

# Speech

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Mr. Toastmaster, ladies and gentlemen, some of you are probably thinking that Henry is just too lazy to think of a real title for his speech, so he's labeled it "Speech," just like labels on generic products in supermarkets, you know, "Rice," "Dog Food," ... "Speech." But, you are wrong. "Speech" really is the title of this speech because it's a speech about speech.

Now, you might think that a speaking about speech to a such consummate speakers such as yourselves is not exactly a wise move. But ask yourselves, "How much do I really know about this basic human capability?" Where, in the Toastmasters manual is the chapter on How We Speak?

My aim this evening is to change the way that you think about speech—to change it in a way that perhaps makes you better Toastmasters, and also makes you more appreciative of the importance of speech in our mental lives.

So, how do we speak? It must go something like this. First I have an idea. Then I put it into words and say the words. Right? Of course, we, as Toastmasters, know that a lot can go wrong in the putting-into-words and saying-it parts. That's why Suzy, who sits and sews in a shoe-shine shop is so often accused of behavior that is definitely not acceptable in such shops.

But there are other slips of the tongue that give us pause about the have-idea-say-idea theory. There are Freudian slips for example, or slips where the idea is almost right. I may say "Jan," when I mean to say "Gail."<sup>1</sup> These are idea slips. You can't blame them on whatever puts your ideas into words or on what says the words. Where do these idea slips come from?

Maybe we should rethink our simple theory of speech. Instead of their being just ideas and words and articulations, maybe there is a huge of mental objects. Some folks call them "demons." Some of these demons are complete ideas, some are just fragments of ideas or words, some are sounds. Each of these demons is punching other demons and at the same time getting punched by other demons, but their attention is very selective. A word demon, for example, is only punched by the higher-level demons that have her word in then. And the worse she gets punched, the harder she punches all of the sound demons needed to say her word. What finally comes out are the articulation demons

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<sup>1</sup> Jan and Gail are sisters, both of whom are members of Northwest Toastmasters.

getting punched the hardest. Because the connections among demons are just right, what finally gets said is nearly always a coherent utterance, but behind every we say is, quite literally, *pandemonium*.

“Sorry,” you say, “you may speak like that, but I don’t. There’s an idea behind everything that I say.” It is true that utterances express ideas. But where does the idea come in? Maybe the idea comes from what you say, not the other way around. Maybe the only way that you (or anyone) can know what you’re saying is by listening to yourself.

The great philosopher Bertrand Russell gives us one lovely example of what I mean. He once wrote this to his mistress, Lady Ottoline. “I did not know that I loved you until I heard myself telling you so—for one instant, I thought, ‘Good God, what have I said?’ and then I knew it was the truth.”

Maybe we, like Russell, have to listen to what we say before we know what we are talking about, even if we have to say it silently.

There is a lesson (at least one) here for Toastmasters, whom, we all know, practice their speeches until we can say them in our sleep. The lesson is this. Be respectful of the pandemonium that generates your speeches. Never expect to deliver, word for word, the same speech over and over. Rather, listen to what you happen to have said and ask yourself if it wasn’t better than what you had intended or what you said the last time.

There is a broader lesson here, one that points to the role so speech in the creative process. If what we say comes from sheer pandemonium and only takes on meaning when it’s said, then speaking is, in fact, an act of creativity and may be the font of human creativity. Those who go around talking to themselves aren’t crazy; they’re creative geniuses.

Thank you all.