

Book: 'The human voice'

Our voices say more about us than we think. We are often judged by others on the basis of our voice. Apart from pitch, a voice is also defined by loudness and tempo. Research has shown that we tend to think people with a voice with a relatively low pitch, limited loudness and high tempo are more intelligent. The interpretation of a voice depends on whether we are listening to a man or a woman. With men, a low-pitched, throaty voice is associated with older, real, mature and better adjusted. But with women, a voice with the same characteristics is associated with low intelligence, non-emotional, ugly, sickly and uninterested. Research into in-car satellite navigation systems has also shown that users have less faith in the instructions when these are given by female voices than when these are given by male ones.

Our voice is far from univocal: depending on who we are talking to, our voice adapts. The voice of one and the same person can sound completely different when he/she is talking to loved ones from when he/she is in a business conversation. Pitch can even vary as much as 18% from one day to the next, and the pitch of male voices fluctuates considerably more during a day than that of female voices.

In her book 'The human voice', Anne Karpf makes reference to a wide range of different studies. Such as the study relating the pitch of a voice to scientists' expected career opportunities. A low-tempo and low-pitch voice was not associated with a career in academia. Or the study that showed that the extent to which someone speaks is associated with his/her place in the group; people that speak more than average are sooner considered to possess leadership qualities.

Anne Karpf's book is not intended as a self-help guide to changing your voice to be more convincing, for example. But this book does go into great detail about the importance of our voices in interpersonal communication. In closing, two further examples from this book highlighting the importance of the human voice in image building. The first example concerns a woman whose job involved a lot of cold calling. When she got someone's voice mail on the first try, she would very carefully listen to the voice. During the next call she would then tune her voice to match that of the person on the other end of the line. Seeing as people subconsciously prefer the sound of their own voice, this saleswoman managed to significantly boost the effectiveness of her cold calling.

The last example is the voice of Margaret Thatcher. Thatcher had a rather high-pitched voice, and as we pointed out earlier, low-pitched voices are generally associated with authority and power. In 1977, an advisor to Margaret Thatcher managed to get her to speak slower and softer within a two-month time span. The change was so significant that one radio presenter even thought she had a cold. Spread out over a 10-year period, Thatcher managed to lower her voice an impressive 60 Hz, which equals half the difference between the average male voice and the average female voice. Lowering the pitch of her voice did have one drawback though; when someone's pitch lowers, that is often a sign that they have come to the end of what they wanted to say, giving the other the opportunity to also say something. Thatcher's lower pitch led to her being interrupted by interviewers more than before.

Reference(s)

Karpf, A. (2006), *The human voice (how this extraordinary instrument reveals essential clues about who we are)*. Bloomsbury, New York, N.Y. *

* : available in the EURIB library.