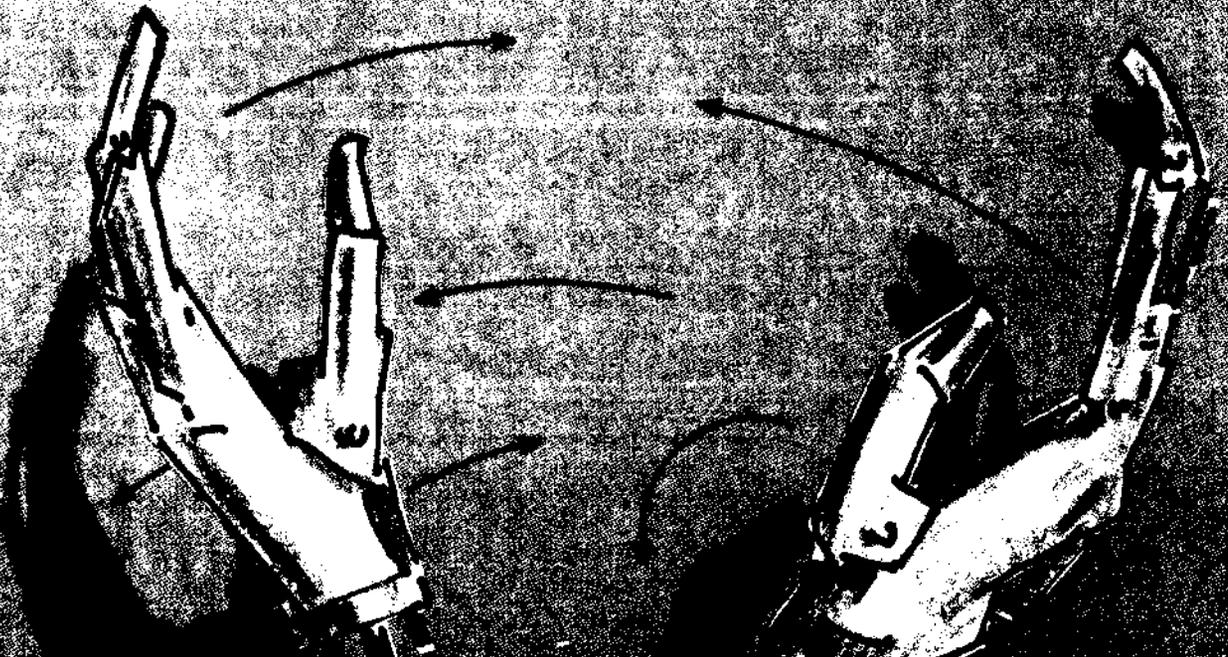


The language and body language of politics

OUR MASTERS' VOICES

MAX ATKINSON

Foreword by David Butler



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view of establishing a reputation as a spellbinding orator. When a speaker continues to talk in competition with the applause, it looks as though he is so popular that he is having to struggle to make himself heard. Meanwhile, those in the audience find themselves engaged in a more direct form of two-way communication than is the case when listening to more ordinary orators. They are put in a position of having to search actively for opportunities to produce a fully fledged display of approval. Their participation is thus more like that found in small-scale conversational settings, where turns as speakers and listeners alternate with similar rapidity.

John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King

While Mr Benn has a near monopoly over the use of these techniques on the contemporary British scene, he is not the only politician ever to have used them. However, the skill of talking into the applause does appear to be a rare commodity in the field of political oratory. Since the present study began, only two others who possessed it have been identified, namely John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King. And the fact that they were two of the most unquestionably 'charismatic' speakers of the post-war period strongly supports the suggestion that this particular form of technical skill is an important factor in achieving recognition as a spellbinding orator. The connection between Kennedy's use of the strategy and his ability to convey a 'sense of passion and conviction' was thus commented on in a *New York Times* article comparing the styles of the two presidential candidates in the 1960 campaign:

When the crowds start to applaud, he [Kennedy] is often carried by his own momentum through the first outburst smothering the uproar. For all this, his platform style conveys a sense of passion and conviction that seems to reach the crowd, even when his reasoning is lost. (*New York Times*, 25 September 1960)

If the journalist who wrote this had looked more closely at what Kennedy actually said after the applause had started, he might well have discovered that, as in the case of Mr Benn, there was little chance of his reasoning being lost.

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4.4 John F. Kennedy and Martin Luther King were two other highly effective orators who regularly talked during bursts of applause.

The same strategy was also mentioned in an article on Martin Luther King in the magazine *Encounter*, where it was referred to as 'biting into' the audience responses. As can be seen below, the author singled this out from 'every device ever contrived by every preacher of the South' as having played an important part in contributing to the impressiveness of King's celebrated 'I have a dream' speech. Not mentioned, however, is another device which was also much in evidence, for contrasts also feature repeatedly in the extracts from the speech selected for direct quotation:

In the most famous passage of his most famous speech, before the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, in 1963, three centuries of the rhetoric of the South were pulled together into one exalted outburst. Every device ever contrived by every preacher of the South, black or white, was put to use, until his huge audience, black and white, had been carried beyond itself, no longer merely the sum of its members. He bit into the gathering Amens, the answering 'Yeah! Yeah!', the thundering applause, for they were not to be allowed to rest, but were to be carried to a higher pitch with each ejaculation. It went like this.

I have a dream that one day even the State of Mississippi, a desert sweltering with the heat of injustice and oppression
'Yeah! Yeah!' –

will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice.
– the Amens roll into the rising applause. He does not let them die:

I have a dream that my four little children
– 'Amen! Amen!' 'Yeah! Yeah!' –

will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the colour of their skin but by the content of their character

– the Amens and the applause swell. But he bites into them:

I have a dream today
The applause rises, held now in anticipation of what is to come:

I have a dream that one day the State of Alabama....
And so on, until he bites again into the applause, with the reiterated, 'I have a dream today,' as he carried the audience to the final:

I have a dream that one day every valley shall be exalted, every hill and mountain will be made low, the rough places will be made plain, and the crooked places will be made straight, and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together. (Henry Fairlie, 'Martin Luther King', *Encounter*, June 1968, p.4)

Fifteen years after Martin Luther King was assassinated, a half-page article in the *Guardian* newspaper was published under the heading 'A view from the clouded mountain top'. The title was taken from a famous extract from the end of his last-ever speech, which was reprinted at the beginning of the article as follows:

'I've been to the mountain top. I've looked over and seen the promised land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know that we as a people will get to the promised land. So I'm happy tonight.' This was Martin Luther King speaking in Memphis 15 years ago. The next day he was shot dead... (Paul Oestreicher, *Guardian*, 4 April 1983)

The presence of a three-part list and a contrast are clear enough but the reproduction of the quotation in this form fails to convey much of a sense for the range of responses that are such an important characteristic of the black church services in the southern United States. As was pointed out in the earlier *Encounter* article, these were crucial to Martin Luther King's style of oratory. Frequent cries of 'Amen', 'Holy' and 'Yeah' made his speeches sound even more like two-way conversations with the audience than Mr Benn's rapid-fire contrast-response sequences. To perform their part in the dialogue, King's audiences must have been continually on the look-out for opportunities to respond. They must also therefore have had to concentrate very closely on everything he said. Had they not sustained a heightened level of attentiveness, his audiences would have been incapable of participating in the vibrant manner so typical of southern black congregations.

Because of the frequency and range of these audience responses, together with Martin Luther King's own extensive use of variations in volume, intonation and rhythm, it is virtually impossible to transcribe his speeches in a way that is both

technical virtuosity. His gaze scanned the audience throughout, and he showed no sign at all of having a script or notes in front of him. His final declaration of faith was preceded, in quick succession by a three-part list, a contrast and another three-part list. But one thing which is very different from all the other cases cited so far is that the audience responded *after each item* in the first of the lists, and *in between* the two parts of the contrast. None the less, the fact that there was a marked increase in the intensity of the responses after the third item in the list (four 'Holy's' and an 'Amen'), and at the end of the second part of the contrast ('Yeah' and applause), shows that the audience regarded these as completion points requiring more decisive displays of approval.

The video tape reveals that Martin Luther King himself also projected these as completion points with a non-verbal movement that was not used anywhere else in the sequence. The first line and the contrast both ended in exactly the same way with the words 'promised land'. In both cases, a slight shake of the head coincided with the word 'promised'. The same head shake also occurred as he was starting to say the word 'glory', just before the final ovation got under way. The movement thus appears to have been regularly treated by the audience as a signal that the end of an applaudable message was close at hand.

Extract (46) also illustrates the strategy referred to in the quotation from the *Encounter* article as 'biting into' the audience responses. This, it appears, involved talking in overlap with the applause in a rather different and perhaps less obviously noticeable way than is done by Mr Benn. Instead of continuing as soon as a response got under way, Martin Luther King would bide his time, and then come in just before the end of each one. During the applause which followed the contrast in extract (46), he made no attempt to carry on speaking until six seconds had elapsed. And six seconds, it will be remembered, is just the point at which the intensity of applause typically starts to fall away towards the eight-second norm. By waiting until then, Dr King was able to continue totally fluently, without any fear of his next words being missed, and without any need of the repeated restarts so favoured by Mr Benn. The overall impact, however, was no less favourable, especially given that the

audience responses also tended to start just before completion points were reached. When both the speaker and his audience repeatedly come in before the other has quite finished, a state of closely co-ordinated rapport exists between them, and the overriding impression is one of intense harmony, spontaneity and mutual understanding.

Margaret Thatcher and the evolution of charismatic woman

Given that American political oratory before the 1960s had been an activity largely dominated by whites, it was important for Martin Luther King's success that there already existed a distinctive black religious tradition which could be readily adapted for speaking on behalf of the civil rights movement. For women, however, there are no such obvious models, as political oratory has been a predominantly male preserve for thousands of years. There is no record of any celebrated female orators in classical Greece or Rome, and the early texts on rhetoric and oratory were written on the assumption that the practitioners would be male. Thus, at an early stage in his mammoth work on *The Education of an Orator*, Quintillian had this to say about the aim of the book:

We are to form, then, the perfect orator, who cannot exist unless as a good man; and we require in him, therefore, not only consummate ability in speaking, but every excellence of mind . . . since the man who can duly sustain his character as a citizen, who is qualified for the management of public and private affairs, and who can govern communities by his counsels, settle them by means of law, and improve them by judicial enactments, can certainly be nothing else but an orator. (Quintillian, *Institutes of Oratory, or The Education of an Orator*, p. 4, emphasis added)

Recent years have seen a number of women rise to become heads of government – Mrs Bandaranaike in Sri Lanka, Mrs Perón in Argentina, Mrs Gandhi in India, Mrs Meir in Israel and Mrs Thatcher in the United Kingdom – success stories which might initially seem to suggest that the male-dominated political mould has been broken once and for all, and that women will henceforth be able to enjoy equal opportunities in the

pursuit of political careers. However, there are at least two reasons for caution in drawing any such conclusion. One is that the first three in the above list of women who have achieved high political office had close family ties with male national heroes who had recently died. Golda Meir and Margaret Thatcher are therefore the only ones who can be said to have reached the top entirely on their own merits. A second reason for caution is that women still face a number of social and physiological obstacles with which men never have to contend. In the absence of any established tradition like that in which black American leaders have been able to operate, female politicians have to develop their own ways of surviving in a male-dominated profession. The solutions found by someone like Mrs Thatcher are therefore likely to create behavioural precedents from which aspiring female politicians of the future may be able to learn and benefit.

Some of the problems faced by women in politics are much the same as those faced by women in any other male-dominated profession. They are aptly summed up in the colloquial saying to the effect that 'women are damned if they behave like men, and damned if they don't.' Thus, if a woman acts in a tough, decisive or ruthless manner, she is likely to find her femininity being called into question. But if she is gentle, indecisive or conciliatory, her male colleagues may consider her unsuitable for the job. Such a dilemma is familiar to most professional women, but political women are confronted by additional disadvantages because public speaking is such an important part of their work. This is not just because the skills of oratory and debating have been monopolized by men for such a long time, but is also because there are differences in the length of male and female vocal cords which result in the difference in pitch of male and female voices.

Pitch can pose problems for all public speakers, whatever their sex, because it tends to rise when a speaker is nervous or speaks louder than usual, both of which are likely to happen in oratory. For women, however, the problem is more acute because the natural pitch of their voices has a higher starting-point than is the case for men, and therefore cannot rise as far before reaching a level at which it sounds excessively 'shrill'. This might not matter were it not for the fact that high-pitched

vocalizations tend to be strongly associated with emotional or irrational outbursts – a deeply rooted cultural assumption that no doubt derives from, and is sustained by, the screams of each new generation of infants. The fact that the sound of a woman raising her voice is more likely to be negatively evaluated as ‘shrill’ or ‘screeching’ is probably at the heart of a source of irritation which is familiar to many professional women, namely the tendency of male colleagues to accuse them of ‘over-reacting’ whenever they become involved in arguments.

Consistent with such attitudes to high-pitched female vocalizations is the fact that lower-pitched female voices tend to be regarded as more attractive than high-pitched voices. There is a strong association between ‘huskiness’ and ‘sexiness’, and Shakespeare’s positive evaluation of low pitch has long been enshrined in the dictionaries of quotations: ‘Her voice was ever soft, gentle and low, an excellent thing in woman’ (*King Lear*, V, iii). Viewed in these terms, the fact that Mrs Thatcher has taken positive steps to lower the pitch of her voice can be seen as a perfectly rational response to a very real problem. Under the guidance of a tutor from the National Theatre, she underwent a training programme which included special humming exercises aimed at lowering the pitch level at which she formerly spoke. From tape recordings of speeches made before and after receiving tuition a marked difference can be clearly heard. When these are played through an electronic pitch and intensity analyser, it emerges that she achieved a reduction in pitch of 46 Hz, a figure which is almost half the average difference in pitch between male and female voices. Such a decrease is all the more remarkable for the fact that it was accomplished after Mrs Thatcher had already passed the age at which the pitch of women’s voices tends naturally to rise: generally speaking, a steady reduction takes place up to the age of forty-five, after which the pitch gradually rises again. The lowering of her voice has had other consequences which have probably contributed both to the greater clarity of her talk and to its ‘statesmanlike’ character. For example, the human voice-production system is organized in such a way that reductions in pitch involve physiological processes which tend to slow down the speed at which we speak, and Mrs Thatcher now speaks noticeably less rapidly than she did before undergoing voice tuition.