

## To obfuscate or elucidate? Now, that's a question!



### Ewan Pearson

**I**s your average central banker intentionally difficult to understand, or is the impenetrability an accident? We think everyone should be clear and accurate in their oral communications, yet it's obvious that there is a huge difference between the world's two most important central bankers. Sadly, the better one just retired.

How do we know there's such a difference? We researched speeches by Jean-Claude Trichet, at the European Central Bank (ECB). For 'fun' we compared his style with the outgoing Fed Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan. Here are the highlights and some thoughts on what you can do to be clear or vague (on demand).

In December 2005, the EU rates changed, plus it was vital to manage future rate expectations. Key phrases are vital tools for central banks, but Trichet is difficult to read. Here are some of his favourites:

|                                  |               |                                     |
|----------------------------------|---------------|-------------------------------------|
| 'Monetary Policy'                | translates as | Interest Rates                      |
| Rates 'remain appropriate'       |               | No change planned                   |
| Rates 'still remain appropriate' |               | No change now, maybe soon           |
| Price 'vigilance'                |               | We're worried about inflation       |
| 'Continued vigilance'            |               | We're still worried                 |
| 'Particular vigilance'           |               | We're quite worried                 |
| 'Strong vigilance'               |               | We're very worried and may even act |

The wording of Trichet's speeches in late 2005 was just about OK, although hardly easy reading: A complicated sentence structure made it hard to listen to and difficult for his international audience. It's debatable whether this was deliberate, in order to keep the markets guessing, or an accidental side-effect of a language barrier. Either way you were left to guess the meaning.

Having studied 3 months of ECB communications, it's also clear that Trichet's answers were too long, averaging 120 words!! Once, he took 45 words to say "No", here it is in full:



Jean-Claude Trichet,  
President of the European Central Bank

*Q: "Can I ask you about the recent US interest rate hike?"*

*A: "Each central bank has its own responsibility. I never comment on the decisions which are taken by the Bank of Japan or the Federal Reserve or other fellow central bank governors. And I do not expect that they would comment on what we do ourselves"*

For Trichet, verbosity is a big problem plus the words he chooses frankly do not help. We took a

passage from his November 2005 speech and were able to shorten it by 40 % and improve the Flesch Index\* by 25 %.

Trichet's third problem is languages. He often switches out of English to his native French, or even Latin. When asked what 'ex ante' means, he replied "*Ex ante means 'ex ante' in English and in Latin. In French I would say 'a priori' and not 'ex ante', but only in French.*

But it's not all Trichet's fault. ECB watchers interpreted "rate policy still remains appropriate" in completely opposite ways: some said this meant a

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## Advice squeezed straight from the experts



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change was coming soon, others said not. Rates rose just one month later. So now you know.

Greenspan has also been accused of using impenetrable language. He once said: "If I seem unduly clear to you, you must have misunderstood what I said." So, obfuscation can be deliberate after all.

Joking aside, Greenspan is a joy to read compared with Trichet, both for simplicity and for wordsmithing: He famously used the phrase "irrational exuberance" in 1996. The markets went into a spin. The short statements after Fed rate decisions are a model of simplicity compared with the ECB's. It was a breath of fresh air to read the Fed reports after fighting our way through the ECB fog.

Trichet needs to show the skill and gravitas of Greenspan. He's not there yet and the top 3 reasons are because of his word selection, sentence length and sentence structure. His job is all the more challenging because he's got 20 EU languages to deal with. Greenspan has just the one.

We've not been to a recent Trichet presentation, but have spoken to some who have. The view is that whilst his word selection might be a barrier to understanding him, his speaking style is even worse; he's got work to do.

If both Governors obfuscate, does it matter if it's done on purpose or by accident? We think it does, but only when a clear message is needed.

So, what can you do to speak more clearly? Here are a few tips: Shorten sentences; Avoid merging two together with words like 'and'. Don't say two words where one will do. Reduce the syllables per word. Avoid phrases such as 'at the end of the day' and 'to be honest'. Avoid sub-clauses, acronyms and jargon wherever possible. Finally, speak to express, not impress.

Now, where did I put my Latin Primer?

*The above article is based on our research and an interview in December 2005 with Reuters.*

*\*The Flesch index is used widely by copywriters and editors to measure clarity. This article scored 60, in spite of the quotes!*



## Frying the vocal cords

**Sarah Cottam**

No, I am not about to write an article about the top ten cannibal recipes. Instead, this is the first in a series of articles about some of the more common vocal imperfections from a year's worth of our clients' voice analyses. This particular imperfection was found in around 10% of those clients and is called the vocal fry. 'What's that?' I hear you ask...

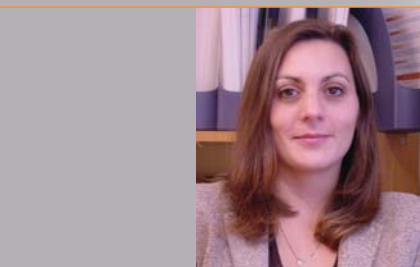
A vocal fry is an irregularity in vocal cord vibration. The frequency of these vibrations are very low, usually around 25-50Hz, producing a low rumbling sound. Let's put that into context: The average female pitch ranges from 170-240Hz and average male pitch ranges from 100-140Hz.

The fry sounds similar to that of popping of corn or an old motorboat or motorcycle engine. It's hard to explain what it sounds like, so I've put an example on the 'Voice Analysis' section of our website for you to hear it.

We all have a tendency to fry at some point: It occurs at a certain trigger pitch or trigger intensity (loudness), usually low in both instances. And we



are more susceptible to it when we are tired or have a sore throat. We all forgive these rare instances. The area for concern is when the fry becomes pathological like an underlying drone to the voice, almost like a church organ or bagpipes. Whilst this is very useful for some music styles like



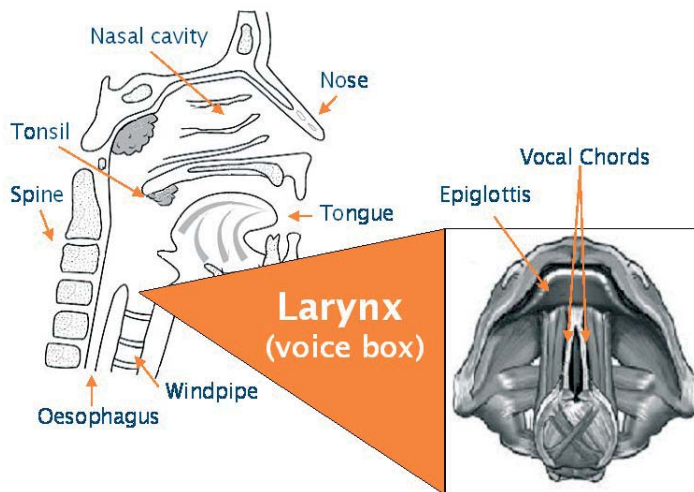
the Mongolian Höömij style of singing, it is not so pleasant in normal speaking.

But this begs one of our favourite questions... "So what can we do about it?"

The simple answer is... try to stop frying your cords.

Not easy I admit. The fry depends on too many factors for me to detail a quick fix in this article. However, it would be rude of me not to give you a few pointers:

Try to find out why the vocal fry happens by pin pointing what you were doing at the time of the fry. This will of course take time and effort. It is difficult to listen carefully to your own voice and break it down into its different parts. Difficult but not impossible. Once you have managed to identify the fry and its trigger then the hard work is in trying not to hit that trigger by steering away from it.



| Trigger  | Solution  |
|--|---|
| Were you talking in a low or high pitch voice?         | Try to avoid the trigger pitch, but make sure that you don't over compensate and become monotonous.   |
| Were you loud or quiet?                                | As with pitch, try to avoid the trigger but do keep the variation   |
| Was it at the beginning of your talking or at the end? | The beginning is caused by high sub glottal pressure: Start the sentence with soft glottal attack sounds e.g. 'wh'. The end is caused by low sub glottal pressure: end the sentences with hard glottal attack e.g. put. |
| What was your posture like?                            | A slouched posture can cause a fry, specifically if the neck is compressed. So make sure that your posture is positive.   |
| Was it at the beginning or end of the day?             | A dry or tired throat can cause a fry, and is easily remedied by lubrication. Although, coffee will make it worse and water doesn't last long. Fruit juice or milk is more effective.                                   |
| Or does it happen all the time when talking?           | More specialised analysis and coaching would be needed for this. Or a new career as a Höömij singer!  |



Failing all of that, I have heard that a lot of butter and freshly chopped tarragon works well.

# How motivation can make or break a deal

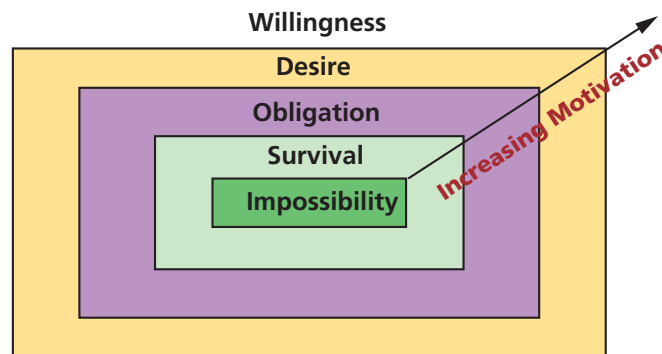


## Tim Farish

**N**ext time you enter into negotiations with someone, wouldn't it be useful to be given clues that could help you get what you want? Well now, you can.

A model devised by Brad Brown\* shows how our motivational state infects our language and can subconsciously affect any negotiation.

The premise of the model is that people are often stuck in one of 4 motivational states or 'boxes'. But how do you know which box they are in and what can you do about it? The first step is to notice a person's state by listening to the words they use. Brown categorises 5 states: *Impossibility, Survival, Obligation, Desire and Willingness*.



The language of *Impossibility* uses phrases such as 'I *can't* do this' or 'I *won't* do that'. This state is seen as the most limited of all the states, where your mind insists there is no point trying and you dissolve into resignation. Characteristics of this state are a tendency to abdicate responsibility, blame others and be resigned to your own powerlessness. When dealing with someone in *Impossibility* it is important to use empathy and active listening. This can be achieved by stating that you want to understand first before moving forward. Questions such as 'Can you tell me more about what's getting in the way?' opens up a dialogue and helps build rapport, but be prepared to listen more at first.

*Survival* language generally mirrors the desperation in which people find themselves.... 'I *have to* or else' or 'I *need* to do this or *I'm in trouble*'

The language of *Obligation* reflects a sense of begrudged duty that someone feels i.e. 'I'm *expected* to do this' or 'I had *better* get on with that'. People in *Survival* and *Obligation* do their duty but often feel fear or resentment. When dealing with someone in both these states, it is equally important to use empathy and active listening as mentioned earlier but it is also important to use exploring questions to open up a useful dialogue. For example 'What exactly are you *expected* to do?' followed by 'Why are you *expected* to do it?' can help to explore the issue and help move them forward. By doing this you are probing for feelings and perceptions while inviting people to see new perspectives.

*Desire* language reflects a drive and single-mindedness with phrases such as 'I *really want* this' or 'I *must have* that'. People in *Desire* are rarely interested in the needs of others and hence are unable to negotiate long-term agreements that are mutually beneficial. When dealing with someone in desire it is useful to ask subtle clarification questions

e.g. 'That's interesting, but can you remind me how this benefits us both?' In this way, your needs are given equal importance and you can then move back into using exploring questions.

*Willingness* is an ideal state that exists when you are able to 'break out' of all the other boxes. In this state, you can achieve more than you previously thought was possible before you began negotiating.

I will explore Willingness more thoroughly in the next issue of 'Speak Up', but in the meantime, let's say that I also *have* to conduct my own research by monitoring the language of my friends and colleagues. I guess that puts me firmly in the *Survival* camp so I look forward to telling you all about how successful I have been!

\*Motivational States by Dr. Brad Brown, Interaction Ltd.

## Our Services

Grant Pearson Brown Consulting is a respected adviser. We enhance the performance of businesses, helping clients to excel in the use of the spoken word, improving the performance of individuals and teams. Over the long term our work improves the way a firm does business.

We coach and advise individuals to perform at their best in the toughest situations including: Presentations, New Business Pitches, Business Development, Negotiating, Media Interviews and Telephone Calls.

Our clients' needs are the only focus of our work; we listen to them and closely tailor our response to deliver first class coaching and advice. Through our own innovative culture we selectively pursue new ideas and approaches, continually hone our advice and create tools such as Voice Analysis, Prospect Relationship Management (PRM) and the GPB Virtual Classroom.