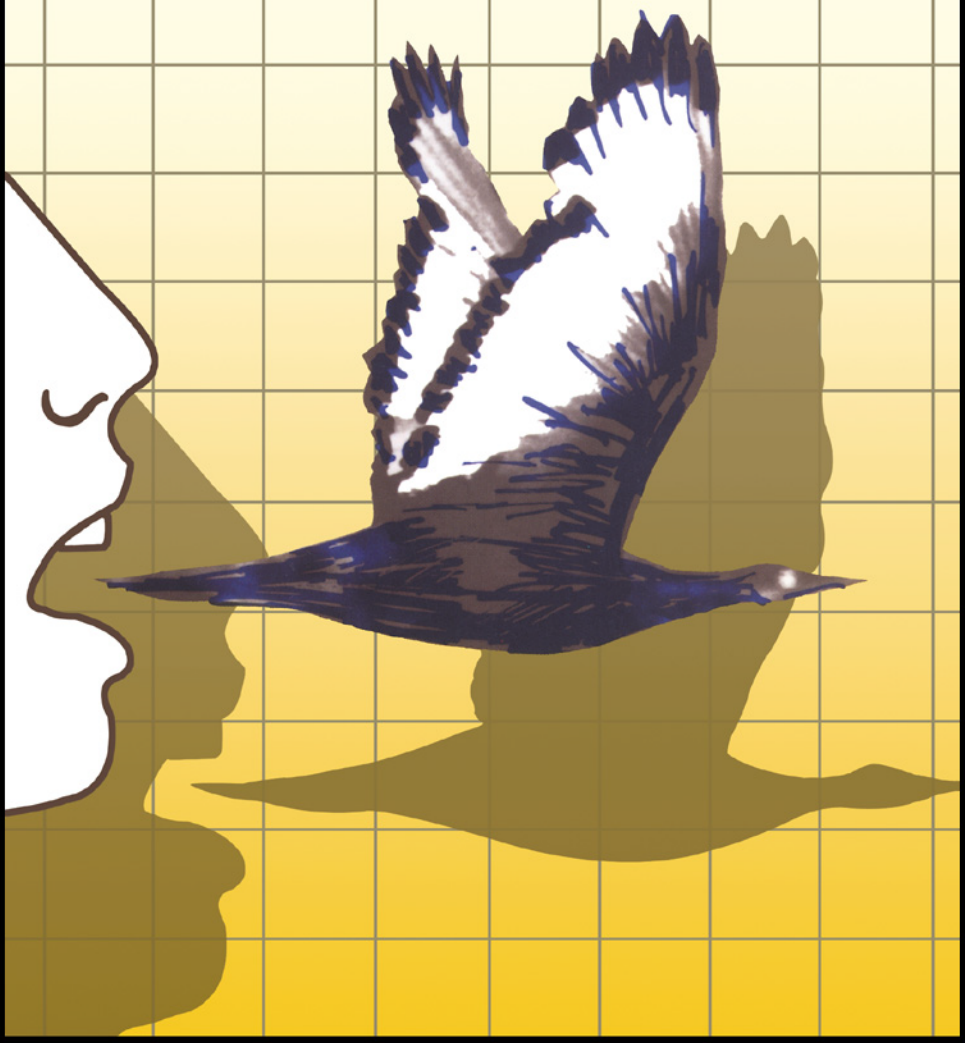
EFFECTIVE SPEAKING

Communicating in Speech

Christopher Turk



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Effective Speaking
Communicating in Speech

For David, Sarah and Anna

Effective Speaking:
Communicating in Speech

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Acknowledgements

Apart from the many people whose talks I have listened to, criticized, and learnt from, during a decade of teaching effective speaking to commercial, industrial and governmental organizations (as well as in several universities) I owe special thanks to several colleagues and friends.

Firstly, John Kirkman, who introduced me to the scientific study of communication, and who nursed me through my own learning process. John and I wrote *Effective Writing* together in 1980/81, and when we delivered the manuscript, I asked him if he would continue to collaborate on *Effective Speaking*. He had other projects at the time, and I went on to write *Effective Speaking* by myself. But John is present in ideas, if not acknowledged on the cover. Although general knowledge about speaking is widespread, and ideas could (and have) come from the many other books on the subject, John was my teacher and friend, and this is my chance to thank him for his help. He taught me about professionalism when I was a young man, and supported me through many early failures.

I also want to thank my other senior colleague, Alban Levy. One of the best speakers I know, Alban combines a sure wit with a masterly knowledge of audiences and their psychology. Just watching him perform was an education in itself; and audiences throughout the world treasure his humour. I have learned a great deal from him, and in many cases have adapted his way of organizing a topic, rather than use ideas from the extensive literature on the subject.

The third colleague is Peter Hunt. Several of the examples are his, and many informal conversations with him have refined my ideas on speaking. Peter is one of those people, intelligent, urbane, and witty, who is a naturally good speaker. My thanks are due to him as a good friend, as well as a colleague, and an example over a decade and a half.

Finally, I would like to thank everyone else who put up with my distractions while writing. Dennis Bratchell, at UWIST, helped me to obtain a sabbatical during 1983/84 when there was finally time to finish the book. My father read drafts and proofs. Without Catherine, though, it would never have been finished.

1

Communicating in speech

Who is this book for?

Everyone has to be a listener sometimes; at lectures, presentations, meetings, and on the telephone, we spend a lot of our time listening to others talking. We all know, then, that the average standard of spoken presentation is poor. We are often bored, irritated, even embarrassed as listeners; rarely are we captivated, or filled with new enthusiasm for a topic and with respect for the speaker. I suppose most people when they suffer an appalling presentation vow that when their turn comes they will do better.

When we are asked to speak it is often not so easy. I expect that many people who pick up this book have either just been asked to give an important presentation, or have just given one which has gone less than triumphantly. Take comfort; speaking, like most of the things we do, can be learned. It is not a mysterious gift, something inborn in the lucky and denied to ordinary mortals. It is a skill, and thinking about it will improve it. This book is written on the premise that careful consideration of the problems which face the inexperienced speaker will improve the standards of presentation they can hope to achieve. The experienced speaker, too, can improve. Habits formed without thought, mannerisms which have been reinforced over years of use, assumptions which have never been analysed, can be remodelled by thinking about the task of effective speaking.

This book is not intended, or expected, to produce demagogues. It is primarily for people who need to speak as part of their job, and whose careers will be advanced by the ability to speak competently. Increasingly, industry and government organizations prefer verbal presentations. Reports of research work, proposals for administrative innovations, progress meetings, union meetings, the training of new

recruits, conferences and symposia are just some examples. Indeed, many senior managers find that a case made face-to-face is more effective that one made in reports and memoranda. So most professionals (whether administrators, engineers, scientists, technologists, or those climbing the management ladder), will sometimes find themselves asked to give verbal presentations.

In private life too, people are called on to speak who may be unwilling or ill-prepared. This book is intended to help such people; politicians, advocates, salesmen and revolutionaries are not the readers I expect, although they may (indeed will) find useful ideas. The chapters on intonation control (eight) and non-verbal communication (nine), for example, report research on the psychological impact of speech and behaviour patterns on audiences. Indeed, observation suggests that many supposedly experienced speakers could get a great deal of benefit from this information. This book is written so that it can be used, both for general reading, and as a text book for courses on communication skills. The material in the references can be browsed by the general reader, or studied by the student. Both should be able to speak better afterwards, no matter how deep their study.

Learn to speak well

Most people think a decent standard of competence in speaking to a group is part of the basic professionalism of any job; but too many professionals are nervous about speaking, and afraid that they do not speak well. The basic premise of this book, as I have said, is that such a decent standard can be learned, and this confidence is based on many years of experience in training people to speak. A first stage in building up the confidence to speak is to think about the job of speaking, what tools you will use, and what effects you aim to achieve. Language is the basic tool, and language is a mysterious phenomenon. Consider, for a moment, the basic skills in communicating that everyone possesses. Language is used by all human beings; we use it copiously and without second thought every day of our lives. Indeed, our ability and confidence in manipulating language is a central part of the personality we present to those around us. But there is nothing unalterable about these abilities.

Because language skills grew without conscious thought we imagine that our level of competence in the use of language is something unalterable. If we are hesitant, slow, unimaginative, and pedestrian we

fear that this situation is foredoomed, that we cannot change what we are. But our language skills are not what we are. Because we negotiate most of our interactions with the outside world through language these skills may appear to others to represent all that we are, and we often allow ourselves to believe their view of us. But we should not. Language skills can be modified and improved by repeating the same processes we first used to acquire them. We learned our language by listening to others, and imitating what they did. We can improve our command of it in the same way; by listening to research findings and advice based on them, imitating techniques which we observe to work, and thinking.[1]

Many people argue that speaking well is no more than the application of common sense. But in this book the results of research in psychology and linguistics are used to support advice on effective techniques. By doing this, I aim to help the speaker become more aware of the complex interactions between speaker, message and audience. The application of thought to any activity requires us to understand it first.[2] The common sense school will reject all such ideas on the grounds that they are either obvious, or incomprehensible. Such a Luddite approach should be foreign to an engineer or scientist, but surprisingly it is often people who apply rational thought in their jobs, who consider language skills to be in the realm of witchcraft.

I am not unaware of the fears that this approach may evoke. And I am certainly aware that not all research is useful, comprehensible, or relevant. I am not about to bombard you with a textbook of academic psychology. It is certainly true, for instance, that all too often the so-called 'discoveries' of the human sciences are rather obvious. One investigator warns his readers that:

> Occasionally we make discoveries which fail to set the world alight with surprise and admiration. One of the more profound insights we have achieved since 1945 has been the realisation that man speaks. He also listens to speech. Some men read and write as well.[3]

But just because some research confirms the obvious, it should not necessarily be ignored. It is surprising how often speakers fail to use common sense, and surprising how often the obvious has to be repeated when training people to speak. I argue that we should pay attention to the objective, scientific, evidence about how people speak, and how they affect the audience. I agree we should avoid that excessive faith in laboratory responses which George Miller calls 'psycholatry'.[4] We

should strike a balance between ignorance of research, and pseudo-scientific over-respect for jargon. Our aim, we should not forget, is to speak better: it is not to become armchair psychologists, nor is it to give up the task as a hopeless case, to which no rules apply, and in which no knowledge can help.

So far I have discussed the role of research findings in developing practical skills as if research on people's behaviour is always a bland confirmation of familiar patterns. But sometimes the results are unexpected (as some of the research reported in this book is—for example the effect of hesitations reported in chapter six.) The most interesting and useful results of psychological research are often the ones which are 'counter-intuitive, that is to say surprising and quite unexpected.'[5] A well-known worker on social psychology, Michael Argyle, reminds us that his subject is:

> full of surprises because many of the research findings could not have been anticipated by a thoughtful person sitting in an armchair and analysing what happens when people meet.[6]

By talking about these interactions more precisely than is common, I hope to make the speaker perform better. But this can only be done if we bring into consciousness skills which are usually unconscious. Many people fear that this will make them lose spontaneity and become painfully self-conscious. But that does not seem to happen. The increased consciousness of what we are doing is usually not noticed by others, while the improved skills most certainly are. Everyone who has been involved in training social and performance skills agrees that thinking about these skills improves them.

If the first premise of this book, then, is that speaking skills can be improved by thinking about them, the second one is that psychology and linguistics have much to teach us.[7] I must be careful, though, that the book is not regarded as a manual for experts, or that I am regarded as a super-speaker who does not understand the fears of the ordinary trembling mortal. I am not. Nisbet suggests that in speaking, as in other things, there are:

> three levels of proficiency: the provisional licence holder, the ordinary road user and the rally driver. The first is learning the rules; the second has everyday skills, and some bad habits; the third can break many of the elementary rules—a dangerous style, but a delight to the connoisseur.[8]

I am aiming to help the ordinary road user. I am not a rally driver myself, and have usually come a cropper when I have tried to be one. It is the decent standard of ordinary competence in speaking that this book aims at.

What needs to be done

If we are to improve speaking skills, we must first become more aware of ourselves, our motivations, behaviour patterns, and likely mistakes.[9] Second, we must be aware of the audience's psychology, and their reactions to the speaker's faults and omissions. The first problem for all speakers is being aware of themselves, and judging correctly their own part in what is, for many, an unfamiliar interaction. Quite a bit of the advice and discussion throughout the book will be about how we achieve this useful self-knowledge. One of the difficulties, for example, is that although we are always trying to present ourselves in a favourable light to others, we have little real idea of what we sound like to them.

The main effect we have is created by the tone of our own voice. Indeed, some people are said to be very fond of this sound! But the sound we hear ourselves is very different from the sound that everyone else hears, because we hear it in a different way. Other people hear us (and we hear other people) only through sound waves in the air. But we hear our own voice mainly as the vibrations transmitted from the voice box, through the bones of the head. Only by trying shouting into a skull from a medical student's skeleton can we judge what a difference these bone resonances make. You can perhaps appreciate what a difference this method of transmission makes by considering how often people are surprised by tape-recordings of their own voices. Psychologists have discovered that we are typically quite unaware of the emotive affects of the way we speak. We may not realize how cross we sound, for example, or how often we interrupt other people.[10]

The second area for careful thought is diagnosing what has gone wrong when a talk fails to have a good effect. The reasons are usually in part lack of knowledge about the audience's perceptions and expectations, and in part general disorganization. In my experience, presentations are often ineffective either because of ill-thought-out behaviour, and lack of confidence,[11] or because of a failure to organize ideas and information in an easily understood way. There is a great deal of knowledge and experience about why talks fail, and this book suggests ways in which you can avoid failure. So take heart; if a talk you have just given has collapsed into disaster, there is hope. The

reasons for such failures are fairly well known. If the thought of speaking fills you with cold despair, or even if you are just not very satisfied with your performances so far, there are plenty of solutions. The first problem is having the courage to recognize your mistakes and thoughtlessness. The second (and easier) problem is to correct them.

I shall be following a fairly detailed line through these problems in this book, discussing first the audience, and in the next chapter the analysis, selection and organization of the material. There are then separate chapters on practical aspects of speaking, such as using notes, coping with nerves, and getting the timing of the talk right. The following three chapters deal with making the presentation as varied as possible, being aware of non-verbal signals from both speaker and audience, and arranging the room you are speaking in. Three more chapters deal with specific techniques; the use of visual aids, giving persuasive talks, and handling questions. The reader should then be much more knowledgeable and confident about what he or she is doing. By the end of the book your speaking skills are likely to improve.

If you must give a speech tomorrow, and have no time to read the whole book now, the best single piece of advice I can offer you is this. Practice is the best way to learn a skill like speaking, and if practice is to be effective, you need a critic. This is not just my own hunch; it is a well recognized result in research on social skills that:

> A text can provide a coherent background of concepts and principles where these exist...or supply knowledge about techniques, but to teach successfully each individual must practise the skill, receiving feedback on his performance, in order to discover his own particular abilities and failings[12]

Practice is vital, but practice by yourself tells you very little. Who ever felt nervous in front of a bathroom mirror? And effective criticism from a spouse is more likely to result in divorce than in better speaking. The best source of criticism is another person, and the best other person is someone you trust, but who has no axe to grind. Find a friend, and ask him or her to sit and listen to you trying out your talk, if possible in the empty room you will use for the actual talk. Believe what they say to you, for your perception of yourself is nothing like as accurate as theirs. Their advice is likely to be the best quick guide to effective speaking you can find. If they, and you, have time to go further on the quest for good speaking, then get him or her to read this book. It aims to give the framework of ideas, evidence,

and anecdote for good speaking. But in the end the substance of good speaking is acquired by intelligent awareness while speaking, and only practice will perfect the advice this book offers.

Communication in theory

Having sketched the field we are about to enter, it is time to start looking seriously at the basics of good speaking. In order to have a clear idea of what we are doing, I want first to deal with general principles which apply to communicating whether the medium is speech or writing, before going on in the following chapters to deal with the special problems of spoken communication.

I am not intending to treat the reader to a specialized tome of linguistic theorizing, or what George Miller calls 'a pleasant field trip through some rather exotic psycholinguistic meadows'[13]. But I do hope to give the reader a genuine understanding of the mechanisms employed in giving and listening to speeches. The bedrock of this understanding is best found in a map or model of the communication process. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver designed a model in 1949[14] which schematizes the process of communicating in its most general form. This model is one of the oldest, and most commonly used in the study of communication.

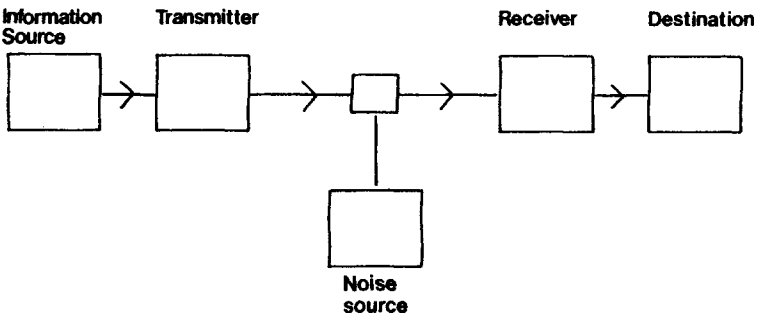

Fig. 1.1 The Shannon and Weaver model

What can we learn from this model? Its virtue is that it helps us to think about the overall process. It highlights some obvious but important aspects of communicating information, which are often overlooked. Its vice is that its simplifications are so extreme that they sometimes seem to trivialize the discussion. Certainly, it should not be taken as the last word on the subject; it is little more than the first. But the model does remind us that the end of the process is not a physical product—*words* or *text*—but a mental result—*understanding*. The main insight this generalized model of communication offers is its emphasis on the flow of information. No communication is just the production of signals, with no thought for their purpose or destination. The writer does not, or should not, see paper as his only end. Similarly, the speaker cannot act as if he or she were talking to an empty room. The listeners are as much part of the process as the speaker. A communication model without an end as well as a beginning, would be like a half built bridge.

What does this teach the communicator? Firstly, that the information must be selected for the needs of the audience, not just for his or her own convenience. He is not just producing information, he has to shape it so that it will fit into the listener's mind. No locksmith makes keys to suit his own ideas of prettiness—they have a job to do. So no communicator assembles his information without a careful eye on where he is to put it. It must fit the recipient's needs, otherwise access to the listener's understanding, memory and approval will be denied. It is a point we would all regard as common sense. And yet it is a point which is most commonly overlooked.

I have heard so many talks fail just because they were over the heads (or beneath the contempt) of their listeners. The needs of the audience must determine the selection of material—it must help them to do their job, or pursue their interests. This is the only ambition in a speaker which will be rewarded with success. This topic is dealt with more in chapter two. Communication has an end as well as a beginning, an audience as well as a speaker. The audience is *part of the message,* and different audiences can transform the meaning of the same message. Robinson writes:

> 'Ring-a-ring-a-roses a pocketful of posies' would convey different messages uttered by a teacher to five-year-old children in a games lesson, by a teacher of linguistics illustrating the achievement of poetic or rhythmic effects, and by a managing director of an industrial company at a board meeting at which the members appeared to be squabbling unnecessarily[15]

Communication channels have other important characteristics. The greatest gulf in the world is between two minds, and sending a precarious leaky cargo of ideas over that gap is a permanent challenge. The channels also have noise, require some redundancy, and benefit from feedback.

In a speech, *noise* is any form of interference with the message which produces extra and distracting information. It can be as simple as the roar of traffic through an open window, it can be as obvious as the intolerable heat, the buzzing of flies, and the desire to sleep that comes over an audience listening to a droning speech after lunch. It can also be as subtle as an unwary reference to an audience's pet hate. Anything which interferes with easy communication has the effect of noise in a communication channel.

Redundancy is also a feature of all human communication. Stylists are often heard to recommend economy, and despise vacuous repetition. But a speaker describing the shape of equipment with his hands as well as his voice is using redundancy helpfully. Saying the same thing in different ways, using different media, or simply saying it twice may be a useful aid to clarity.

Feedback is a vital component of successful speaking. By being sensitive to the audience's reactions, the speaker can modify his message to achieve the best effect. All three of these theoretical components of communication, then, have their counterparts in spoken communication. Too many thoughtless speakers think that their words reflect exactly what they are thinking, and that their hearers interpret those words perfectly. Not so. Nothing is perfect, and language is very imperfect.

Speech came first

Spoken language was the first form of communication between human beings. It came long before written language, and writing is a transcript of speech, not vice versa. This more primitive form of communication still provides the most direct access to other minds. The reason why people prefer to listen to a spoken explanation is that it seems to need less effort to understand than the more formal medium of writing. Yet some speakers try to make speech as close to writing as possible, and destroy its freshness and immediacy. Speaking is the direct route from one mind to another, and is the way we usually choose when we want to ask a question, or give an explanation. Research shows that ideas and information are more easily understood and processed through speech than through writing.

Unless they are pretending to be formal, people usually speak in a style which is more direct, and easier to understand, than the style in which they write; speech makes the personal interaction more immediate. One of the reasons is that when speaking, interest and enthusiasm in the listeners are generated by non-verbal, as well as by verbal, signals. The variety and impact of the message are heightened by the presence of another person. Listeners also feel more secure when they can see the person who is giving them new information. Their judgement of the validity of the message, the competence, and the depth of knowledge of the speaker is easier if non-verbal clues, as well as verbal clues, are available. There are many reasons why speaking is the best of the communication channels. It is not always used, largely because people are afraid of their inexperience and inability to speak well. Yet practice and study can provide the skill needed to use this most direct path into the minds of others. It is worth the effort to become an effective speaker.

Finally, let me say that I am very much aware that this is a book of advice, and books of advice all too easily become patronizing and repetitive. They tend to be full of sentences of the form '*do* this', '*don't* do that', '*remember* the other', and '*avoid* something else'. This becomes tedious. I have moderated advice with anecdote, and prohibition with discussion. But I cannot change the basic character of the book. I hope you will take it all in the spirit in which it is intended.

I have also tried to avoid sexist language, particularly in the choice of pronouns. In my university there are people in the forefront of the equal opportunities movement, and we have had many discussions about the use of 'he', or 'he and she', and other problems in non-sexist writing. Our conclusion has been that it is not possible to avoid all sex-specific pronouns without producing clumsiness of style. But in the present stage of the feminist movement, that is better than using the older convention where 'he' was supposed to stand for both men and women. I have tried to mix these approaches; I hope it will demonstrate a recognition of the fact that successful executives, administrators, technologists and speakers are as likely to be women, as men.

In the main, I restricted the references to books which are easily available in paperback. You will find these are the best sources if you want to read more about a topic. There is also a short list of further reading at the end of the book, as well as a detailed bibliography which is intended for specialists and students. Each

chapter ends with a one page summary of the key points in the chapter—a sort of crib sheet for people who want reminding, or who are short of time.

Notes to chapter one

1. See: Halle, Morris., Bresnan, Joan, and Miller George, (eds), *Linguistic Theory and Psychological Reality* (MIT Press, 1978).
2. For example, Adler, Ronald B., and Rodman, George, *Understanding Human Communication* (Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1982).
3. W.P.Robinson, *Language and Social Behaviour* (Penguin, 1974), p. 17.
4. George A.Miller, *The Psychology of Communication: Seven Essays* (Basic Books, 1975), p.91.
5. Hans and Michael Eysenck, *Mindwatching* (Michael Joseph, 1981), p.8.
6. Michael Argyle, *The Psychology of Interpersonal Behaviour* (4th Ed., Penguin, 1983), pp. 11–12.
7. For a recent introduction, see: Quinn, Virginia Nichols, *Applied Psychology* (McGraw Hill, 1984).
8. Quoted in Donald Bligh, *What's the Use of Lectures?* (Penguin, 1971), p.9.
9. See: Fransella, Fay (ed.), *Personality: Theory, Measurement and Research* (Methuen, 1981).
10. Wicklund, R.A., Objective Self-Awareness, *Advances in Experimental Social Psychology,* Vol. 8 (1975), pp.233–275.
11. For an interesting discussion of confidence, see: Powell, John, *Why Am I Afraid To Tell You Who I Am? Insights On Self-awareness, Personal Growth and Interpersonal Communication* (Fontana, 1975).
12. Ruth Beard, *Teaching and Learning in Higher Education* (Penguin, 1976), p.8.
13. George Miller, *The Psychology of Communication,* (Basic Books) p. 125.
14. Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *The Mathematical Theory of Communication* (Illinois University Press, 1949), p.34.
15. W.P.Robinson, *Language and Social Behaviour*, (Penguin) p.28.

Further reading

Three recent books on spoken communication skills are:

Robinson, Don, and Ray Power, *Spotlight on Communication. A Skills Based Approach* (Pitman, 1984).

Ross, Raymond S., *Essentials of Speech Communication* (2nd ed., Prentice Hall, 1984).

Verderber, Rudolph F., *Communicate!* (4th ed., Wadsworth, 1984).

SUMMARY SHEET

Chapter one—Communicating

Everyone has to speak sometimes.

Speaking can be learned.

Research evidence helps us to understand.

Sometimes research results are surprising.

Self-awareness is needed to be a good speaker.

Critical advice from a friend is the best quick guide to speaking.

Models of communication show:

- Understanding, not just words, should be the aim
- Select what you say for the audience's benefit
- Noise is anything which interferes with the message
- Redundancy is common in all forms of communication
- Feedback comes from the audience's reactions.

Speech was the first, and is still the most important, way of communicating ideas and information.

Books of advice can be patronizing—hopefully not this one.

Non-sexist language sometimes sounds clumsy, but is more accurate.

Notes on further reading are listed at the back.

2

The audience

Think about the audience

Thinking about the audience is the first stage in preparing to give a successful talk or presentation. They are the recipients of the information; it must be selected and tailored for their needs. They are also the people whose presence will make you nervous when you speak, whose reactions will depress or encourage you, and whose judgement will measure your success or failure.

When you are thinking about this audience, you must remember, too, that they are active, not passive, participants. They are not empty jugs, sitting waiting for you to pour information into their ears. They have attitudes, interests, likes and dislikes of their own. So the speaker has a personnel management role; he or she has to deal with people and not just with facts. He must not only dole out the information, but anticipate difficulties, deal with problems, to smooth the whole process. So what does a speaker need to know about his audience?

Firstly, he or she should be aware that all audiences have some of the qualities of a crowd. An audience is a group of individuals, many of whom the speaker may know personally, yet collected together they acquire a new personality. When individuals are collected in a room, in enforced silence, all facing one other individual, the speaker, they change. For instance, it is obvious to anyone who watches an audience that their emotions, such as laughter, boredom, and enthusiasm, are both stronger and more sustained.

Every group, even a small and decorous collection of familiar colleagues, displays some of the qualities the sociologists call ‘crowd phenomenon’. W.J.H.Sprott, in his book *Human Groups,* writes:

'There is general agreement that a person who is a full member of a crowd…is likely to behave differently from the way he would behave if he were by himself.'[1] The differences of behaviour can be summed up in two ways. The first is that there is a heightening of emotionality. The man in the presence of danger feels frightened; in the presence of other people experiencing and showing the same emotion, his fear is even stronger. The second way is that people in a group have a reduced sense of responsibility, less critical sense, and weaker self-control.

There has been much research to try to determine why it should be that people in groups behave less responsibly than individuals. Miller and Dollard point out that as we grow up we are rewarded when we act in the same way as other people act, and punished for non-conformity. The result is that we are taught to accept leadership from others. People in crowds often behave in ways which they would consider reprehensible if they were alone. The crowd becomes their 'super-ego'.[2]

There is no doubt, then, that a group of people is different from an individual, or even two or three people. Hopefully, no speaker during his regular work as manager, administrator, or scientist is likely to encounter a lynching-mob. But he should not forget that every group is tinged with the crowd phenomenon. Collections of people must be treated with care.[3]

The care is best expressed by spending time thinking about exactly *who* they are, and *what* they want. Most speakers have a fair idea of what sort of audience they have to face. They know, for instance, if a group is likely to be hostile or welcoming. But many speakers do not think long enough, or clearly enough, about their audience. Cumbersome though it seems, I believe strongly that thinking about the audience should be done on paper. The effort of writing explicit answers will crystallize half perceived ideas. An example of a questionnaire which can be adapted to your own circumstances is shown in Fig. 2.1.

Think about the context

First, you should analyse the occasion. Decide what the purpose of the meeting is. What is the audience expecting to gain from being there? Are they hoping to make a decision, or are they there simply to keep an eye on progress? Is the talk of general interest, or is it to give new information about a specific process? Will the audience use the

information immediately, and if so for what purpose? Many presentations are chiefly psychological in aim. The intention of the monthly branch meeting, for instance, is often to make sure that people come together at least once a month. It helps to give them a sense of corporate identity, and to encourage their loyalty and enthusiasm. Such a meeting may be a platform for news about the company, a place to set new sales targets, for giving information about progress in meeting these targets, and for news, about colleagues.

Another type of meeting is the symposium of a learned society. Here the purpose is probably to disseminate information and to encourage other workers. Listeners may pick up ideas which apply to their own work, or they may simply expand their general knowledge. Other groups may consist of a few research managers, one or two people from head office, and the speaker's own immediate boss, who wants a new project explaining. It may need the approval of all the audience if the company is going to be persuaded to spend money on it.

There are as many purposes as there are meetings. It is naive to imagine that the purpose is often a single one. I doubt if many presentations are purely for general interest; or indeed if many of them are to sell one particular idea only. They will also be goodwill exercises for the company or department, career-building opportunities for the speaker, and general back-patting, congratulatory sessions for the group. What people will do as a

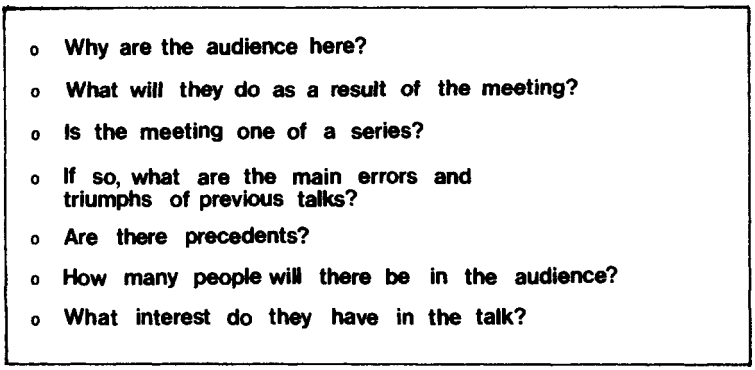

Fig. 2.1 Audience analysis

result of the talk is as diverse as their reasons for being present. Some will go back to their offices and sign cheques or requisitions; some will merely forget the whole thing; some will find that in a conversation days later they have information unexpectedly relevant to what is being discussed. The task of visualizing, quite specifically, why people are there is an important step in understanding the audience. Unless you can write down a statement of what the audience will actually do as a result of hearing your presentation, you have not really clarified the purpose of the meeting.

A next question to ask is whether the meeting is one of a series, or whether it was called to deal with the topic of the moment. Are there precedents for such a meeting? Does management ask for regular presentations on research topics? Are administrative bottlenecks always thrashed out in head-of-department meetings, with the responsible officer addressing the group? The attitudes and expectations of the audience will depend very much on what they are used to. Imagine yourself being asked to give a paper; your own knowledge of the precedents will help you to avoid obvious pitfalls. If your paper is to be given in one of a series of research colloquia, it will help to remember your impression of the other speakers you have heard. The audience will probably view you in the same way.

Perhaps the worst feature of the colloquia you have attended so far has been the blind specialization of some of the speakers. They may have been wrapped up entirely in the fascination of their own techniques. The only bit of the last talk you enjoyed may have been, for instance, a short section on the translation of pure research ideas into commercial reality; the rest was irrelevant and therefore boring. From your own reaction to others, you have a model with which to design your own talk. Clearly, in the situation we are discussing, unless there are many people in the audience working on the same specialization, the speaker should keep discussion of the intricacies to a minimum. But information about the commercial hopes and pressures that fuel the research, and their effect on the direction of the work, could form a major section of the talk.

Let me take another example. Imagine a computer systems analyst, presenting technical (not specifically sales) information on a new product for a potential customer. His branch manager may also be in the audience, so it is a career opportunity as well as an information giving session, and obviously an occasion to impress the expertise and quality of his company's professionalism. But if

the presentation is one of a series given by every major computer manufacturer competing for the order, a shrewd guess at the line taken by other speakers will help greatly. To repeat the same claims, and offer the same facilities is useless. What is distinctive must be stressed.

Awareness of precedent is essential for a successful presentation. Most talks fit into a familiar context; they form part of a pattern, and the audience's expectations are formed by this pattern. All communication depends on contrast with its context, and language operates by using the contrast between different sounds to signify meaning. For example, the difference between 'red' and 'led' lies only in the first letter. Orientals find the contrast between these sounds difficult to perceive, usually, and without it meaning is lost. Equally, unless there is a contrast between the communication medium and the context it is received in, no meaning can be transmitted.

A language which consisted of a series of humming tones might work well in the quiet plains of Mongolia where we can imagine it originating. It would be useless in a modern factory filled with machinery. Contrast between elements in a language, and between the language and its context is essential. In the same way, yet another paper read in a droning monotone in a conference filled with monotonous papers will not communicate. It will be ignored and forgotten. In considering the precedents for your presentation build on the contrasts that will make it stand out.

How large an audience?

Next, think about how large the audience will be; try to write down a rough estimate of the numbers. There is a scale of sizes (and types) of audience, from a little group of three or four in a small office, through a seminar of twelve to fifteen in a meeting room, to an audience of forty or fifty (or even hundreds) in a large hall. The formality of the presentation will, of course, vary with the size. It is useless to have a largely written script, full of formal language, for the group of two or three in an office. An informal summary, followed by a discussion will be best for them. Equally, a heart-to-heart chat, with little structure and invitations for questions very early on, will fail in a lecture theatre filled with two hundred experts. One interesting result from sociological research shows that as 'group size increases, member satisfaction decreases.'[4] Speakers should, therefore, be aware of the effect of group

size on the audience's satisfaction, as well as on the speaker's nerves. Both the ideas, and the voice which accompanies them, have to be bolder and more forceful in a large group.

Think next about the audience's interest in the talk. It will depend on factors such as their age, their status, and their background, as well as their reasons for being there. Were they compelled to attend? What do they expect to gain from the presentation? Most audiences will have various layers of interest. They may have a primary interest in the subject of your talk, but they will also have a secondary interest in other matters, such as the group you work for, and they may have a passing interest in other areas which you talk about. You will also need to know whether they have power to do things as a result of hearing your talk. What can they do for you, or you for them, which forms a community of interest (in both the involvement, and the curiosity sense of that word)?

Considering these factors will not, of course, guarantee success. Indeed, so complex are human interrelationships that not even a team of sociologists could tease out the full niceties of an audience's attitudes and expectations. But the speaker should not abandon attempts to be rational about his presentation, just because an audience is a complex entity. His analysis of the audience will always be imprecise. But this does not matter, because the audience will come half-way to meet the speaker. From their end of the communicative relationship they will be making the same allowances and adjustments as the speaker is making from his. Few audiences are malicious, and the speaker can count on a reserve of willingness and tolerance from them.

We should also realize that language is a very approximate medium. Even if an exact specification of the audience's attitudes and needs could be written, the encoding of the message can only be approximate. So even a crude analysis is better than none. What is needed is protection from the grosser and more obvious mistakes. To plunge in, without having first thought about the audience, is like navigating over a reef without a map. The speaker may make it, and never know how close his or her hull came to the fangs of rock beneath. But it is just as likely that he or she will end up with a wrecked argument, and the cargo of ideas just so much flotsam washing uselessly around in the stormy minds of the audience! If that happens, the speaker has only him or herself to blame if he or she had not first charted the passage. Thinking first, even though it is approximate, is better than making mistakes. And thinking is only complete if it is made explicit.