Our voice and ears: Spreading the word

The interpreting profession has always been aware of the importance of the voice and the ears. After all, they are the tools of our trade.

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Why bring up this subject again when there is such an abundance of articles on our very own website? (Try a search for “voice”.) In fact, this is not an attempt to produce a handbook or a dissertation, but rather a new tool to draw attention to an old subject. STRESS is today’s buzz word and fighting it the motto. So maybe these ideas might contain some extra food for thought that will, after all, prove useful to some.

Why is the profession interested?

Our profession has always been aware of the importance of the voice and the ear and, needless to say, AIIC has repeatedly recommended that members have periodic check-ups in order to establish a personal record that can be used in case of any dysfunction or impairment. Also, the recent Workload Study touches on booth and working conditions and their effect on health and well-being, giving us all more to think about. We are, after all, talking about the tools of our trade.

What attention have schools given to the subject

In the past very little attention was given by schools or universities to the role of the voice or to ear and voice management. Over the last 10-15 years curricula have improved, but still there is precious little voice training (at most some elemental phonetics or optional “speech” lessons). Programs that include active professional interpreters on their teaching staff have “allowed” interpretation teachers to invite full-fledged voice trainers to give seminars on voice management, usually in parallel with demonstrations in consecutive. Among European institutions, the European Parliament has recently been host to quite a number of successful consecutive and voice training seminars. We who live in Brussels have been fortunate to have had the opportunity of attending workshops given by Prof. Gerard Ilg and Mr. R. Voyat.

Awareness of the importance of ear and voice, however, is greater than ever. Through AIIC channels we have received information on workshops organised in the US and Brazil, both eminently practical in approach (i.e. the voice as an efficient tool to “perform” as an interpreter). Valid as that may be in order to convey one’s message, daily practice and personal experience have convinced me that there is more in the voice than meets the eye, or perhaps that should be than “hits the ear”. I would even dare say that CONVEYING THE MESSAGE (i.e. SPREADING THE WORD) is more of a sensorial experience felt almost at skin level.
The question is: in today’s quest for quality at all levels can we afford to remain deaf to this particular resonance? After all, long ago Portuguese poet Bernardo Soares (pseudonym of Fernando Pessoa) said that “the word is only complete when seen and heard.”

**AIIC regions have different outlooks**

Puzzling as it may seem, although AIIC was founded in the city of Paris 50 years ago, very little is mentioned in technical studies about the **Tomatis method**, an ear training method developed by French-born Dr. Alfred Tomatis decades ago while analyzing hearing impairment among dock workers. In a way, he created a kind of workout for the ear. Thanks to his method the ear can be “trained” and will eventually open up once again to those frequencies it had stopped picking up for some reason or other. Dr. Tomatis is also very well known for his books on bilingualism.

In the past 4-5 years, however, voice management seminars organised by the AIIC regions of Switzerland, Italy, Belgium, Portugal and the Netherlands have shown a different outlook, at least according to the activity reports submitted. Curious readers should not fail to read the informative articles available on this site, such as **Masters of the Voice** by S. Gebhard or **Formation à l'Utilisation de la Voix** by b. Kremer. True enough, the voice is still considered as a “tool” for the interpreter, on a par with his or her languages, but its sensorial and emotional effect on the listener is also taken into account. This is all so obvious and rational when one considers the proximity induced by headphones and booth equipment. As a matter of fact, let’s not forget our colleagues in the booth when discussing SI!

**Listening to the voice at “skin level”**

I have heard some colleagues say that unless one has a specific speech problem, voice training is something solely for singers and perhaps actors. But what about career-conscious politicians or any of today’s VIPs for whom elocution is as important as execution? You can be sure that any image consultant looking to build a successful career will not forget voice coaching!

Interpreters use their voices more than the average person, probably as much as any professional of the stage. On top of it we are not aware of the fact that common misuse induced by stress, lack of training and poor conditions will surely lead to fatigue and burnout. I am not implying that we may find ourselves out of the market because we cannot literally utter one more word. What I am saying is that we would do well to listen more to our own voice and to other people’s voices “at skin level” (see Annex I). “Ecouter de son oreille droite” and “se sentir bien dans sa peau” are common expressions in French that should make us think hard.

I’ll confess that I have a musical ear and spend most of my spare time in music-related activities. I also had sore throat problems in the past because of an allergic rhinitis caused by excessive air-conditioning. By consulting experienced medical specialists I was able to overcome these troubles. Voice counseling proved to be the right antidote.

These circumstances have undoubtedly made me feel “under my skin” how difficult it is to survive as a freelancer with a faltering voice, which can also grate on the ear of a person listening through headphones. Try to remember your own feeling when a speaker had a bad cold or a broken voice. You cannot choose your speaker, but your client may choose a different interpreter next time around! And, according to survey findings, delegates are more inclined to believe that what you say is correct if it is delivered in a pleasant voice! Can you think of a better reason for mastering your voice? Please your delegates and yourself at the same time!

**Creating a pleasant sound environment**
Don’t write this off as being overly simplistic. Just think of how many hours we spend over a lifetime interpreting in the restricted environment of the booth. We already have to cope with the adverse effects on our health of static and magnetic fields. Let’s try at least to use our voices to create the right vibrations and a pleasant resonance within the booth. Your boothmate’s ear will thank you, not to mention your delegate’s.

Reading (see Annex II) has led me to this holistic approach. Just a clever strategic marketing stance, you ask, or a creative professional attitude? Read on and decide.

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**ANNEX I**

**Common Symptoms to be Heeded**

1. **VOCAL FATIGUE**, namely a **muffled, hollow** voice after class or after work. (And not a **clear, resonant** voice, with **concentrated sound**.)
   
   Because the voice is **not placed correctly**, it is **sunk deep down** the throat, resting heavily on the larynx and the vocal cords.
   
   This means your **natural resonators** are not being used.

2. The voice becomes **raspy or harsh**, especially the morning after a hard day’s work.
   
   This happens because the voice is **forced** and **does not flow freely** carried by **adequate breath**.

3. The voice becomes hampered by **mucus**, which induces you to **clear your throat forcibly** to get rid of that “frog in your throat”.
   
   (Note that mucus is a reaction of ill-treated membranes, which want to soothe and protect themselves).

**Checklist**

*A Self-evaluation*

- How do I feel **in the evening** after working all day?
  
  Do I have strained jaw muscles?
  
  Do I have a muffled (muted), hollow voice?
  
  Do I have a raw, harsh voice?
  
  Do I have mucus on the vocal cords and do I therefore have to clear my throat frequently?
  
  Do I have a dry throat? A sore throat? Do I feel like coughing?

- How do I feel **the next morning**?
  
  Do I have a thick, throaty, worn-out voice? A creaky, cracking voice?

- Or, on the contrary, do I feel vocally fresh and ready to train and/or again?

- It is important to notice whether anything went wrong during work.
  
  It could be a **warning signal** to be heeded! Was there a sudden loss of voice?
  
  Did the voice slip out, up or down?
  
  Did I feel strain, tension, or even pain in my throat?

- Was I short of breath? Was my breathing short and cramped?

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Annex II

**Bibliography**


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Recommended citation format: