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STANISLAVSKI & THE ACTOR

Jean Benedetti

Verbal Action

In these classes we shall look at the following aspects of language in terms of logical and expressive functions:

Punctuation
Pauses
Stress

Speech is action, no less than gesture and movement. Just as we study and analyse the nature of physical action, so we need to study and analyse the nature of verbal action.

The actual training of the vocal instrument is a matter for specialists. We need to go regularly to voice class.

There remains, however, the problem of how we respond to language, whether we understand the way it works and are able to find clues to feeling, attitudes, intentions from the way in which the words are arranged on the page. In modern criminal investigation, the police often derive crucial information about the person they are seeking through a forensic analysis of his vocal and speech patterns. We need to develop similar skills with the printed word.

We do not assume, if we are called on to perform a dance in the course of a play, that we can simply do it. We have to master the steps, the rhythm, control our body. We do not assume that because we can walk or run we can also dance in *Swan Lake* or *West Side Story*. We do not normally speak in blank verse (as in Shakespeare) or in rhymed couplets (as in Molière or Racine) and should not assume that mastering those forms will come easily simply because we speak every day.

Dialogue is not everyday speech, however much it may look like it. The plays of Noël Coward, Harold Pinter and David Mamet may seem to be composed of ordinary expressions but the dialogue is, in fact, tightly organised, like music. They could not be mistaken for each other, however 'everyday' the vocab-

ulary. They sound and feel different. How are we to analyse and master differences like that?

Some major film, television and theatre companies employ regular voice consultants and dialogue coaches to guide actors through difficult moments, but such expert advice is not always available and we need to be able to work effectively on our own.

We are not linguists, but we can acquire a basic knowledge of language, of the way it works and how the way it is written down indicates the way it should be spoken.

PUNCTUATION

Punctuation has two functions. It divides a long statement up into units so that it can be more easily understood. That is its logical function. It can also indicate phrasing, breathing, the rise and fall of the voice, the musical pattern. That is its expressive function. In music, the phrasing is indicated by curved lines of varying lengths.

In both cases, as we are addressing someone else (even our own inner self), it is a way of controlling the listener's response.

The Comma

The comma indicates that I have not finished what I want to say. I will continue. Usually the voice rises slightly in pitch, so that the listener waits for the rest of the sentence and will continue to wait if a number of phrases end in a comma:

I don't want apples, or pears, or cucumbers.

The Full Stop

The full stop indicates that the statement is complete. The voice drops, indicating the end:

I don't want apples, or pears, or cucumbers, I want peaches.

The Question Mark

I want a response and the strength of my want is expressed by a

marked rise in pitch at the end of the sentence. If I don't get an answer, I may repeat the question, rising higher at the end of the sentence every time:

Are you coming, or not?

A Row of Dots

This indicates that my thoughts have trailed away, I have lost track of what I was going to say:

I was trying to remember where I put my keys but I . . .

A Dash

This indicates an afterthought, or a comment on what has just been said:

He's very rich – and how!

The Exclamation Mark

This emphasises a command, a strong expression of feeling (as in swearing), or a statement that is made very emphatically, indicating that you expect it to be taken seriously:

Come here! All right then, **** off! Don't say I didn't warn you!

The Colon and Semicolon

Modern punctuation makes less and less use of these but they are found in earlier writing. Both indicate a kind of half-close, somewhere in pitch between the comma and the full stop.

PAUSES

Punctuation shows us on the page how a sentence is made up, what its constituent parts are; it guides the eye so that the meaning becomes clear and the information can be taken in effectively. The pause performs a similar function for the ear. It breaks up the sentence into manageable parts. A statement that

is driven through without pauses can be very difficult to follow or can even become meaningless.

The simplest example of phrasing is what Stanislavski called the 'Two-column sentence' which is divided into two by a comma:

If you don't do as I say, I shall leave.

At the comma we mark a pause.

The first half of the sentence constitutes a warning, and the voice rises, thus creating a sense of expectation. The pause enables the listener to digest the information he has received. The second half of the sentence indicates the consequences of the warning. The voice drops to the full stop, suggesting finality.

This is what Stanislavski called the 'logical pause', since it is concerned with the argument grouping together words which belong together, and separating different groups from one another.

There is, however, another kind of pause, the 'psychological pause', which stems from inner impulse or the action and may break up a text differently. The logical pause is dictated by the content, the psychological pause indicates the state of mind of the speaker and changes of mood.

In delivering a text, both kinds of pauses need to be combined.

The most obvious examples are verse texts, where the writing is continuous and the metre urges the actor forward so as to maintain the flow. We have to find ways, however, of expressing intense inner feeling within the formal structure of the writing.

Stanislavski took the example of *King Lear* Act V, scene iii. Lear, who has regained his sanity, carries in the dead body of Cordelia. He alternates between frustrated anger and almost uncontrollable grief.

Shakespeare's text is:

A plague upon you, murderous traitors all.
I might have saved her; now she's gone forever. –
Cordelia, Cordelia: stay a little. Ha?
What is't thou sayst? – Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in women. –
I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

First establishing the logical pauses, Stanislavski found:

A plague upon you, murderous traitors all. [*logical pause*]
I might have saved her; [*logical pause*] now she's gone forever.

–
Cordelia, Cordelia: stay a little. Ha?
What is't thou sayst? – Her voice was ever soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in women. –
I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

Then, looking for the psychological pauses, he suggested:

A plague upon you, murderous traitors all.
I might have saved her; now she's gone forever. –
[*psychological pause*]
Cordelia, Cordelia: stay a little. Ha?
What is't thou sayst? – [*psychological pause*] Her voice was ever
soft,
Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in women. – [*psychological
pause*]
I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

It is important to note here that the psychological pauses are actually indicated by the punctuation, wherever we find a full stop, or a question mark followed by dashes.

Psychological pauses must be used very cautiously. If there are too many, they replace the logical pause and the sense is lost. They must, therefore, be planned and, of course, justified. In the *Lear* passage, the psychological pauses coincide with changes of thought and focus, a switch in the **Object of Attention**.

If we combine logical pauses and psychological pauses we may find:

A plague upon you, murderous traitors all. [*logical pause*]
I might have saved her; [*logical pause*] now she's gone forever.
– [*psychological pause*]
Cordelia, Cordelia: stay a little. Ha?
What is't thou sayst? – [*psychological pause*] Her voice was ever
soft,

Gentle, and low, an excellent thing in women. – [*psychological pause*]

I killed the slave that was a-hanging thee.

A pause should not be a gap. It must be an integral part of the dialogue. Dialogue at every point has its own **Tempo-rhythm** and the pauses must be measured within that **Tempo-rhythm**.

STRESS

Stress adds vitality to speech by denoting personal involvement in what is being said. It also ensures greater precision of meaning.

Take the simple sentence:

I walked here.

We can stress this in three ways, each with a different meaning:

I walked here (others didn't).

I *walked* here (I didn't drive).

I walked *here* (not somewhere else).

Stress can not only merely change meaning, but also reveal attitude, feeling.

Let us take the sentence:

All I want is for you to get out of here and leave me alone.

This will be differently stressed according to the state of mind of the speaker.

Angry:

All I want is for you to get out of here and leave me *alone*.

Attempting self-control:

All I want is for *you* to get out of here and leave me *alone*.

Weary:

All I want is for you to get out of here and leave me alone.

In each case, the depth, force and length of the stress will note the degree of emotion.

In any given phrase, or group of words, there is a keyword, what Stanislavski called a 'magnet', around which the other words cluster. A statement, made up of individual phrases, would contain a limited number of keywords, which are stressed. This Stanislavski called the *logical stress*.

Having too many stresses in a statement, like having too many pauses, obscures the meaning, makes the sentence more difficult to follow. If everything is important, then nothing is important.

Stanislavski distinguished three levels of logical stress in descending order of strength:

Level 1: major stress, falls on the word(s) in the main clause.

Level 2: medium stress, falls on the words in dependent clauses.

Level 3: minor stress, occurs in parentheses.

Stanislavski took a sentence from Gogol's *Taras Bulba*:

'Where's the old woman?' – that is what he usually called his wife – 'Look alive, old woman, prepare us food, the way we have to go is great.'

A major stress falls on the first 'old woman' and later 'food'. A medium stress falls on 'way' and a minor stress on 'wife' in the parenthesis.

In addition to the logical stress, there is what Stanislavski called the 'symbolic' or 'artistic' stress.

The artistic stress paints a more vivid picture in the imagination of the listener.

Stanislavski took the sentence:

'A block and in it an axe, that is what he saw before him.'

The logical stress, as in straight reporting, gives:

'A block and in it an axe, *that* is what he saw before him.'

The artistic stress:

'A *block* and in it an *axe*, that he what he saw before him.'

This focuses the listener's imagination on the picture in the speaker's mind. A minor stress will occur on 'that'.

EXERCISES

- Take extracts from daily papers and magazines, analyse them for punctuation, pause and stress, and read them out loud to convey information clearly. Do this on a daily basis.
- Go back to the extract from *Macbeth* (pp. 67–68) and see how the tension, the inner turmoil is indicated by the way in which the lines are broken up between the two characters, the jerkiness of the rhythms, which suggest fear, wariness, breathlessness. Find other passages from plays or literature, where the shape of the emotion is suggested by the layout of the sentences.