

THE AMERICAN VOICE

BY
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The schools are largely responsible for bad pronunciation, enunciation, and faulty tone quality of voice. The teacher himself may speak with an exaggerated burr or possess some individual vocal evil; the child, generally loving the teacher, imitates him adoringly, even more than it imitates the parents. Yet the Board of Education is not bothered anywhere by any such defects in engaging teachers. The teacher, on the other hand, is nowise disturbed, so long as the pupil's answer is technically correct, by either the enunciation or the tone in which it is given. The same may be said of the Sunday school teacher, in whose power lies so strongly an opportunity through practical example. Here too we find careless inattention, or that it is regarded as something outside the Sunday school province.

Both divisions appear ignorant or forgetful of the fact that where the teacher speaks properly the child will also, through imitation.

To go into the higher plane of university education, faulty enunciation and unmusical tone quality seem to flourish with equal luxuriance. Few professors give in their lectures any examples of the natural and musical delivery of which the human voice is capable; a mere droning or a dead level of monotony in speech is their routine of choice.

Droning in the Pulpit

IN the pulpit a goodly share of good sermons is deprived of its possible value by the same traditional droning, which, improvement though it may be on that of the Pilgrim fathers, is often obnoxious enough. Such a tone of voice can never impressively fasten a truth in the mind of the intellectual hearer; it is too stereotyped to be received as sincerely felt, no matter how sincere the mind may be that prompts it. With the unintellectual such style is likely to work in a numbing, peculiar fashion, the words becoming a something to be heard while they last and then promptly forgotten.

In the home there are those who assume a certain careless laxity in speech in which they do not indulge elsewhere, and a tone of voice which, for propriety's sake, they discard abroad; yet the home is the school of inveterate habit for the younger generation. Children much more readily imitate the faulty than the correct; to hear an older person misuse word or tone means to them a standard and privilege to do the same.

In the countless ramifications of life the misdirection of speech is almost unescapable; one generation is schooled in it, only to transmit its faults to the one next succeeding.

All Italians, nearly all French, and a large percentage of English actors possess that musical quality of voice which is largely missing on the American stage. The voice of the average American actor is untrained, it lacks refinement. Many of our actors deliver painfully exact in their enunciation; but the delivery is hard, they bite off the word.

The State must bear its share of blame in disseminating misdirection. A phase of our musical illusions, as one instance of this, will afford ample illustration of how the voice can be abominably misused; voices capable of delivering the lines of Shakespeare may be sought in vain, and in the highest quarters. But, culpable as the American actor may be, his is not the great share in the carelessness that obtains. On the stage some effort is made, though assuredly not enough, toward sound vocal training. In the theatrical world there is an *esprit de corps* which tends toward endeavor for clearness, smoothness, and musical quality of speech. While that endeavor is far from being sufficient, a value and attention are given on the stage to the musical speaking voice

that school, university, and pulpit signally fail to accord it.

The stage is a tremendous influence. At no time in the history of the world has theater attendance equaled that of to-day in America. In one city of late the ministers *en bloc* have set down the stage as an instrument of the devil, a place of nakedness and debauchery. There is in mind a club of women at Evanston, Illinois, whose mission it is to study good plays and further them, and to avoid and warn against bad ones. Such a movement is helpful, it has worth and value; but wholesale, unqualified denunciation recoils only upon those who make it. The public, undisturbed, continues to attend the theater. Ministers find their congregations dwindling; they rise in protest.

In the good speaking voice, either from stage or pulpit, lies equal power of impression upon the listener. The stage has recognized that which the pulpit appears faintly to realize, the power of the musical speaking voice.

Some who protest against the stage might learn from it why they fail to attract and hold their hearers. Even a good sermon delivered in a bad voice is a lost effort.

That there is no known instrument equal in beauty to the human voice is so trite that it would scarcely be needed to repeat it, were it not that the truism seems so seldom remotely connected with the speaking voice. The musical speaking voice is as effective as the singing one. That is a point upon which too great stress is impossible.

A man who lacks smooth, agreeable intonation might as well place his voice in an agreeable register. If he takes a little pains he will likely soon find in what part of his throat that register lies.

There is no voice so disagreeable that it is incapable of improvement, and the worst point in the matter is that many voices are disagreeable only because of the careless indifference to the musical quality naturally in them. A voice used consistently, even with slight ear to its training, will certainly grow mellow.

With the young, at an age when everything leaves vivid impression, lies, as I have said, the real hope of complete voice training and development. In their case the call is imperative.

What the Schools Should Do

IN the public schools there should be a department of correct speech. It should be graded to supply the needs of corresponding grades in other departments, beginning with the most important of them all, the kindergarten. Where new teachers are engaged in any department, ability provided, preference should be given to those who command well trained voices. In this way the whole personnel of institutions could be advanced to a proper standard without any hint of revolutionizing, and finally be settled upon satisfactory basis.

Those public schools, excellent as they may be in other directions, at present persistently turn out hard, raucous, nasal voiced students in droves, to go through life aiding unconsciously or indifferently in the general din. Reformation of this culpable oversight once established in public schools, the movement would logically work itself out with the masses.

At present Americans of refinement are by no means freer of unmusical voices and nasality than the rest; each section, for obvious reasons, being affected according to local environment.

With awakened knowledge to the importance of voice training for their children, that portion attending private schools would by preference be sent to

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THERE is no civilized country on the globe where so little attention is paid to the speaking voice, though nowhere is that attention more needed, than in America. Toward the criticism of foreigners we are supposed to be the most lenient of peoples; though criticism by our own, even when less sweeping, and certainly more well informed, from long experience, is not received with the same genial tolerance.

Many, notably the English, have railed at and ridiculed what they and our friends on the Continent term "the frightful American voice." No end of unpleasant comment has been applied to it, and much deservedly; but by some strange oversight none appears to have looked for the underlying cause of this national defect, nor has any suggestion of remedy been advanced.

It is to the schools, the universities, the pulpit, and in part to the stage, that this almost universal misdirection of the American voice is due. Not until certain forces realize and set about correcting this misdirection, the result mainly of ignorance or careless indifference, may any improvement be expected. The writing of articles and isolated instances of individual zeal promise little. The direct causes of bad influence must be aroused to some sense of responsibility before any real reform can be awakened.

To judge of the misdirection of the American voice, we have to get it in contrast with the French, Italian, and English tone in speech; though for this last I do not sustain the same unreserved admiration accorded by many. The Italian voice is eloquently musical; the French, though in less degree, is both musical and agreeable; the English, in frequent instances, is of an uncommonly mellow charm.

These facts we have to face when we consider our own vocal shortcomings as a people.

Handicaps We Have

MANY things are against us. We are not an art loving nation; our strenuous haste is uncompromising. We have in each section of the country the handicap of some special vocal inheritance. The New England voice has yielded to the droning ancestry of the Puritan parson; in Pennsylvania there is another kind of nasality—high, harsh, hard, and a trifle more aggressive—which may come in a way from the drone of the Quaker, or in a measure from the Puritan element. In that section there is too the corrupt English of the Pennsylvania Dutch and its contributing inflection. The negro dialect has corrupted the speech of the South, which is softer and more tender, mainly because the tone of speech of Southern peoples is everywhere more soft and musical. In the West there is an atrocious burr and sounding of the letter R, which in Michigan is heard in all its pristine terror. If the sections of the entire country were taken separately, it would be found that each has its special, particular misdirection. The great mass give absolutely no thought to musical tone as an invaluable factor in the common associations of everyday life.

To begin to direct the misused speaking voice of the present adult generation properly is well nigh useless; it is likely too firmly fixed in the wrong way ever to attain the right one. It is in children that hope must lie, if any hope may be entertained in existing conditions.