



The Sounds Behind Our Voice

By John A Baron

What do seasoned actors express that is more than the lines they say?

What do the 'raw/gut' sounds behind our words actually mean?

How aware are we of the underlying causes of our own and of others vocal tensions?

How might professionals intentionally access 'sound' to more effectively persuade clients?

And baby talk. What do we know about this?

The bridge between early childhood sound and adult vocal tones is an area that requires better understanding if we are to more fully realize the potential and depth in our communication. The sounds behind words often express unconscious aspects of ourselves and our memories. This is one reason they tend to remain unknown or unclear to us.

As an ex-actor in my native England, then businessman, mind-body-plus teacher and voice coach, these questions have lived with me over the years. I'm wanting to share some of my observations and hunches with the Somatic Psychotherapy Community as to why sounds behind voices often say much more than mere words.

Tone of Voice

We use the phrase 'tone of voice' from time to time. But what do we mean when we say or hear it?

Most of us can recall being told "do not use that tone of voice at me" as a wannabee delinquent teenager by an out-of-patience parent. Our tone at that time may have sounded:

persnickety
cool
sarcastic
entitled
arrogant
victimized
demeaning
supercilious
whiney
aggressive

and these are just ten tones of voice for this one example. The list, of course, is endless. Well, at least as endless as grouchy teenagers are.

The truth is our 'tone of voice' actually communicates far more than the words we use do.

We all used our innate sound to communicate as infants before our words started to show up. But these innate sounds don't suddenly stop when we begin to 'speak.' They develop alongside our acquired vocabularies. This development synchronizes with our expanding vocabulary. These sounds can be as sophisticated as the most complex sentences we use. Yet there seems to be little study about their meaning, at least as far as language communication is concerned. There are not thousands of innate-sound dictionary equivalents; no university chairs devoted to the meaning of sounds behind words.

Our tone of voice expresses our emotional connection behind the words we use.

Our emotional states fluctuate throughout the day. Take the following string of words, for example: "pass the salt!" There are millions of ways to say this. Deliver this line to just three people you know (better if there's a salt cellar around when you do). As you say 'pass the salt' to each of them, you will sound different every time. Why? Because you have a different emotional connection to each of them. Your sound will reflect that.





To Be Or Not To Be

In my work with actors, I have had them experiment with a character they're playing by exploring the bare sounds behind each character's words. Let's say the actor is playing Hamlet and we're using his famous speech "to be, or not to" A little time may be spent saying the words of the speech to themselves. It's best if the actor is NOT interpreting at this stage but feeling how the words land as they continue to contemplate them.

After a while the actor can start to experiment with voicing the sounds behind the words. These sounds may sound peculiar at first, even Neanderthal-like at times. But at least this gets the actor away from literal (or wooden) interpretation. In this case the actor plays with exploring the raw emotions of their character via the exploration of these raw sounds. At times we may hear:

whimpers
guttural sounds
breathing expressions
shouts
varying vowel sounds

clucked consonants
soulful cries
sounds of contentment
humorous sounds
pitiful noises
and other sounds.

If you'd like to experiment here, use the line 'to be or not to be.'

- Sit with it for a while.
- What emotional perceptions come up for you?
- Let sounds (not words) come out of you via this connection. (It doesn't need to be dramatic.)
- What raw sounds express the meaning, for you—right now—of the unspoken words behind 'to be, or not to be?'
- Now say the line a few times out loud, connecting the words to the sounds you were making.
- Note the sounds and the words. How is one affecting the other?

With actors I will have them take this crazy experiment a step further.

- From these raw sounds I will ask them to explore their movement, letting the movement be a direct expression of the emotion they've connected to, not to the character they're playing or the character's situation, but the emotion itself.
- The actors will make a variety of movements—large movement, still movement, fast, slow movement, gesturing movement etc.—all emerging/happening.
- See what shows up

Asking the actor to explore emotions and sounds behind words in this way reveals expressions that cannot be accessed by words alone. The results of this experiment are often startling, so much so that movements which arise via this process can be choreographed into the actor's staging when appropriate.

Accessing and exploring the sounds behind our words open up a new understanding, not only in the actor's communication, but in our own.





How Voices Come Into Being

For the first few months of their lives, infants express themselves by the sounds they make. Some familiar examples:

- gurgles
- cries
- shouts
- screams
- grunts
- sing-song sounds
- laughter
- 'Ooh's' and 'ahs'
- fear sounds
- cries of hunger
- conversation noises
- giggles
- 'coos' and happy sounds

In other 'words,' infants express themselves via these kinds of raw sounds. These raw sounds do not simply disappear after words come along. They become part of the foundation of sound behind our individual voices and are the basis upon which our emotional world is built and conveyed.

These noises without words are part of the struggle the infant has in communicating. This may be one reason that some of us still struggle with our emotional expression today. The noises, tones, and sounds behind words often communicate the memories of struggles; struggles that can induce stress triggers.

If emotional expression is discouraged in infancy this will create vocal blocks/ tensions, both then and later. If so, the vocal instrument is compromised. This happens before full sentences come along and can continue far into adulthood.

A child will copy the sounds / tones of voice of people in their lives. They will even embody them over time to some extent. Voices—pleasant and unpleasant, loud, and soft, threatening, and welcoming—all stored in memory.

In a pioneering study, Australian opera singer Priscilla Dunstan, outlined five basic sounds babies make:

- 'Neh' (hunger)
- 'Eh' (burping)
- 'Eairh' (gas)
- 'Heh' (discomfort)
- Owh (sleepiness)

This may seem to be a basic observation, yet it did start a recognition of the benefits of considering the meaning of sounds in infants.

Research also claims that between the ages 0 to 3 months neonates' sounds are not speech or language but an activation of the voice box. Whether future research continues to expand these initial findings remains to be seen.

Baby Talk

From the ages of six months to nine months babies start to copy basic sounds like 'mama,' 'papa,' etc.

The *Journal of Neuroscience* (2018) published a study referencing 'Baby Talk'. Their findings were dramatic. Back and forth conversation between parent and infant developed better language/comprehension skill. This was irrespective of the socio/economic group of the parent and child.

It was the back-and-forth conversation, not the drilling of individual words and meaning, that proved more relevant. This back and forth was even more successful when the adult spoke with the child and not at them. When the adult practiced turn-taking, i.e., pausing between the exchanges, this invited the infant to connect. Observation skill, interaction, and imitation skills improved.

Adult parents speak to their child in an endearing way using familiar baby talk sounds. The adult may blabber in fun, use gentle noises, or raise pitch to communicate with the child. Conversely, the disconnected parent may yell, speak loudly, use a high accusatory sound or even a low threatening one. All this affects the child for good or for ill. The tone of voice the adult uses becomes the child's emotional inheritance, and part of their embodied make up. This is reflected in the sounds they make when speaking.





Do Sounds Behind Words Express the Unconscious?

The bridge between infancy and adulthood is massive. The sounds acquired in this time reflect countless experiences. Our verbal development is loaded with the sounds communicated to us behind words. These sounds reflect a meaning locked away in personal histories. In fact, what body language is to movement, these sounds are to voices. These sounds cannot always be explained, though they are intuited from time to time.

This is my theory: the sounds behind words mainly express the unconscious parts of ourselves and our memories. Which is why, for the most part, they remain unknown or unclear to us.

What Happens When the Tone of Voice is Used to Affect the Outcome?

'Paralinguistic' is a newly introduced buzzword which is now applied to business presentation. It is our communication behind words themselves, e.g., volume, speed, intonation, gesture, and other non-verbal cues. (Para - 'alongside of' and linguistic - 'human speech'.)

Jonah Berger and Alex B. Van Zant (2019) recently conducted four experiments on tone of voice and how it affects persuasion. They found listeners are persuaded by the speakers' attempts to modulate not just what they say, but *how* they say it.

When communicators spoke louder and varied their volume they were perceived as being confident. This confidence connected to their power of persuasion, proving this link.

The Reflection Behind the Mirror

Elizabeth is a successful educator. For years she has taught classes in a variety of schools and universities, from poor to posh. Due to constant vocal strain, she recently took a series of one-on-one voice coaching sessions with me.

My initial observations showed Elizabeth had excess muscular tension in her face and jaw. On top of that, she had shallow breathing, vocal fry (a grating low sound) and very quick delivery.



Elizabeth is a pleasant articulate person, yet she conveyed such obvious tension by her 'sound' that she was difficult to listen to. These marked tensions have the effect of making one's listener tense. (A tense speaker/ performer/ actor/ musician, will also make their audience tense.)

In one session, we were exploring continuous air flow, first linking it to continuous sound and then varying the volume and pitch of certain sounds.

Her habitual vocal repertoire was a mix of sounds best described as:

breathless
pinched,
hidden,
locked up,
quick,
soft,
staccato.

The new sounds she was exploring were not part of this habitual repertoire.

Elizabeth suddenly stopped speaking. She looked shocked.

What had happened was a clash between her habitual sounds and the exploration of these new sounds. They had triggered a strong memory.

Elizabeth then told me about her repressive upbringing, which included both physical and emotional violence: "Speak when you're spoken to!" and "Obey your father or else!"

The moment she had stopped the exercise, she understood the cause of her tensions. What blocked her ability to speak with ease throughout her whole adult life, originated in early childhood:

the closed mouth (“Don’t be seen!”)
the forced smile (‘I’ll be good.’)
the fast delivery (“Say it quickly so you won’t be noticed.”)
the breathlessness (her embodied fear)
the staccato sounds (“I don’t want to be in trouble.”)

All this tension was locked into vocal identity that was and is challenging to break free from.

Vocal Tensions Affect Vocal Functioning

Elizabeth is now able to speak with much more ease. Even when habitual vocal tensions return, she understands they are only temporary, not all consuming. These vocal tensions reflect the person she was. Consciously releasing these tensions make her sound like the person she is now.

We all copy the sounds of our upbringing. Elizabeth’s example shows us that tensions that lie in our early childhood affect the way we sound. Muscles tend to fixate these experiences. Any undue muscular tension affects the free functioning of our vocal instrument. This in turn affects the myriad of sounds behind the words we use.

If we were to take away words; if we were to focus on the actual sounds a person makes, what then? It then becomes a different game—a game we can begin to be more conscious of, should we so choose. But until we do, can we really understand the art of communication and the essence of presentation skill?

Is it worth bothering about these raw sounds behind words? Is it such a big deal as far as practical communication is concerned?

Ask a theatre actor. Ask a public speaking coach. Ask a business communications coach. Ask the people who are now able to persuade listeners more effectively. And ask the people like Elizabeth, who are now able to speak their truth and sound truthful when they do.

Walt Whitman said, “Every soul has its own individual voice.”

Yes. It’s just a matter of finding it!



John A Baron began his professional life as an actor in England playing leading roles in professional theatre, film and TV. He went on to become a business owner, corporate trainer, senior teacher and teacher trainer of The Alexander Technique and Voice Coach.

Along the way John developed special workshops, and training programs for such diverse organizations as Fireman's Fund Insurance, Google Inc. (two-year project), San Francisco Ballet (twenty-five-year project), San Francisco Opera, Weg Der Mitte (Berlin), Cal State Hayward University, The Sundance Institute, and The Esalen Institute.

He currently practices in Sausalito, California.

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