

## **In Defence of the Art of Speaking**

The art of forming words and combining them to make a sense and, more importantly, the art of communicating through the written word, heralded a new epoch in the march of civilization with the result man considers himself as the crowning glory of the universe. Throughout history we find man cultivating these arts with great assiduity. It is only in the modern era, with its technological advances, that the arts of speech making and writing and communicating thoughts and ideas are tending to become lost. We no longer hear of great orators.

Our revered national leaders like Gokhale, Sivaswamy Iyer, Srinivasa Sastry, Gundappa, (according to Sampatgiri Rao, the famous Head Master of the National High School, Bangalore), were literally men of letters who contributed more to the enrichment of the postal exchequer than any one else. Such prolific writers of letters they were.

### *Need for Cultivating the Art of Speaking*

My regret at the loss of the art of speaking is all the more keen on seeing even our great national leaders reading from texts probably prepared by their assistants. What is annoying is that they do not lift their eyes up even once to look at their audience, their eyes being glued to the manuscript. Their faces, fortunately, are screened from the audience by the ubiquitous presence of a battery of microphones. How do they expect to communicate to their audience in this way?

Here I must share with my readers a story of a minister asking his secretary to draft a speech for him which should take not more than 15 minutes to deliver. The Secretary dutifully prepared the text and sent it to the Minister who did not take the trouble of looking at it even once beforehand but started reading it at the meeting. When he finished reading, he was annoyed to see that the speech had taken double the time stipulated. He was naturally angry and took his secretary to task for not following his instructions strictly. The story goes that the secretary politely replied stating that the speech written by him was to last exactly fifteen minutes but what is he to do if the Minister read the speech as well as the attached carbon copy! I hope it is only a story and not the record of what really happened. The story, however, is not without its moral. Those reading speeches prepared by their assistants should take the elementary precaution of going through them at least once and familiarising themselves about their contents beforehand.

I had the good fortune of hearing great orators in my student days like S. Radhakrishnan, Satyamurthy, C.R. Reddy, C.V. Raman and V. Srinivasa Sastry. Of all these persons, Srinivasa Sastry easily stood head and shoulders above the rest. His words flowed mellifluously, rolling out one after the other effortlessly in a most graceful way which

mesmerized the audience. No wonder even the British, who looked down upon Indians, called him the silver tongued orator of the British empire and even made him a privy counsellor. He is believed to have enraptured British audiences by his exalted sentiments and superb eloquence.

On the occasion of one of his speeches in Whitehall, London, a member in the audience came up to Sastry and said "How is it that you speak English, which is not your mother tongue, so brilliantly. Some of our own best men who go to Oxford and Cambridge do not speak as well". Sastry seems to have replied hesitantly "Well, I really do not know. I suppose it must be the two thousand years of culture behind me."

The *Calcutta Gaurdian* writing about Sastry's speeches wrote: "For rarely does the opportunity come to most of us to listen to so polished an utterance of so mature a mind, so generous a lover of youth, so qualified a man of public affairs, who looms large whatever the stage, whether academia, political or social, whether Indian, imperial or international -- showing not through any adventitious aid or pose but by the breadth of his knowledge of the world, by the simplicity of his fairness to foes and friends and the matchless poise of his judgement."

Speaking especially in a foreign tongue does not come to us the easy way. It means very hard work to train the voice, make it rise and fall, give the correct inflection and end dramatically. It is said that even an accomplished orator like Winston Churchill, the former British Prime Minister, who made great speeches during the war years, used to rehearse his speeches before a dressing mirror the previous night! How many hours these great speakers must have spent browsing over the dictionary, trying to learn the correct accent of words and rehearsing their speeches before their final delivery, will never be known.

Microphones and loud speakers have destroyed the art of good speaking with voice cultivation no longer necessary. Moreover, these instrumental contraptions have given scope to the audiences to misbehave. Listeners, instead of concentrating on the speaker, set up private conversation with friends sitting by their side and walk in and out when the lecture is progressing, making visitors from a foreign country observe that Indian audiences are the worst behaved in the world.

#### *Lessons from Pygmalion — The Play of George Bernard Shaw*

Only the other day I started reading 'Pygmalion', the famous play of George Bernard Shaw, that master craftsman of the English language.

This play is about a Professor of phonetics, who is very particular as to how the English language is to be spoken. He takes a bet that he can transform an ordinary dirty looking street girl with a deplorable accent, into a smart looking lady who can pass off as a princess in an august assembly of English nobility. So thorough was his coaching that he wins his bet with no one being able to identify the princess as a fake.

The moral of the play is centred around the importance of cultivation of the English

language in the only manner in which it ought to be done. Shaw, in the drama, chastises the flower girl to stop her 'boohooing', in words which are worth recapitulating.

'A woman who utters such depressing and disgusting sounds has no right to be anywhere — no right to live. Remember that you are a human being with a soul and the divine gift of articulate speech; that your native language is the language of Shakespeare and Milton and the Bible and don't sit there crooning like a bilious pigeon'.

I wish our legislators and budding politicians would read this play, not for entertainment, but for educating themselves and resolving to set apart a certain part of their time to improving their language in a sincere effort to communicate more effectively.

The bureaucratic masters sitting in Delhi determining the destinies of All India Radio would also do well to read the play and learn a lesson or two. They would then hopefully initiate a programme of training the battalion of their news readers and local representatives to speak better.

Our young scientists too, especially those aspiring to make a mark in life, would do well to undergo a course in the art of speaking so that they will be able to put their ideas across more effectively.

#### *Pitfalls in the Organisation of Seminars*

We have now-a-days any number of scientists keen on presenting the details of their research to larger audiences. Although years of work have been spent on their research it is obvious that they have hardly given any time to learning the best way of communicating. The result has been that even research of a high order registers no effect on an indifferent audience. There is great clamour and pressure on the Chairman for the opportunity to speak but when permission is given, the speaker, who has not prepared for the talk beforehand, goes on wandering over the subject, keeps on talking endlessly and exceeding the time limit. The whole exercise of organizing big seminars at considerable expense thus fails to benefit either the speaker or the audience.

#### *Seminars to Motivate Participants*

Ordering your thoughts in the most methodical and logical sequence and wording them in the most lucid language is a difficult art but it can be achieved with intense practice and good guidance. Memorizing great writings in the English language will be of help.

Meetings if they have to serve a useful purpose, have to be properly planned and conducted to inspire and motivate the participants to achieve a higher level of performance. The following words extracted from '*The Hindu*' may prove to be of help to the organisers as well as the participants:

'Good meetings bring forth the best in people – best ideas, best decisions and best follow up reactions. There is an element of magic when people come together for a meeting. The magic is in the interplay of ideas and confluence of personalities that take place in the

meeting. When the interaction and the meetings are complete, information has been exchanged, old ideas discussed and blended with new ideas, a consensus is reached and an action plan is born. The crux of the magic lies in that a meeting can be so many things all at once – a technique of communication, a cauldron of concepts and an anvil on which action plans are forged.’

This is an ideal which every organizer of a meeting should keep before him. To the extent we conform to such an ideal we will have taken a significant step in the path of progress to effective communication.

Our ancients laid great stress on correct pronunciation and perfect accent. Chanting of the *Vedas* is a perfect example where intensive training has been able to impart a mastery over the voice and correct pronunciation and accent.

*Hanumān* is a great character by *Vālmiki* in his renowned *Rāmāyana*. Although depicted as a monkey he is characterised as *Vākya Kovida* (an expert in speech making). In the whole fiction of devotional writing we will not perhaps find a character comparable to *Hanumān*. In the *Rāmāyana* story he first appears in *Kiṣkinda Kāṇḍa* approaching *Rama* and *Lakshmana* enquiring as to who they were and why they had come to *Kiṣkinda*. On this occasion poet *Vālmiki* puts words in the mouth of *Rama* characterizing good speech which are worth remembering

*Avistaram asandigdham avilambitam adrutam*  
*Urastham kanthagam vākyam vartate madhyame sware*  
*Samskarakrama sampannām, adrutām, avilambitām*  
*Uççārayati kalyanīm vaçam hrīdaya hārīnīm*

“Not lengthy, not difficult to understand, neither rapid or halting and words uttered clearly in a sweet modulated voice

He has spoken grammatically as a cultivated man with perfect accent and captivating the heart of his listeners.”

What more qualifications do we need in a good speaker?

These are the ideals of good speech set before us by acknowledged practitioners and no effort should be spared in cultivating the art of good speech and effective communication.

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