

The Voice As Mask

By John A. Baron

"Our voice is a mask because it helps us express ourselves, it helps us share who we are inside, but it is still just a projection"

Rébecca Kleinberger





Masks have fascinated cultures and individuals for centuries. In ancient Greek plays, masks were thought to embody the spirit of the character that the actor played. It was as if the mask itself used the actor to bring the character it represented back to life. The actor could often feel overtaken by the character of the mask. The voice of the actor in the here and now expressed the spirit of the character portrayed.

But a mask is more than the physical material, be it leather, *Papier-mâché*, or terra cotta. It is a representation of the person in appearance and voice. How many disguises live in our voice, our sounds, and sayings? Our manipulations, politicking, false enthusiasms, cover-ups, obfuscations, insincerities, compromised agreements? How do these actually sound? How do we hear them in ourselves as we do in others?

The Human Voice is a Mask

The human voice is more than a technical instrument, more than a vehicle to express words waiting to be said. Researchers can and do gain insight into how the voice works by studying articulation, breathing, movements of the vocal folds, etc. And their studies aid our work in all aspects of human life (physical, emotional, spiritual). And while these studies are essential, and perhaps at times necessary, technical analysis alone doesn't paint a complete picture. As somatic therapists/educators, we know that the voice reflects the state and being of the speaker, connected or otherwise. It reflects the entire being, the Self, including what is conscious and visible and what is shadowed and unconscious, shifting silently below the surface until "voiced".

What do the sounds of human voices hide or reveal?



Our voice can be molded to fit our feelings, be it frightened, nervous, joyful, excited, or even bored. But it can also betray our most profound truth, silent in the wings: a crack, an unexpected high shrill, a stumbling over words. We have the sense that we can control what we say and how we say it, but the reality is that our voices are layered, and textured. They perform as expected, and at times they break free and reveal our truth, perhaps at times much to our embarrassment or disgrace.

Without wearing actual physical masks, we put on voices to fulfill the demands of roles we find ourselves in, be it the stern father or the concerned mother, the loving partner or jovial comrade.

How then do we sound in these roles?

The mask of the roles may become evident to us when we play them. But what happens when the role or mask takes over? When we are unaware of this happening (others may be, though)? When we become lost in them, what then? Lost or found in a role, our voices will express our true feelings in many different ways, like it or not.

Voice expresses spirit

Words take on a new dimension when the sounds behind words - intonation, emotion, pitch, tempo - are enlivened or deadened.

Not everyone will be familiar with the phrase 'Voice Confrontation.' Most will be familiar with its meaning. It refers to the dislike of the sound of our own voice. There is a technical explanation for this. When we hear the recorded sound of our own voice, it is without the bone conduction sounds we hear when speaking. So, a recording doesn't sound quite the same to us as we sound to ourselves when we speak. But there may be a more veiled explanation for voice confrontation: we don't like the sound of our voice when our sound sounds phony to us. Why? Because then we have to admit we are phony.

Vocal phoniness is an indication that vocal masks are at play. When that is the case, what are vocal masks hiding?

'Phony' is a loaded word, one most of us have a strong adverse reaction to. It implies, false, B.S., sham, pseudo, manipulation, and affectation. But also consider these possibilities: unconscious, unintended, habit, buffering, defense, suppressed emotion, insecurity, and nervousness. Then, phoniness takes on another dimension, a more human one.

Perhaps we don't like how we sound when the vulnerabilities hiding behind our voice masks are revealed. The tightening of the throat, holding of one's breath, and pushing of sound, are just some examples/ manifestations of how we camouflage/ armor what we don't want others to see or hear. If the sounds we make doing this resemble croaky adolescents, then the way we mask our vulnerabilities becomes obvious.



"I sometimes hold it half a sin, to put in words the grief I feel, for words like nature half reveal, and half conceal the soul within."

A.L. Tennyson

Voice masks

When considering the following 'vocal quirks', please bear in mind, that they are examples. They are not absolutes. There are millions of messages within and behind all voices. The following illustrate a few.

Vocal Quirk 1. Everything in life is enthusiastic

This may have started with barkers at the fair and picked up by checkered-suited car salesmen in the 1960's, people using their voices to proclaim the truth, whatever they happen to be selling. This voice is used by overzealous preachers, new age gurus, motivational speakers, and hyper podcasters, all armed with chirpy content.

Where there is unnecessary physical tension, there is vocal tension – for example, speaking loudly, pitching higher, rushing tempos. Overuse of this mask exhausts the listener. ‘Rah rah’ delivery puts on an upbeat, smiling mask with too many questions behind it. Why is all and everything reduced to a one-note samba of false cheeriness? Of course, not everything can be whoop dee do enthusiasm, so why make it so?

"There is a King Who is aware of every Mask you put on." Rumi

Vocal Quirk 2. Mumbling

"Erm hume yango shelditz e verbul standitch" If you wrote like you sound when you mumble, might you come across like this? Businesswise or otherwise, we can't afford to mumble.

Working to affect clarity in a person's sound is one of the most important parts of vocal coaching. The goal of accent reduction, for example, is not to get rid of accents, but to clean up accents so speakers will be understood.

What hides behind mumbles? What does it say about a person's confidence? Their shyness, opposition, secrets, uncertainties, disagreements? What impression does it give to the listener? What might a 'mumbling mask' actually look like?





Vocal Quirk 3. Too Quick, Too Slow

'In-tempo-rate' is my newly invented word for explaining hurried or dragged speech patterns.

Some gifted and intelligent types often speak at breakneck speed. They speak at the pace of their own understanding and not of their audience. Galloping away, they appear to have little concern for their listeners. Thus, they lose them and leave them in the dust.

Listeners' needs need prioritizing. When a speaker adapts their tempo to the pace of their listeners, they will be better received. Getting quick speakers to slow down is a challenge at first, as is changing any habit. But slowing one's speaking opens other doors. The speaker, paying more attention to the needs of the audience, connects more with them.

People may speak too quickly when they lack confidence. Then, they seem to be saying, "Let's get it over with."

Hyper expression is a characteristic of fast-paced speakers. Sounding 'hyper,' is perceived as negative, compulsive, erratic, and even by some as rude. (Yet another unwanted mask for a speaker to consider.)

Speaking too slowly may be a lesser sin than its opposite, but the impression it gives is that of a dullard. Taking one's time while conversing is to be encouraged. Yet, when taken too far, it will irritate most listeners. Behind this mask lurks uncertainty and hesitancy. It says, 'I'm not interesting, or even worse, 'I'm slow!'

Varying tempo in our speaking, in my mind, is an absolute necessity. Why? Because liveliness speaks at a quick pace, while thoughtfulness and depth need more time. Listeners need both. Lack of variance in tempo reveals a lack of nuance and exposes emotional woodenness.

"I wear the mask. It does not wear me."

Phillippe, 'Man in the Iron Mask'



Voice Quirk 4. Tight Jaw

Try this: Tighten your jaw. Now continue to speak with the jaw tightened (many do). What did you notice? What happens to the sound, the story that emerges from this, the emotions it constellates? What does a tight jaw imply?

The masseter muscles of the jaw are the strongest (per sq. inch) in the body. Along with the temporalis, they are the main closers of the jaw. Most people, though, clench them when opening their jaw. It should open by gravity (only partially true. Some smaller muscles with fancy Latin names do their bit also. For example, digastric, mylohyoid, lateral pterygoid). Yet jaw over-tension is rampant.

A tight-held jaw impedes the free movement of the tongue, mouth, neck, and facial muscles - all affecting the way we sound. The tighter the jaw, the more constricted the sound. A tight neck and jaw constrict the larynx.

Jaw tension can be camouflage for holding back anger, or not speaking out. Our tensions are also our armor - the armor that masks the fears and energies. A mask that doesn't want this communicated.

"Oral armoring (mouth/jaw) can be seen in habitual expressions: sarcastic smiling, continuous smiling, or a contemptuous or smug grin. The chin may be collapsed or pushed forward. The throat can be pinched in a way that results in a whining sound or weak voice."

Dr. Patricia Frisch

Voice Quirk 5. Monotone

Physical tension will narrow the vocal range. An average person can have a range of between 1.5 to 2 octaves in their voice. A trained singer between 2 to 3 octaves, in rare cases even more. Most people access 16 to 20 notes/pitches to express themselves. What amazing possibilities the voice has.

The higher the pitch, the more vibrant the content. Lower pitches convey ease and connection. But trying to pitch the voice to a particular note will only make the speaker sound stiff and phony. Why? The notes/ranges/octaves/pitches behind our words reflect our emotional connection/aliveness. Intonation, the pattern of pitch changes when speaking, is determined by our emotions.



When our emotions are hidden or repressed, the voice will mirror this. Then we hang out in limited ranges, even to the point of becoming monotoned. A monotone voice is a boring voice. It suggests a lack of connection to both the subject and the self.

"The only proper mask to wear in life is your own damn face."

Toni Cade Bambara

Voice Masks

There are many other vocal quirks that serve as examples of voice masks.

Most physical, vocal tensions reflect a disconnect in the person speaking. Disconnections that wear a mask. Using the idea of voice masks adds a needed dimension to body psychotherapy. Vocal challenges are personal; they reveal what a person is hiding - their character, potential, talents, fears, and truth.

Masks are certainly useful at times. Actors put them on and take them off as the play dictates. We can follow their example. Unmasking the voice, understanding its infinite nuances, and learning to 'read' inferences in the sounds behind words, will help us understand and better communicate with ourselves and others.

Begin by listening. Listen to changes you hear in yourself and others: tone, pitch, tempo, delivery, breathing patterns, silences, pauses, volume, tensions, and variations. Then observe physical movements and expressions. What sounds tend to accompany them? What are the sounds behind words? How does tension or lack of tension play out vocally?

In working with stage actors, I will sometimes have them read their lines out loud in a neutral way, deliberately minimizing expression and immediate interpretation. When doing this, they are also asked to remain at ease as best they can. What tends to emerge then, are emotional perceptions of the character. Perceptions that are not so easily accessed via mere intellectual analysis. Taking one of these emotions, the actor will be asked to 'move it.' The understanding that emerges from this movement can be inciteful. (It may even be choreographed back into the play.) Following this, the actor is asked to find sounds that express this particular emotion and movement. Not words, sounds: notes, pitches, elongated vowel sounds, etc. Not the sound behind the actor's actual lines, but of the chosen emotional perception the actor is experimenting with. The more the actor experiments in this way, the more awareness/ dimension/ subtext is revealed.

"Now when I speak and remember parts of our vocal work: dialing back the volume, connecting to resonance, accessing continuous air flow, backing off my habitual staccato delivery for example, I find myself speaking with much more ease than before. Then, I realize my old anxieties that accompanied my old speech patterns, were simply not there."

Anonymous

Likewise, the more we move beyond intellectual analysis of ourselves and others and explore what hides behind our masks, personas (the word persona also meaning 'mask'), and voice masks, the more is revealed.

Awareness is the key to unlocking the mystery behind masks, especially voice masks.

A final thought: what the speaker conceals, the voice reveals!



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. John worked with some of Europe's finest voice teachers, winning an Arts Council Grant (UK) to help further his vocal studies.

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 Esalen Institute, Voicetrax (voice actor training company and The Sundance Institute.

He is the founder of FindYourBusinessVoice.com, teaches A.T. from his studio in Sausalito, and one-on-one/ group vocal sessions online.

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Persona

By John Baron

Without a stage or play
he makes the entrance
moving all his movements with
a poise
emanating charisma
radiating mystery
around an all adoring public
of himself.

Oh, that familiar mask
out of the depths of fame
appearing night by night
in gas-lit glare
retort fantastic, expression,
gesture spare,
the name and reputation
go before him.

Prepared, well performed,
Processes, well-rehearsed,
Comportment, and inflection,
and technique.

And the need for validation
way beyond the footlights there
assured now of acceptance in
the aa – pplause!

*'Ladies and gentlemen
take your seats,
five minutes,
please, five minutes.'*

Backstage dressing room
break a leg whistle a tune
eight bare light bulbs frame
an image bare.
There he is the very sight
hairband and
a face of white
looking for himself amid
stick make-up.

*Behind the mask behind
the words he say's
behind learning behind
identities
behind appearance behind
fame
behind the curtain behind
the name.*

'Oh those harrowing hateful
moments that I spend alone
darlings, where's the public?'

(Pause)

'when you need 'em.'
Feeling like an empty room
matinee afternoon
he powders his own face
in preparation.

'Who am I' he wonders
why 'standing here inside a role,'
he waits in trepidation for
the show.
The sound of audience, exclamation -
'Cue actor!'
Injecting fix into
This masked-scared soul.



"A mask tells us more than a face."

Oscar Wilde