

Book Review

Setter, J. (2019). *Your Voice Speaks Volumes: It's Not What You Say but How You Say It*. London, Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press. (229 pp., \$15-\$25)

Brittany Hochstaetter
Wake Technical Community College

The human voice matters. Pat J. Gehrke, editor of "Teaching First Year Communication Courses: Paradigms and Innovations," writes of the "erasure of orality" occurring in public speaking classrooms (p. 144). He argues that little attention has been given to issues of voice, body, and face as they relate to speaking, much to the loss of the subject and student. "We, the teachers of public speaking, are long overdue to serve our students better and to embrace the power of the voice and body," he writes (p. 144). In her recent book, *Your Voice Speaks Volumes: It's Not What You Say but How You Say It* (Oxford, 2019), Professor Jane Setter of Reading University takes a deep and fascinating dive into the mechanics and history of human speech and considers the cultural impact of the voice, including its role in discrimination, criminal investigations, and shifting identity. The theme running throughout all the chapters is that the voice is powerful and not to be underestimated in human relationships. Setter writes, "Expectations of how people should or will sound when they open their mouths to speak play a role in relationships, in our society, and in how well people get on in our society" (p. 85).

This book is divided into seven chapters, the first being introductory, "Nuts and Bolts of How Speech Works." The following six consider the power of the voice in different socio-cultural contexts: accents and prejudice, the vocal challenges faced by men and women, professional and performance voice, the voice related to

criminal investigations, transgender speech, and intercultural vocal dynamics. Setter's thesis is precisely her title, "Your Voice Speaks Volumes," and she supports this premise through the seven chapters. Setter is descriptive rather than interventionist in her approach, however, and communication teachers or professionals may find themselves longing for more pragmatic suggestions. This book is not by any means a *guide*. Curious instructors may enjoy learning the answer to whether regional dialects are still more negatively perceived and why a person might have a different speaking versus singing accent, but the book's most practical value for communication centers may be found in its ability to enhance our perspectives on human vocal power.

Speech tutors often hear students end a phrase with intonation that should fall downward but instead goes upward. Jane Setter helps the reader better understand this phenomenon called "uptalk," which is more often associated with women. Setter explains why it causes confusion in speech if used incorrectly because "rising contours, where the pitch goes up at the end, are usually used to show one of three things: speakers have not finished; there is an element of questioning or request; or the speaker is inviting the listener to respond or participate" (pp. 77-78). Setter goes on to discuss other specific vocal qualities that communication center coaches typically hear, including pitch. She explores how certain aspects of vocal tone discriminate against women. It is often women who must

adapt to what society deems confident in terms of vocal quality. For example, Margaret Thatcher, England's former prime minister from (1979-1990), adopted vocal coaching to lower her tone to sound more confident and authoritative, improving her public perception. It is not apparent from the Setter's tone if the Thatcher illustration is an example to follow or eschew. However, Setter ends this section with a plea about the negative perceptions of uptalk and higher pitch, when she says, "I'd like to ask others who might judge female speakers - and it is often women judging women as much as men doing so - to realize this is a form of gender discrimination which contributes to other inequities we see between men and women in society today" (p. 85). Setter's ambivalence clears up as she ends this section showing that women are the trendsetters of speech habits, even negatively perceived ones, which eventually become accepted speech standards. She writes, "I cannot see a time when women will not be criticized for the way they speak, even if it is common knowledge that this eventually becomes the norm" (p. 86). From her perspective, these vocal habits, which research shows to have negative consequences for the speaker *today*, are tomorrow's innovations not *yet* accepted by society.

Setter's sixth chapter, "Making a Change," specifically looks at research into the voices of transgender individuals that seeks to understand how they feel about their voices. As communication centers continue to expand their reach and broaden access, tutors may find it helpful to consider the struggles of vocal identity for transitioning students who may be cautious with vocal performance to avoid being misgendered by the audience based on their vocal quality. The chapter offers the perspective of an interviewee, Sophie, who shares, "The voice gives everything away.

People assume so much from what they hear. They get a lot of information from the way someone speaks. It's got a much bigger role than it should have" (pp. 174-175). This section was one of the most valuable in the book because little has been written on the transgender vocal experience. Readers may find themselves moved by the stories and experiences shared in this chapter but bereft of any concrete resources or action steps to support transitioning students with their voices.

While not a complete treatise on vocal communication, *Your Voice Speaks Volumes*, is a current and useful tool for well-rounded communication center libraries and would be beneficial for those who wish to gain knowledge about vocal power in diverse contexts. Readers may better understand why the voice creates inequitable demands on different speakers, but will have to turn elsewhere for *how* to help.

References

- Gehrke, P. J. (2018). Epilogue: A Manifesto for Teaching Public Speaking. In P. J. Gehrke (Ed.) *Teaching first-year communication courses: Paradigms and innovations* (pp. 242-264). London: Routledge.