distinct patterns of expression. We sometimes get the feeling that there are two things

being communicated by the voice, which may then be felt as splitting itself into an "upper" and a "lower" level.

It should be fairly clear from our hasty review that if we make a level-to-level analysis of the speech of an individual and if we carefully see each of these levels in its social perspective, we obtain a valuable lever for psychiatric work. It is possible that the kind of analysis which has here been suggested, if carried far enough, may enable us to arrive at certain very pertinent conclusions regarding personality. Intuitively we attach an enormous importance to the voice and to the speech behavior that is carried by the voice. We have not much to say about it as a rule, not much more than an "I like that man's voice," or "I do not like the way he talks." Individual speech analysis is difficult to make, partly because of the peculiarly fleeting character of speech, partly because it is especially difficult to eliminate the social determinants of speech. In view of these difficulties there is not as much significant speech analysis being made by students of behavior as we might wish, but the difficulties do not relieve us of the responsibility for making such researches.