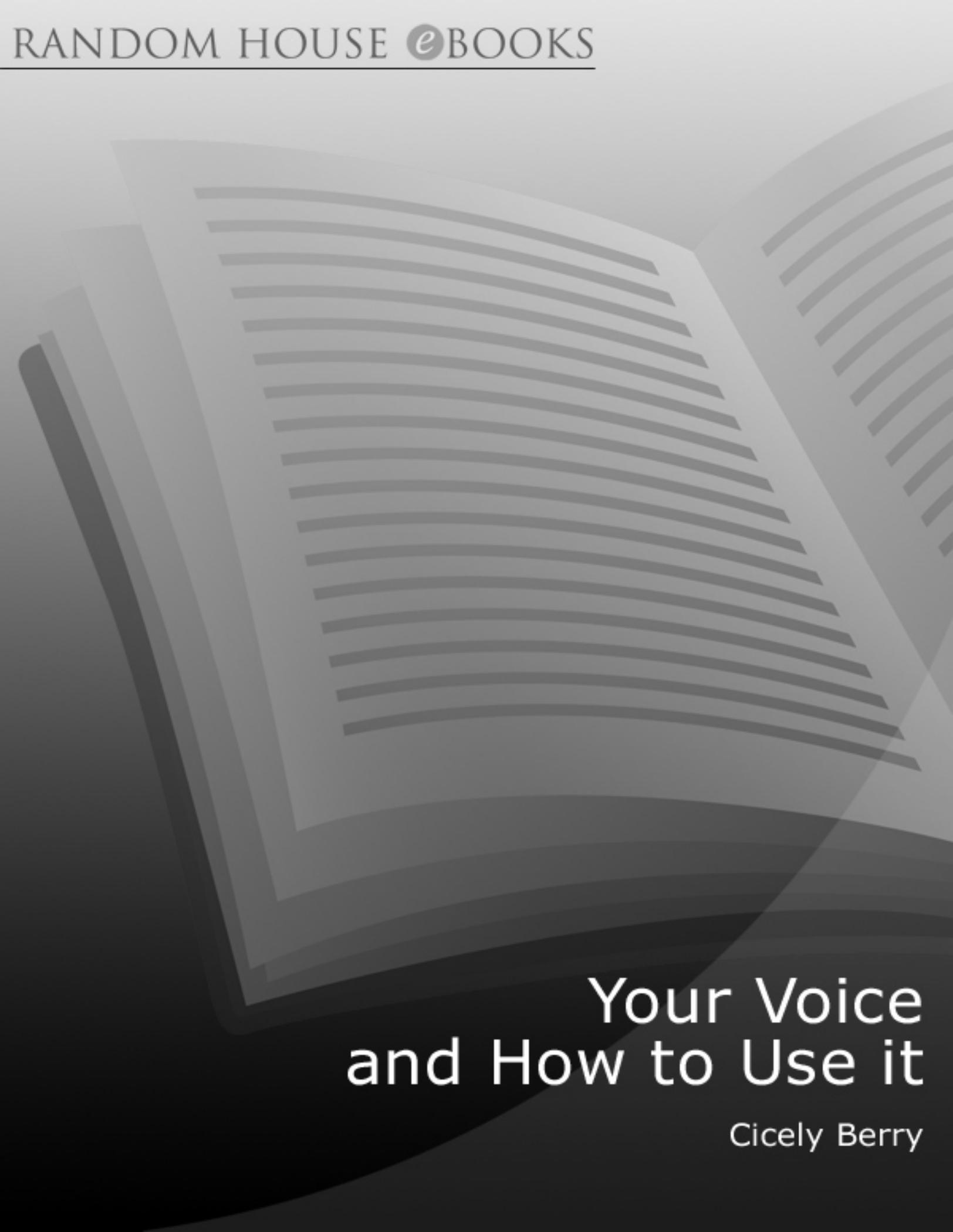


RANDOM HOUSE  BOOKS



Your Voice and How to Use it

Cicely Berry

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Also by Cicely Berry

Title Page

Diagrams in text

Introduction

- 1 Becoming Aware of Your Voice
- 2 Good Sound and Good Speaking
- 3 Breathing and Relaxation
- 4 Communication and Words
- 5 Your Voice
- 6 Relaxation and Breathing
- 7 Speech
- 8 Tone, Projection and Variety
- 9 Your Voice in Action
 - Speaking in public*
 - In Business*
 - In Politics*
 - Teaching Situations*
 - Churchmen and Preaching*
 - Broadcasting*
 - Amateur Drama*

Summary of Exercises

- 10 Speakers on Speaking
 - Lord Mancroft*
 - Marjorie Proops*
 - Dr Mervyn Stockwood*

Richard Baker
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Tariq Ali

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About the Book

What is 'good speech'?

Why is it important?

Do accents matter?

How can I stop being nervous?

Anxiety about how we speak prevents many of us from expressing ourselves well. In her classic handbook, Cicely Berry, Voice Director of the Royal Shakespeare Company and world-famous voice teacher, tackles the reasons for this anxiety and explains her practical exercises for relaxation and breathing, clarity of diction and vocal flexibility - everything that you need to achieve good speech.

Comprehensive and straightforward, *Your Voice and How to Use It* is essential for everyone who ever needs to speak in public with conviction and confidence.

Also by Cicely Berry

VOICE AND THE ACTOR
THE ACTOR AND THE TEXT

YOUR VOICE AND HOW TO USE IT

Cicely Berry



Diagrams in text

[Possible rib movement](#)

[Good and bad posture](#)

[Position of the back of the tongue and soft palate](#)

[Position of the tongue tip and soft palate](#)

[Position of the lips](#)

[Parts of the mouth](#)

[Possible position for the blade of the tongue](#)

[Bone prop in the mouth](#)

Introduction

I am very pleased that Virgin have decided to reissue this book now, in 2000, a quarter of a century after it was written. From a personal point of view, it means that the book is still useful: by giving a certain technical grounding to help people find their own voice, it gives them the confidence to speak in public – and that gives me great pleasure. But, most importantly, this reissue gives us the opportunity to look at the whole process of communicating in public, its value to society, and how our response to it has changed over the last 25 years.

What I find so interesting is that, though we are not a verbal culture as such, people are still drawn by the spoken word; it is innate in all of us – children love being told stories – and I believe we are still drawn by the vibration of the human voice, and still get pleasure from the sound and form of a speech well made. What is more, I believe this to be of vital import to our society at the moment for, in this day of Internet technology, management jargon and minimal communication, our whole way of relating to one another is in the balance: if we are not careful it will be the people who have the right shorthand jargon, and who present facts fast, who will rule, and those with perhaps a fuller and richer understanding of what is going on around them, an understanding of the human condition, who will become the underclass. But I believe this need not come about, for a good speaker can present his/her argument in a way that stimulates both the mind and the imagination of the listener, and can make his/her audience want to discuss, want to talk, want to communicate. This, I believe,

is fundamental to the future of our society and of democracy.

I know a great many people worry deeply about how they speak and how they sound, and that this anxiety often stops them expressing themselves as fully as they would wish. The aim of this book, therefore, is to enable you to speak clearly and with confidence in a public situation. When I say 'public' I do not necessarily mean getting up in front of an audience; I mean saying anything in an open or formal situation - perhaps a meeting with colleagues, or between friends coming together to discuss an issue. And I believe this can be done quite simply - through a good understanding of how your voice works, and through quite straightforward and practical exercises.

I think there is little that gives more immediate pleasure than when, while talking with other people, you have a good creative thought and say it at that moment 'just right': it makes you feel quite elated! But at a deeper level, when you have a strong feeling about an issue, be it personal or public, and have managed to express it in exactly the right way, i.e. with shape and precision, this too brings a sense of satisfaction: it has put something in place. If what you were expressing was painful, it may even help to heal. The important thing is that you felt in charge of the situation and of yourself: you were articulate for that moment. Yet how seldom do we feel in charge in this way.

Now when you think how innate language is within us, how much it is part of our everyday life, I want to question why this is so, and why so many people find it extremely difficult, even painful, to express themselves out loud - which is in itself public. The answer is of course complex, because so many things influence how we speak and how the voice reacts to different social situations, so I want to look briefly at what those influences might be and how the exercises can help. There are four main headings:

- i) the personal (how we arrive at our own voice)
- ii) the social (how we react to other people)
- iii) the public (the different public expectations and modes)
- iv) the practical (the reason for the exercises)

One further thing, but perhaps the most important: you will only feel confident if you feel you are being true to yourself.

First - the *personal* angle/influence.

Your voice is the means by which you convey your inner self and your inner thoughts and feelings in an immediate way to other people - the outside world. It is the outward expression of your inner self, a sort of channel from inside to outside, and is therefore a very particular expression of you and of your personality.

I think we all have what I call a 'secret' voice: a voice that we hear inside our heads, which conveys exactly what we want, how we think and feel, yet that voice so seldom tallies with what in the end comes out. The inner image does not fit with the outer one - or rather the voice that other people hear does not tally with that inner image. Why?

I will try to answer. We arrive at our voice via a very circuitous route: to begin with, it is to do with what you hear when you are a child - in other words, what there is to copy. But this is quite complex, for how you copy what you hear is conditioned by how you relate to those around you, and how you choose to copy it: this is governed by your personality, and is therefore a choice quite early on, albeit an instinctive one. (I will go into this in more detail in the next chapter.) The important thing to realise is that our habits of speech are formed very early and quite unconsciously: they are part of our body growth, as it were, and cannot be changed easily.

But then as we grow older and go to school we become part of a social situation: we start to make our voice behave according to a received idea of how we think we should sound. We start to monitor it, subliminally of course: we start to make it conform - or not conform if we wish to rebel, and that is our choice. None of this is what might be termed 'psychological', but is simply to do with how we unconsciously motivate ourselves in order to survive as well as possible. But our habits stay with us, so if you were told to 'speak up' when you were small - I think one of the worst things that can be said to a child - that may well continue to be said. Sadly the habit will become more deeply rooted, perhaps because you are self-conscious and do not want to be noticed - but all too often some of that feeling remains with us.

For criticism of your voice comes uncomfortably close to being a criticism of you as a person. For instance, if someone asks you to repeat what you have said because they have not heard you properly, being either not clear or not loud enough, you unconsciously resent this as you assume that your voice is inadequate. Or if you are interrupted while telling a story, you assume you are not being sufficiently interesting, and do not want to finish. In both cases, your confidence is undermined.

As you will therefore suspect, a great deal depends on how confident you were made to feel as a child in expressing yourself: this in turn depends on whether your family liked to talk and express their feelings - and this is not strictly to do with class or education, it is to do with the habit, ethos, of each particular family and culture. But of course, ultimately class does play a huge part in self-confidence, and we must be honest about this: the class or culture which surrounds you forms the background within which you can feel at ease. It is much more difficult to feel confident in company if you do not have a certain social experience/background, or, and this is also crucial, if you

feel you have missed out on a full education. This has no correlation with how much you have to offer as a person, but it does have a bearing on your ability to act/speak with authority.

Also I think some people are born with quite a natural vocal response – they want to talk: we recognize that some people have what we call ‘a musical ear’ and have naturally good singing voices, and in the same way I believe some people have a feel for words – they like poetry for instance, and this gives them a kind of vocal/ verbal confidence from the beginning. It is a gift and we must recognize it as such, but it is also something that we can acquire.

Secondly – the *social* angle.

We carry all this ‘voice baggage’ with us into the adult world, into our career, business, whatever: we obviously learn a lot on the way and get better at communicating etc., but the background habits and vocal patterns are still with us.

So the next step is to learn how to be objective about your voice: and this is particularly difficult because, as we have seen, we have such a subjective response to it. It is subjective not only because of the habits we have grown up with, and the memories and associations that stick, but also because you hear your own voice via the bone conduction in your own head, and this gives it a different resonance: you are therefore not hearing it as other people do. This accounts for the shock when you hear your recorded voice for the first time: it often seems unrecognizable, and this is not simply because of the recording mechanism, but because you are hearing it via the outside waves and your outer ear. You are hearing it as someone else: and this is where you need to be objective.

Here I want to say two things which may seem contradictory: first I think that in our wish, or rather need, to fit in and to sound intelligent, we become too

conditioned by what we think other people expect of us – we make our voice ‘behave’. If we are not careful our secret voice gets lost – we stop listening for it. Yet at the same time we have to be realistic: we may have irritating vocal habits of which we are not aware and which may be alienating and give the wrong impression, so we have to be sensible. We have to believe that we are good enough, and that what we have to say is important: we also have to learn to make any necessary adjustments in order that our voice conveys exactly what we intend, and how we perceive ourselves to be. It is a fine balance.

Thirdly – the *public* angle.

I think it is quite difficult to specify exactly what is expected of us now, for fashions of speech change: you have only to listen to a newsreel of ten years ago to realize this – it does not sound quite real any more. And since I wrote this book in 1975 I think there has been a good deal of change: so let us take an objective look at this.

How we communicate with each other on an everyday basis has become minimalist, and much less formal: technology has taken over more and more. We have become a less verbal society, and when it comes to functioning in public we are more interested in the soundbite than in reasoning things out in depth. Billions of dollars are spent each year by corporate companies to make corporate videos in order to sell their products, which is impersonal communication! This means that when we get up to speak formally, we have to make a bigger adjustment: on the one hand we need to seem informal, but at the same time we are aware that we need to grab attention in as colourful a way as possible, for the vernacular slang is rich and vivid. This is in fact ‘being formal’ but with a different angle – and so the soundbite was formed.

Let me digress a moment and give you an example. For the last 30 years my main work has been with the Royal Shakespeare Company: as Voice Director for the RSC I have seen, or should I say heard, very clearly the change in speech during this time. I know that because of today's mode of casual speech it is very difficult for young actors – and of course I mean actors of either gender – to feel at home with the colourful and emotionally charged world that Shakespeare conjures for us through the language: it is not that they cannot do it, but that they find it difficult to be truthful within themselves, whilst honouring the imagery and rhythm of that text. It is extravagant language – the very opposite of how we communicate now. We have to work at it in a very specific way, for it is essential for the actor to feel truthful: and I have evolved a number of ways to break through that barrier. I say this because I think it might help to clarify what I mean.

Still on this question of fashions in speech, when you hear that newsreel of 20, or even 10, years ago it will sound affected: and this is because we have become used to a much broader range of accent – which is as it should be. The good thing about television – ‘that campfire around which our communities gather’ as Helena Kennedy so eloquently puts it – is that it has opened our ears to the great variety within the English language itself, and we are no longer bound by the ‘upper class’ accent. Twenty years ago, people were trained to speak what we call RP (Received Pronunciation) or what used to be known as an Oxford accent. This was considered educated and proper, and certainly in some jobs your chances of promotion would have been limited if you had any trace of a so-called ‘vulgar’ or ‘non-U’ accent. Now there is much more diversity of speech sounds and this gives our language so much more colour and (I think) warmth and humanity.

Just five years ago Tom Leonard, the Scottish poet, wrote a great poem called ‘The Six o’Clock News’, the

essence of which was that people did not believe the news if it was read by someone with a Scottish accent. But I think the wind has changed considerably – though not wholly – and in some cases the reverse now holds true. I have heard that in some quarters the prevailing feeling is that someone with a dialect gives the impression that they can be trusted more, and that this can be a useful attribute if you are in marketing – cynical, but true.

Nowadays, if you speak in an accent, unless there is a very good reason to change it I believe you should keep it. An actor, for instance, needs to be able to speak RP – Received Pronunciation – or he/she would be very limited as to the parts that he/she could be cast for, though I firmly believe that RP should be used as an accent and that the native dialect should not be discarded. But unless there is a practical reason such as this, there is no reason to change it. Your speech is what you grew up with and what you feel comfortable with: and moreover, it is emotionally connected with your way of expressing yourself, which in itself is individual. You just need to make sure that it is muscularly firm and clear.

Fourthly – the *practical* exercises.

Having said all this, the interesting thing is that how we deal with our own voice does not change – the equipment (the breathing, relaxation and muscularity that we need practically to work on) is all the same.

I want to quote from Gwynneth Thurburn, who was my teacher: as Principal of the Central School of Speech and Drama for many years, she initiated the main teaching of Voice in this country, and taught many famous actors. What she wrote about the actor and his/her use of voice still applies now: ‘Some kind of period style emerges in every decade or so. We tend to think that something New has been found: that we are verging on the 21st century and so on. Actually most of it is as old as the hills, changing and

varying with the times, but its roots were probably always the same. Beware of the NEW and the DISCOVERY unless you know what is new and what has been discovered that nobody knew before.' I like that.

The exercises will help us in the following ways:

i. Good deep breathing centres us, enables us to hear our own real Voice, and gives it good resonance. If your work is vocally demanding, as for instance it is for the teacher, then breathing exercises are essential to counteract strain. Voice Training should be part of all Teacher Training Colleges and voice strain should be recognized as a hazard of the job: there is both the mental strain of keeping a group of young people interested, and the continuous physical strain on the voice. There are, after all, many good voice teachers who could take on this work. But whatever our job there is always some tension attached, and good breathing makes us calm and, most important, puts us in touch with our own integrity.

ii. An awareness of relaxation gives us confidence: we cannot be completely relaxed always, for there are times when we need tension to hold us together (e.g. when certain strains in our personal life cannot be left at home), but we can gain sufficient physical awareness to release the muscles involved with the breathing and with the neck resonator so that we get the best use and result from our voice, and this of course will help build confidence.

iii. We can practise the muscularity of the lips and tongue, not in order to speak 'better', but rather with the purpose of releasing our thoughts actively and accurately through the language, so the words have authority and life and people listen. Words are our thoughts in action, and we want to make them immediate in that way.

iv. We can acquire an awareness of pitch and volume: so often a voice which is otherwise good to listen to stays on the same pitch and becomes monotonous and in a way lifeless - it does not draw us to listen and in the end is

irritating. Or, and this is quite common, the voice is pitched at the same volume, a fraction too loud, and it seems to be talking 'at' and not 'to' us, and we on the receiving end unconsciously back away - in our minds, of course. This is simply due to a lack of objective judgement on the part of the speaker, and can be put right very quickly.

All these things can be worked at, not in order to alter your voice or make it 'marketable' or 'effective' in an untruthful way, but rather so that you get the best use out of it and, most important, that it may reflect what you think and feel as accurately as possible - and as you would wish. But remember that when you do make these adjustments, because you are hearing them inside your head, the difference will seem big to you at first: do not be put off by this, for the exercises will merely get you to use what is natural in order to speak, and they will in fact make you sound more at ease. However, it will take time to believe this - there is always a time-lag between doing and believing! It is good if there is someone you can trust who you can sound out on what is happening.

As far as building a speech is concerned, always remember that people get pleasure out of hearing others speak well: we will deal with this fully in the final chapter. I believe it is useful to practise on good speeches: prop up Shakespeare on your mantelpiece and read it aloud, or find a book of well-known public speeches and do the same with them: feel the shape and the music - it is exciting. As I have already said, we no longer live in a verbal society, in which people sit down and tell stories to each other: instead we sit passively and watch television and listen to other people talk. We need to get people excited by language again. I have done a good deal of work on Shakespeare in prisons, and I have watched how excited a group will get by speaking this physical language, and I am convinced that if we could release people's desire to speak and to release

their feelings through words, there would be less violence around us.

Looking again at what has been written in the book, it is interesting to see that the basic means have not changed, for the speaker still needs to work on his/her voice, i.e. to find the relaxation, to discover his/her potential resonance, and to work on the definition of the language. Nor has the basic format of a speech changed: the shaping of a speech is still of the utmost importance, for it still needs those three main elements:

- i. opening with a provocative statement or question in order to state the premise
- ii. the building up of the argument: three or four main ideas – ideally with some alliteration
- iii. the winding up, the ending – perhaps leaving us with a question, something unanswered to hover in our minds

These points are analyzed fully in *Our Masters' Voices*, a very interesting book by Max Atkinson which is well worth reading. There is something dynamic in that format which appeals to all, and makes us want to hear more, but you have to play around with the form for yourself and make it your own to see if it works for you. And, very importantly, always leave a split moment between thoughts to allow time for each idea to drop for the listener – and to make him/her hungry for more.

By working at all this, we can get the best possible use from our voices – and in the process be as truthful and as accurate as possible in conveying our thoughts and feelings. This is not only helpful and useful, but also makes us more at ease with ourselves – and this is surely worth working for.

And this is something we, those of us who speak in public, also have to work at, for I believe there is

something innate in all of us that responds to the rhythm and cadence of a good speech – it has developed over time with our need to express ourselves, our feelings, and connect with the person we are talking to – and we must keep this need alive. Words have the power to excite, provoke, disturb and give pleasure. I believe it is our job to excite people with language and make them want to talk.

I think it is very useful that we have the views of speakers from the past as well as the present in this book, for all the speakers who are quoted have that desire to reach an audience, that commitment, that pleasure and that generosity. They all convey their real sense of joy in communicating with others, and there is much we can learn from them. One last point: at the time of writing I chose to use *he* rather than *he/she*, believing it to be less cumbersome. I now regret this, and I apologise to those whose feelings may be offended.

Cicely Berry
January 2000

SECTION ONE

1 Becoming Aware of Your Voice

1 How vocal sound is made.

Let us see first of all how sound is made. To make any sound at all two factors are needed - something that strikes and an object that is struck and which resists the impact to a greater or lesser degree and vibrates accordingly. These vibrations then disturb the surrounding air and set up sound waves which you receive through the mechanism of the ear, which, by a very intricate procedure, sends impulses to the brain and the result is that you hear a sound. All sounds have these two factors, and their volume will depend on two things - the hardness of the object struck, and its sensitivity to vibrations - so that the noise made by walking on a wooden platform will be greater than the impact of the same footsteps on a stone pavement, for wood is more pliant than stone and so capable of larger vibrations. It is the size of the vibrations that determines the volume - of course, the object that strikes can vibrate too. The more musical the sound the more regular the vibrations themselves will be, although we are not aware of this. A musical sound also has a third factor which helps to give a pattern to the vibrations, and that is a resonator - i.e., something which amplifies the initial sound by setting up sympathetic vibrations, and amplifying and sustaining that initial sound sufficiently to allow us to hear a note of a

certain pitch. The resonating factor may be quite crude, as in a zither for instance, where the strings are simply attached to a piece of wood of a certain shape and size, and where vibrations respond to the initial sound set up by the strings. Or the resonator may be a more elaborate affair like the case of a violin, which has a very particular shape and size, the resonating vibrations of which give us the particular quality of the violin and make it recognizable as such as opposed to any other instrument. The resonator contributes its own quality to the original sound because of the harmonic vibrations it sets up, and because it sustains that sound so that we hear a distinguishable note. In fact, in an organ it is the resonant pitch of the pipes that dominates the initial vibrations made by the reed. Thus it is the resonator which determines the quality of sound and makes it particular.

The space in which a sound is made can add its own resonance and alter the quality of the sound. For instance, an empty room will amplify sound more than a furnished one, for material stops vibration and so deadens the sound. Consequently, a stone building, such as a church, with non-porous walls, will bounce sound back off the walls, making even more resonance, and creating its own particular acoustic problems. On the other hand, when sound is made in the open air, the sound waves disperse more quickly as there is no space to contain them, which is why it is always a much greater strain to speak outside as you have little means of judging how far the sound is carrying.

Now let us be specific about how we make our own vocal sound, and for this purpose we will take the violin as an example, because it offers a good analogy with the voice. In a violin the bow strikes the strings causing them to vibrate and thus set up sound waves. This initial note, which is small, is then amplified by the wooden box underneath setting up its own vibrations. The pitch of the note is determined by the tautness and length of the vibrating

portion of the string which the player controls with his fingers - the higher the note the shorter the vibrating portion and *vice versa*, and the particular size and shape of the violin box sets up its own vibrations, which are the harmonics of the original note, and gives them the particular quality which we recognize as belonging to a violin. However, the quality of sound can vary enormously between one violin and another, because of the difference of materials used, the precise measurements, the particular craftsmanship and so on - all these things determine the precise quality of the individual violin. The sound will also vary because of the way it is played - how the bow actually strikes the strings, etc. - all these factors will make the resonating vibrations or harmonics slightly different. In other words - i) the quality of sound will vary from one violin to another, and ii) the quality from the same violin will vary according to how it is played.

Let us see how this compares with the voice. In the voice the breath acts as the bow which, on exhaling, strikes the vocal cords in the larynx which come together when you want to make sound, and causes them to vibrate. These vibrations set up sound waves which can then be resonated in the chest, the pharynx or hollow space above the larynx, in the mouth, nose and bones of the face and skull, and the hollow spaces in some of the bones of the head - the sinuses. You will see immediately that, although the way in which we make sound is the same, the individual quality of the voice will vary according to the infinite variations in the size and shape of people, and thus the individual voice becomes as distinctive and particular to each person as fingerprints. Just as a good violinist can get sounds out of a violin that a bad player cannot, so, as individuals, we can make good or bad use of the mechanism we have. For instance, the way we use the breath to strike the cords - as the violinist uses his bow - can make the difference to the sound being breathy or glottal or harsh - in fact you can