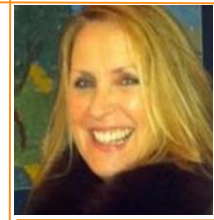


# Striking the Balance



Lynda considers some aspects of effective communication which need care and preparation.



Lynda Russell-Whitaker

If you can, in these turbulent times, cast your mind back to a time when you were going about your normal, daily routine. It's likely that, at some point over the last month or two, you were on public transport; a train, a bus or the tube. An aeroplane, perhaps. There was probably more than one occasion when you overheard a conversation between two of your fellow passengers, within easy eavesdropping distance.

this is referred to as 'Register'; another is your physical proximity to a conversation partner.

Our choice of language can create closer psychological proximity, or greater distance. The latter is very topical at the moment.

*'Human perceptions of space [...] are shaped and patterned by culture'.*

For more on this highly relevant topic, read Anthropologist Edward T. Hall's theory of proxemics\*, first developed and

published in 'The Hidden Dimension' (1966).

It's surprising just how many *disfluencies* you may have heard. When in the natural flow of a conversation with someone we know well, a few of us may be fairly fluent, but for most, our speech pattern is likely to be littered with them!

Hall's Proxemic Theory argues that human perceptions of space, although derived from sensory apparatus that all humans share, are shaped and patterned by culture. His work has had a major impact on a number of disciplines, including of course communication theory.

Regular readers of SpeakUp! will know what these disfluencies are, but I'll mention them here to those who aren't: umms/errs, repetition or rephrasing; fillers, such as 'you know', 'kind of' and 'like'; and hesitation pauses (that is, not deliberate ones).

Our sensitivity to proximity will depend on context, as well as our cultural background. We behave differently and have more or less space between us, depending on the circumstance. One might think of it as

Although we will want to maintain an element of naturalness, approachability and warmth, when delivering a speech or presentation to a larger audience, we will all also want to avoid an excessive rate of disfluencies. Science suggests that excessive means more than 5 per minute in total, all types.



*We use air space to separate ourselves from others but also to bring us closer together (image source: unsplash.com)*

a kind of spectrum, from having a private chat with a close friend, engaging in live debate at a friend's party, presenting at a small meeting at work, to delivering an address in front of hundreds of people.

Other elements to consider include your choice of language, for example between formal and informal. In language teaching,

Although you're unlikely to offend someone (when it comes to personal space), whilst addressing your staff at a large

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company event, you may unwittingly create more psychological (as opposed to physical) distance between you than intended or desired.

This isn't necessarily about inclusivity or exclusivity, although we might use language to include or exclude others. This is more about formal and informal language; how close or distant, polite or direct we choose to be.

We don't always consciously create language that distances or includes. But we will usually employ a mix in most situations. You might use the third person singular, the 'polite' form (he/she/they), instead of the first person plural (we) to exclude a person or a thing from a group, and to distance yourself from them.



*You need to think about your audience before you create your presentation (Image source: Unsplash.com)*

### Register of language

Martin Joos<sup>1</sup> describes five styles of Register: Frozen or Static, Formal, Consultative, Casual and Intimate. Two close friends chatting on public transport will probably use informal language. If you were in a meeting at work, you would likely modify this slightly, though perhaps not to the extent that you would if you were speaking at a conference, or giving an address at a state dinner.

Some people, particularly the younger generation are uncomfortable using formal or very polite language when speaking in public. However, when speaking, we need to consider the listener, our audience. This is even more crucial when there is a mix of cultures in the room. A Venezuelan friend of mine, when ordering a takeaway Arepa from a roadside café, might say "give me...", rather than "could you please...", but we would think that rude in the UK! Linguistics Professor, Robin Lakoff, in her paper,

*'The logic of politeness: minding your p's and q's'* (1973), put forward three maxims, (also known as her '*politeness principles*') that show consideration for the listener:

- Don't impose
- Give options
- Make your receiver feel good.

That doesn't sound too onerous to me, and it's unlikely to make you seem stiff and unapproachable, a concern for those uncomfortable with being too polite, or formal.

In classical rhetoric, this is part of 'decorum', or if you prefer, appropriateness.

Decorum applies not only to your speaking style but also gestures, facial expressions, stance or posture, and what you are wearing. It should also take into

consideration your vocal tone, speed of speech, modulation and volume. If you're addressing a large audience, adjustments need to be considered. This brings to mind the difference between television and theatre acting; where in the latter, everything has to be more exaggerated.

In conclusion, know who your audience comprises, and your objective, before developing a presentation and during your delivery. With 'Decorum', remember that, as with many things in life, a smattering of the antithesis of appropriateness can keep your audience's interest. It's all about striking the balance.

by Lynda Russell-Whitaker

\*Hall's distinctions of personal space are: Intimate space, Social and Consultative Space, and Public Space.

1. Martin Joos, *The five clocks*. University of Texas. Pp. 53. (1961).

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straight from the  
experts

