

The Perception of a Broadcasting Voice

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Voice is our main communication resource but especially is the tool more important for working on radio. Voice on radio transmits not only the explicit text, but also all the meaning and the affective dimension. Consequently, the audience's attention to the radio message as well as understanding and assimilating of it will depend on a correct and expressive use of voice. Even in the most basic bibliography, the importance of the correct use of voice is recognized. Nevertheless, the suitable training for the broadcasters always has not a special consideration. For these reasons, this paper tries to realize a compendium of recommendations and defects around the use of voice on radio, based on different empirical researches made in these years.

Keywords: radio, voice, pitch, energy, timbre, stress, intonation, rhythm, articulation

The Importance of the Voice on the Radio

The voice is to the broadcaster as the hands are to the pianist. Just as a musical score is enhanced by the expertise and enthusiasm of the artist, the written word is transforming into compelling, meaningful information for the ear by the eloquence and style of the broadcaster. (Utterback, 2000)

What would be without the familiar, candid, congenial, and friendly voice of a broadcaster? The voice on the radio is a crucial element in communication. Many authors hold that, in radio broadcasts, the perception and understanding of the audience are determined not only by the content, but also by the particular form of presentation. The use of the voice, as the primary instrument for transmitting explicit text, carries the entire burden of meaning and its affective dimension, providing the reference for the radio content.

Therefore, the existing literature on the subject, although rare, always refers to the need for adequate training of broadcasters in the domain of its features, especially because of the enormous impact and influence of radio messages on the audience. Despite its importance, however, how the voice is used on the radio is one of the aspects that are neglected in the training of future journalists, at least in Spain. Moreover, even in school, child education is directed in a comprehensive manner to the necessary training in oral communication. As a result, the majority of the broadcasters that we heard on the radio usually do not possess adequate training on the handling of their voices. In general, most of them learn to express their messages by imitation, reproducing the expressive forms that they can hear from their colleagues, hence, gaining the same vices and defects. Those who begin their career in the medium are required to "talk like journalists" that particular play for the radio, which is not exactly the most natural, accurate, or expressive.

In this sense, we are not discovering anything new, since there is an extensive radio bibliography in which these critical problems are continually mentioned. Even from a theoretical point of view, it is easy to argue why these peculiar forms of expression on the radio are linguistically incorrect and unnatural from an expressive

point of view.

Despite this, there is little research devoted to studies in professional practice, where the main problems in the use of voice on radio are observed. Thus, the objective of this paper is to describe, based on the theory and various empirical researches realized over the years, the main defects in the use of voice on the radio and to evaluate how the audience perceives these defects.

The Perception of the Voice on the Radio

The first important aspect that supports the relevance of the use of voice on radio is that listeners are aware of the changes that broadcasters make in their vocal parameters. Several of the studies we have conducted show that changes in the voice influence the perception that the audience has of the message. While individuals are not able to establish the specific factors, their perception of the message is modified when the message is presented along with changes in the voice. This fact is clearly demonstrated in one of the studies in which the sample, of 126 persons, varies the adjectives assigned, according to the use of voice in radio news, subjected to analysis. In this case, the sample assessed two models of real radio bulletins against two models developed with the correct use of voice (Rodero & Romera, 2006). For programs with the correct model of presentation expressed by male and female voices, the assessment yielded positive adjectives; the ones more frequently used were safe, enjoyable, compelling, quiet, calm, or nearby. The real models of presentation which were considered incorrect and correspond to the actual patterns of presentation of news on radio were assessed by the sample as fast, exuberant, monotonous, or unpleasant.

In addition, several studies on the use of voice on radio show that one a natural presentation is a key factor in correct and pleasant radio presentations. The sample places significant value in voice presentation that is as natural as possible. Therefore, when the models are closer to that kind of speech, they are focused less on the presentation and more on the content. This has been demonstrated in each of the tests that we have done in different studies. The sample hates the exaggerations; therefore, exaggerated models of presentation occupy the last positions when evaluated. At the same time, the sample argues that a natural presentation is their preference because when the presentation is done otherwise, they lose the message content and depart from optimal understanding of the text transmitted.

In addition to naturalness, another important feature of an adequate presentation on radio is variation. This is not so much related to comprehension but to the attention of the audience. We have observed in these studies that there is one flaw the audience does not tolerate under any circumstances: a boring presentation. This feature is reflected in the existing literature, which states that monotony is the worst feature that can be attributed to a broadcaster: "In a study of prose and poetry presented to listeners in two ways, one with a normal intonation and the other with a monotonous intonation, it was demonstrated that monotony leads to a loss of comprehension" (Bolinger, 1989, p. 68). Knapp (1982) had also cited studies of this behaviour. These studies have determined that, compared with a monotony voice, continuous variations in the speed, strength, quality, and pitch of the voice can generate greater attention from the audience. Other authors conclude that monotony decreases the understanding of speech by more than 10%. A study by the Gallup Organization (Glass, 1992, p. 297), in which 73% of the samples considered a monotonous voice as a fatal error, further corroborated the importance of pitch variation.

In summary, the sample constantly requires speech that is not boring, but any change in the presentation, must always develop in a natural way. This means that they choose the formats to collect major changes and are

more dynamic than those with only minor changes in the presentation. Therefore, models that are monotonous or without rhythm are given the worst evaluation. The explication is quite clear: The effective transmission of the message is lost completely when the attention of the audience is not captured. A more dynamic speech, one that is not “sleepy”, is preferred over a linear presentation that is so boring, it causes the audience to lose interest and fail to pay attention to content of the radio message.

In short, we can conclude that the audience is aware of and is influenced by variations in the different elements of voice in their perception and understanding of the message. In this regard, the sample welcomes the presentation that is natural and has continuous variations, but always in the proper measure. Now the question is: What are the qualities emphasized for broadcasters? Thus, we begin the next section.

Qualities of the Voice on the Radio

The use of the voice is based on the handling and combination of three acoustic qualities: intensity, pitch, and timbre. First, intensity is the strength or power of the voice, dependent on the air pressure exerted on the vocal cords. Therefore, it represents the force or energy that drives air from the lungs to the vocal cords. This pressure causes the vocal folds to vibrate, some to a greater or a lesser extent. The perception of the intensity of the voice is reflected in the volume at which the listener hears that voice (Rodero, 2003). This quality of voice is not very decisive on the radio if we consider that the broadcasters work with a microphone that amplifies the sound. Despite this, our research indicates that the intensity that one must use on radio must be strong enough in order to transmit security; therefore, it must be neither too high nor too low. The second of the acoustic qualities of the voice is pitch, which plays a critical role in the use of voice. Pitch is the height or elevation of the voice determined by the number of times per second that our vocal cords vibrate. If they vibrate many times per second, the tension is increased; the voice rises and is finally heard with a higher pitch. In contrast, fewer vibrations per second cause less tension on the vocal cords; hence, the voice drops and is therefore more somber. According to this, pitch is the voice quality that makes possible to classify sounds on a tonal scale, from low to high pitch.

According to our research, the pitch of the voice on the radio must be low. Most people prefer this kind of voice, because it arouses a greater sense of credibility, trust, and confidence. This is easily understood when the voice is compared to the high pitch, for example, of the voice of a child. Because high-pitched voices are associated with children, they produce a lack of confidence. For this reason, the majority of authors recommend using a low-pitched voice for radio messages, especially in news broadcasts where credibility is one of the most valued qualities. Keith Cohler (1985, p. 182) stated clearly: “For broadcasters, the recording of voice is more appreciated in the two most serious tones, either a man or a woman. Sorry for the sopranos and high but it works so”. All these references are fully consistent with the research that we have done. The conclusion is that the voices appropriate for radio are those that have a low pitch, due to the feelings of safety and credibility that they arouse. In one specific study (Rodero, 2001), the sample was asked which voices they considered more pleasant in reporting news on the radio. For both male and female voices, the answer was clearly always the low-pitched voices. These were valued as more powerful, safe, understandable, credible, communicative, close, direct, warm, gentle, reliable, quiet, and natural. In the other extreme, the high-pitched voices were regarded as always sharp and described with these adjectives: cold, bored, nervous, and without authority and credibility.

Finally, timbre is the personality or color of the voice; it is the quality that enables us to distinguish a person just by listening to his voice. With respect to this quality, our studies indicate that the most valued

voices are those that have resonance, brightness, and clarity, because they are perceived as more important and thus more secure. In contrast, the sample hates voices that are darker and less resonant. These are the same qualities that Rodriguez Bravo (1989, p. 256) emphasized in his research, stating that “This depends on how nice of a harmonious pitch of voice and attitude of the broadcaster is fairly quiet and friendly to get a sound that is relaxed and warm”.

In conclusion, with regard to the qualities of the voice, the audience prefers low-pitched voices, resonant timbres, and clear and strong intensities.

Prosody and Pronunciation Features

Along with the acoustic qualities, prosody and pronunciation are the two key elements in a broadcaster’s use of voice. First, prosody consists of the intonation, accent, and rhythm of speech. When we analyze a voice, we discover and address their acoustic qualities. However, when these qualities occur in succession as a spoken sequence, they become a variation of pitches, which makes up the intonation; a succession of pitches, durations, and intensities, which generates the accent; and finally, a sequence of durations, which develops rhythm. Therefore, prosody extends from an acoustic point of view: the changes in frequency, amplitude, and time, which comprises the changes in pitch, intensity, and duration that make up the intonation, accent, and rhythm (Rodero, 2003).

Among the elements of prosody, intonation is one of the most important variables in the use of voice, because it contains the message. Such is its importance that, depending on the form it takes, it can exercise a more powerful influence on the listener than the content itself. In this sense, the studies we have done show that broadcasters often use a type of circumflex intonation, which produces the so-called acoustic “sing song” (Rodero, 2006, 2001; Rodero & Campos, 2005). The error consists of regularly repeating a specific melody, which happens independently to the content. Therefore, the ups and downs of pitch occur at regular intervals, regardless of the word that is being said at the time. Obviously, if we start from the premise that form and content must go hand in hand, we understand that this practice has no meaning. The research which we have done on this subject does not leave room for doubt (Rodero, 2006). Here, we have shown that the vast majority of the pitch combinations that broadcasters use at the beginning, middle, and end of their sentences have a circumflex intonation, although the pitch level varies.

Indeed, in two of the investigations realized for news (Rodero & Romera, 2006; Rodero, 2001), the sample assigned a negative value to the practice, describing it as “a kind of pitch that is not serious”, “sung as a cry”, “a song”, or “ridiculous”. Instead, the model that was preferred by the audience in the two investigations was a model of a natural presentation, one that always retains the content of the message, so that it complies with and reinforces the language functions of this prosodic element, and for that reason, encourages the attention and understanding of the listener. Thus, the model modifies the pitch levels according to the syntax and semantic function of the discourse, and to the speaker’s communicative intention. This recommendation is especially important if one does not want to produce tremendous contradictions between form and content.

As the second prosodic element, we define accent as the emphasis that we put in a word to reveal its importance compared to the other words spoken. Based on this definition, it is easy to understand that the proper stretch emphasizes only those words that are crucial in the understanding of the message. Thus, at least in our investigations (Rodero, 2001), this model is rated as the most appropriate because it gives meaning to the text. The sample positively evaluated this model, saying: “It is natural and balanced”, “It is normal”, and “The

broadcaster stresses where he must do it or puts emphasis on the key”.

However, we found that broadcasters often use a kind of emphasis away from naturalness, marking excessive words with “shock talk”, and over-accentuating or emphasizing some words that do not add meaning to the message (such as pronouns, prepositions, or articles). In addition to being incorrect, this kind of accentuation generates rejection in the listener, as evidenced by several of the studies already cited. These studies indicate that, after selecting the correct model, the sample prefers speech that does not reinforce any accent. Thus, the worst defect for them is to twice accentuate a word that has no meaning, because this renders the presentation, exaggerated, and unnatural. The next flaw is the model that emphasizes the words empty of meaning, because it marks what is not relevant; it is unnatural and lost consciousness. The final error is marking too many words, which the sample describes as exaggerated, unnatural, and unbalanced.

The final element that we have analyzed is rhythm or the combination of speed and pauses that broadcasters make in their presentations. First, it is clear that a presentation with a reading speed that is too quick and with minimal breaks impacts negatively on the understanding of the message, while a slow reading speed with too many pauses negatively affects the listener’s attention. It is thus necessary to find the average between the two, and especially, to know that the rhythm has to vary depending on the meaning of each part of the message. Consistent with this idea, the tests that we have realized show that the audience prefers this kind of rhythm, because it is light and fair, does not result in loss of meaning, and is understandable and normal. However, we note that the broadcasters adopt a reading speed that is too quick and with minimal breaks, which makes it difficult for the listener to comprehend the message and gives the sensation of being hit (Rodero, 2012). We must not forget that from the 170 words a minute, it begins to be ease of understanding.

Finally, one of the key elements in assessing the use of voice on the radio is the pronunciation. It is clear and highlighted in the literature on radio, that a broadcaster must have impeccable diction, and use correct and clear pronunciation. According to our research (Rodero, 2001), naturalness and clarity are the most outstanding qualities of pleasant pronunciation. And along with the naturalness, it is the clarity. Under no circumstances will the sample support exaggerated pronunciation, which they consider pompous and pedantic. At the same time, the sample also requires clarity. Moreover, in addition to being understood perfectly, the message must be correct. In this regard, we have shown that the audience is able to detect errors in pronunciation, which they consider incompatible with the work of a professional broadcaster. When they find improprieties, their assessment equates to a bad broadcaster. Despite this, the study realized about pronunciation on radio bulletins. Rodero (2002) has found that it is not always the case. These broadcasters have realized four errors of pronunciation by each news bulletin.

Conclusions

The way in which broadcasters use their voice is a key factor in the transmission of data through this medium. This fact is not always taken into consideration, at least in professional radio networks in Spain. From the studies that we have realized in the past years about the use of the voice on the radio, we have drawn the following conclusions:

- (1) Changes in the use of voice are clearly perceived by the listeners and have an influence on the understanding of radio messages. Therefore, the listeners give enough importance to the use of voice;
- (2) The audience values in a positive way the use of voice that is natural and with variations, but always in the proper measure. The correct presentation is one in which form and content are integrated to facilitate the

understanding of the message. However, these characteristics are not always found in the professional broadcasts;

(3) The voices preferred by the audience are the ones with a low pitch, a clear and resonant timbre, and a strong intensity because such voices are convincing, safe, understandable, credible, communicative, close, direct, warm, gentle, truthful, calm, and natural;

(4) The main defects in intonation detected among the broadcasters are using slight variations in pitch and a circumflex intonation, repeating patterns and breaking all language functions of this prosodic element. As far as the accent is concerned, broadcasters put too much emphasis on words, accentuate less important words, or over accentuate some words. In relation to rhythm, broadcasters speak with an excessive speed and few pauses, which decreases the understanding of the message. Finally, in terms of pronunciation, broadcasters realize errors or omissions in the articulation of certain phonemes;

(5) Based on the perception of the audience, the main recommendations are: use a natural rhythm in which the pitch movement occurs according to the message content, enhance only those words that are crucial in the understanding of the text, adopt an appropriate rhythm that has a lower speed but is varied with pauses, and use proper diction.

In conclusion, after a review of the literature on radio, and data analysis on the use of voice on radio and the audience perception of the same, we assert the need for broadcasters to undergo better training to ensure improvements in broadcast presentations.

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