

## The gift of the gab: How eloquence works (a review)

Original work by David Crystal published by Yale University Press 2016

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Although David Crystal is one of the world's most eminent professors of English, and a writer and broadcaster on language and related subjects, he is a man who wears his immense learning lightly. *The Gift of the Gab* is full of lively stories and examples which make his points live in the memory – as an eloquent speech or piece of writing should.

*The Gift of the Gab* is about eloquence, as Crystal describes it, 'going beyond the ordinary'. To have the gift of the gab means to speak with eloquence. It comes from the Irish 'to gab', meaning to tell stories fluently and with ease. The book is about public speaking and presentation skills. It covers lecturing, debating and broadcasting but also more informal areas of public speaking such as after dinner speeches at a social event and best man speeches at a wedding. Therefore, how to speak successfully in both informal and formal, social and official functions are discussed. In his chapter

entitled 'Talking about Content' he covers almost every area of public speaking, even down to how to introduce a speaker and deliver a vote of thanks, with detailed but succinct summaries of duration, level of formality required and whether to use a reflective, informative, chatty, personal or emotional style. As a general guide, this is invaluable advice.

As a broadcaster and one who has had to deal with the vagaries of loudspeaker systems and technology all over the world, Crystal is excellent on things you have to look out for and the importance of checking that the technical system works, the volume is loud enough but not too loud and that you know how to turn the microphone on and off and that the microphone is not too near or too far from your mouth for you to be heard without distortion. He also emphasises the importance of checking the room you will be speaking in, making sure everyone can see the

speaker. He would naturally want to walk around the room and sit in different positions so he knows how the audience will be able to view him.

These examples of organisational best practice emphasise Crystal's two key points. First, preparation is vital. Second, focus on delivery. He cites the ancient Greek orator Demosthenes insistence on the key components of a great speech, 'Delivery, Delivery, Delivery'. Crystal also uses the ancient Greeks to define the three approaches a successful public speaker uses in making a speech, Logos (the word) persuasion through reason (using logic, clarity, evidence and coherence; Ethos (character), using the speaker's reputation, personality and expertise to persuade through credibility; and pathos (suffering), appealing to emotions and using passion to arouse sympathy and stimulate imagination; and, he adds, identifying with traditions and beliefs to get support and agreement.

The hero of the book is Barack Obama, whose speeches are analysed in some detail, as well as giving due deference to other famous orators such as Winston Churchill, Abraham Lincoln and Martin Luther King. Obama's election addresses from 2008 are dissected in detail to show how he uses repetition (the rule of three), described as 'triples' and other devices to emphasise his points. The famous repetition of 'Yes we can' is a case in point.

Crystal is one of the world's leading linguists and has spent much of his research career observing and analysing how people use spoken language. The heart of the book, six chapters entitled 'How they do it' is a detailed analysis of how public speakers like Obama use stress and intonation and the arrangement of words to get their message across and make an unforgettable impression.

The first technique is breaking down your sentences into chunks of information. Crystal cites Obama's 2008 victory speech:

*'If there is anyone out there who still doubts that America is a place where all things are possible who still wonders if the dream of our founders is alive in our time who still questions the power of our democracy tonight is your answer.'*

He shows how Obama breaks a long sentence into digestible chunks and uses intonation (speech melody) and stress to make sure the sentence is retained by the working memory. He breaks down the sentence into three chunks, each one introduced by the words 'who still' followed by a verb, to increase memorability. Crystal also uses the principle of '5 plus or minus 1' to indicate the number of stressed words in a chunk to aid memorability. For example in this sentence: *'It's the answer told by lines that stretched around schools and churches in numbers this nation has never seen.'*

There are 6 stresses (5 plus 1) in the first two line chunk and 4 stresses (5 minus 1) in the third line. Dividing your sentences into three chunks and having 5 plus or minus 1 stress points helps make your speech more memorable.

The second technique, already described, is triples or the rule of three. But, warns Crystal, be careful not to overdo it as it can end up sounding over repetitive and insincere.

The third technique is the principle of weight control. This refers to the structure of the sentence, particularly the positioning of the verb. Good weight control will place the main verb one or two words after the beginning of the sentence. Here is Obama once again, as cited by Crystal, with the main verb underlined.

*'I was never the likeliest candidate for this office. We didn't start with much money or many endorsements. Our campaign was not hatched in Washington DC...'*

The fourth technique, word ordering, Crystal describes as the importance of the order of mention. As an example, first say what happens first and say what happens next second, not the other way round. It is much easier for an audience to take in and remember a statement like *'In 1665 there was a great plague in London. The next year there was a great fire'* than *'In 1666 there was a*

*great fire in London, The year before that there had been a great plague.'* As Crystal reminds us, attention spans vary and are short. Don't make it harder for the listener to get the message.

The fifth technique is variation. Steve Jobs, founder of Apple computers, had a technique at the end of a speech of introducing 'One more thing'. It might be a personal story, a new product, even a band playing music but it sent the audience away with a bonus, something additional. Varying the tone at the right point with a story or a practical demonstration can compensate for a more routine part of a speech and placed at the end can become one of the most effective and memorable moments.

Finally, Crystal addresses the technique of personalising a speech, which he describes as sounding natural. One technique, which may be unconscious, is the use of fillers such as 'you know', 'I feel' to make it sound as if you are thinking as you speak and therefore what is coming out of your mouth is more spontaneous and natural. The same effect can sometimes be achieved by hesitation devices such as, 'er...' or by pausing before making an important point. This suggests once again you are thinking on the spot, reflecting on what you are going to say and being natural.

However, be careful. It can also suggest you have

no idea what you are talking about or what to say. 'Erring' and 'Umiming' loudly can also be intensely irritating.

However, Crystal also shows how speakers can break the 'rules' and get away with it and how they can use intonation and voice projection to influence the audience and get their meaning across. Of particular interest to me as a cultural specialist were Crystal's insights into working with foreign audiences, particularly the reluctance to get involved in Q and A sessions in the far east due to perceived loss of face. I'm reminded of how Sir Richard Branson once overcame reticence to ask questions among a university audience in Japan by offering free tickets on Virgin Airlines to Los Angeles to the first questioners. It worked. The questions came flying. Crystal also points out the importance of not leaving immediately after a speech in China, Korea or Japan as many will come up to ask questions individually after the formal proceedings are over. He also refers to the importance of giving the full titles of important political dignitaries in the Middle East and of checking your local cultural references with your host to make sure they are still relevant and appropriate. He is excellent in giving tips on how to work successfully with simultaneous translators and interpreters. Lest it sound as if it is all getting

rather serious, the book is enlivened by many anecdotes, not a few against Crystal himself. I added to my list of 'don'ts' 'Never try and follow a performance poet' after he describes how a barnstorming performance by a rapper, Akala, threw his own conference closing speech into the shadows.

Each of the chapters is punctuated by a short 'Interlude' giving examples of great speechmakers and great presenters and even great singers to emphasise key points. At the end of the book the appendices reproduce in full Barack Obama's victory speech in Chicago in 2008 and Martin Luther King's 'I Have a Dream' speech in Washington in 1963. A Further Reading list makes reference to Carmine Gallo's best-seller, *Talk like TED*, the guide to how successful speakers prepare and deliver TED talks. As you close the book, the back cover contains endorsements from Steven Pinker of Harvard University, author of *The Language Instinct* and Stephen Fry, actor, presenter, raconteur and British National Treasure, as well as Liverpool poet Roger McGough, presenter of *Poetry Please* on BBC Radio 4, who is a self-proclaimed 'glossophobic.' For him 'like all the best speeches, this book illustrates, illuminates and inspires'. What better recommendation could you wish for?