

Pitch up for Christmas

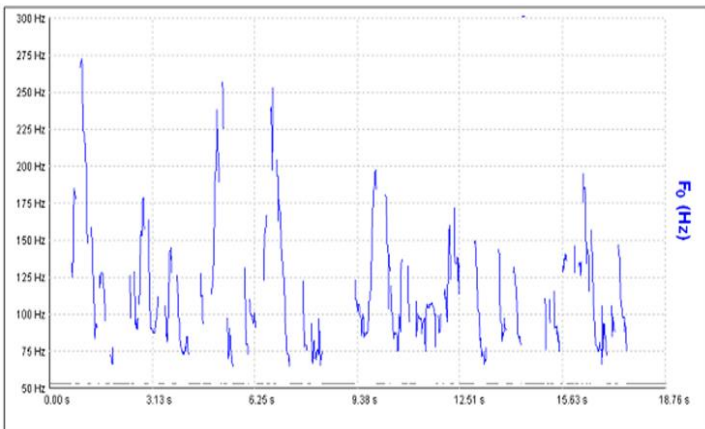


Ewan Pearson

Modulation is probably more important than moderation, but both can be hard to sustain.

Now that those of you who can have pitched up at home, I thought to cheer you all up I'd write more light-heartedly about the most common limitation that we have found when scientifically analysing clients' voices, which is *Pitch Modulation*. This parameter covers how far you go up or down in pitch (*extent*) multiplied by the number of changes/second (*rate*) in pitch height. It can also be called pitch pattern, melody or harmony. Pitch Modulation and Disfluency are the top two limitations, and there are plenty of people out there with both, but as we've covered Disfluency lots in other articles, I'll just cover Pitch Modulation here.

Here is an example of good Pitch Modulation (and good Pitch Range): I think you all know when you hear a



Source: GPB. This is Stephen Fry speaking the first sentence of the first Harry Potter book, filling the range with many changes.

nicely modulated voice versus a not-so-nice flat one. We've conducted experiments on exactly that theme, and the results consistently show that listeners prefer a good dose of modulation, preferably on toast. Or at least that's how it looks from all the Zoom and Teams calls we've been doing with people munching away at home.

Why is a good amount of modulation important? Because if used well it

Modulation used well, communicates a bunch of positive attributes

communicates a bunch of positive attributes such as engagement, pleasantness, enthusiasm, and emphasis. In turn these contribute to persuasiveness, which seems to be the pot of gold for our clients. Thus we have been kept busy working on improving modulation for many years. There is no sign that our attempt to 'boil the ocean' of flat-pitched voices has had an overall effect yet, although it's hard to tell with all this global warming going around.

There are many reasons for flat voices. Genetics contributes little as we have found that almost everyone *can* move their pitch well under testing, showing that there is unfulfilled potential if only we could learn what to do.

Instead the main reasons for flat voices seem to be the voices of those around us as we acquire and develop our own voices. Children start to mimic their parents from a very early age, and indeed this is how they first learn the language/s and accents we all speak with. Then there are broader family and friend surroundings. At school then at university (if fortunate enough to have attended both) the voice develops further, influenced during these most formative years by our peers and teachers.

Then as we get older, it's our cultural social surroundings, our work colleagues, and throughout all of this we'll pick up habits from the voices of those we look up to the most. The media (traditional, and now also social) also have a big part to play.

I now tend not to ask 'where are you from?', and instead ask "where is your voice from?". That more profound question leads to a much more interesting conversation!

Advice *squeezed* straight from the experts



Pitch Up for Christmas (Cont.)

This all leads to the rather obvious question of how can 'someone like me' improve their pitch modulation?

Well, as you're all hopefully away for a bit of a break, here are a few things you could try in the privacy of your own home, to the dismay of the friends or family you manage to assemble over the coming weeks. I'd suggest you all have a go, to share out the embarrassment equitably.



Image: alivenetwork.com (2020)

First, The Sentence Game:

Write or type out a sentence of say 12-20 words covering an important topic that you feel strongly about. Then underline the two most important words using this guidance: (a) the words must not be adjacent, or the last word, (b) it's usually better if you underline a simple adjective rather than a noun or verb, but if polysyllabic, select one syllable to make the change on, and (c) don't show the others what you underlined. Now ask the audience to close their eyes. You then read out your sentence to them, using only pitch rises (not volume changes) to signal the two words you underlined. They have to work out which two words you underlined. If it's not clear, try again but with bigger pitch changes, but still trying to keep the voice sounding normal to a listener even if it sounds weird to you.

Second, hum/speech pairings:

You can take 2-4 words from the sentence above, or use something else. Say these words first by humming them (mouth closed) whilst listening to the pitch pattern (ups and downs), then immediately repeat that pattern but this time with your mouth open using the actual words. The pitch pattern of the

words should match the pattern of the humming. Ask someone to give you feedback on how well you're doing.

Third, Solfege scales. These are really singing warm-up exercises, but they're very helpful in strengthening the muscles in your vocal chords that are required to move up and down in pitch height under control. What you do is sing an octave or more from bottom to top, and/or top to bottom. You use the following words on each subsequent note: *Do, Re, Mi, Fa, So, La, Te, Do*, repeating the set as needed when you go beyond an octave.

You can develop this exercise by singing louder and/or slower, up and down. Try for the full scope of 2 octaves (male) and 3 octaves (female). There are loads of sound file samples on the internet of people singing these scales.

Fourth, exaggerate. This is both a practical and psychological exercise. Take a normal sentence and say it out loud. Then repeat but exaggerate by making the 'ups' go up more and 'downs' go down more. Again, ask for feedback. There is a good video of this exercise on our YouTube channel¹.

I know that carefully selected versions of these exercises have helped our clients a great deal to improve their pitch modulation. Different things work for different people, but once you have found the ones that work for you, with a bit of motivation and possibly some Christmas cheer you can open the New Year with a newer, more modulated and improved voice that is '*you, but on a better day*'.

By Ewan Pearson

1. See: Vocal exercise - *Speaking #5: What's your pitch pattern?* at #9 in the Public Speaking Playlist at GPB's YouTube channel.

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