

Ep #21: Biden and Britt and How Your Face Affects Your Sound

Can't
wait
to hear
you

with
Michèle Voillequé

Full Episode Transcript

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Your voice is unique to you. It grows as you grow. It changes as you change. If you're curious about the relationship between your voice and your body, your heart and your mind, welcome. My name is Michèle Voillequé and I can't wait to hear you.

Today, I want to talk about President Biden and Senator Britt and the fact that what you do with your face affects how your voice sounds.

So last Thursday, a little over a week ago if you're listening to this episode when it's released on March 15th, 2024, we had the State of the Union Address and President Biden spoke and stunned his critics with his energy and vivaciousness and booming voice.

Some people said he sounded angry, other people said he sounded purposeful, in control, "fighting Joe," whatever. His voice had a lot of energy to it.

And his presentation at the State of the Union was followed by the Republican party response, which was delivered by Senator Katie Britt, whose vocal quality was very different.

She's a woman, so her voice is going, has a higher pitch, but there were lots of comments about how high the pitch and how her voice varied in pitch and tonality and timbre in a way that was really irritating, creepy, not well received by many people, such that Saturday Night Live, of course, parodied it, casting Scarlett Johansson as Senator Britt. And it's a pretty masterful, impersonation, I think.

But what I want to talk about is not what they said so much as how they said it. So I watched both speeches and then I watched them with the sound off. And I think that's really useful.

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A lot of my students are having issues with their voice, and one of the stumbling blocks is figuring out how to hold their faces differently to get a different kind of sound.

I've talked about this elsewhere on the podcast, but just to review or because you really can't say it enough, what your voice sounds like outside your body has to do with the spaces it travels through inside your body.

And one of the measures that has a lot to do with how your voice sounds, is the length of your vocal tract. And the length of your vocal tract is the distance between your vocal folds, which are in your neck.

And if you put your hand on your throat and you say something, can feel that there's a piece of cartilage that's vibrating. you'll, you can feel several vibrations in your neck, but you'll notice along that piece of cartilage, there's a part that's vibrating more than others.

And right behind that point of most intense vibration, that's where your vocal folds are located. If you're male, it's going to be right near your Adam's apple. And if you're female, you know, you might have to look a little bit harder for it, but but you can feel it. Anyway, that's the beginning of your vocal tract.

That's the beginning of where your, the sound starts. That's the beginning of sound production right there. And then the end of your vocal tract is wherever your lips are. When you're smiling and your lips are pulled to the side, your vocal tract is shorter than if you're pouting or making a kissy face or pretending to be a supermodel, you know, um, sucking your cheeks in, in a "Blue Steel" kind of way.

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That lengthens your vocal tract because it extends your lips forward. And if you speak or sing with a smiley face as I'm doing now, your vocal tone is going to be brighter and not as deep as if you speak with kind of a pout which I'm doing right now.

Even if I want to raise the pitch of my voice you can hear that there's no, it's still more, it's a kind of a rounder sound, even though my voice is higher.

And if I keep it at that height and I smile, then you can hear that the voice, my voice gets brighter.

And so a lot of times when my students are singing and they're trying to sing a higher note and it gets stuck, oftentimes, if we just adjust the shape of their face from a smiley kind of face to a round or a pouty kind of face, that high note gets suddenly so much easier to sing.

And for my speaking students, when we can relax the cheeks a bit so their faces are not quite so smiley when they're speaking, it can take the strain out of their presenting.

What makes this challenging is that our faces are, our facial expressions are how we build rapport with our audience. And if you're an American, we are a very smiley culture.

We, it's, it's really important that we smile in order to make connections with other people. This isn't true across cultures. Some cultures are smilier than others. I think the United States is at an extreme of smiley.

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So it is possible to build rapport, with your eyes, maybe more than your cheeks, and with your vocal tone rather than your cheeks and a smiley mouth.

So for some students, it's really important to learn those other ways of building rapport, of expressing excitement, engagement, interest in their face that isn't so much in their lips and cheeks, to make it easier on their voice so their voice doesn't get so tired.

So how this relates to the State of the Union address last Thursday is that Joe Biden, on the one hand, or at one extreme, hardly ever spoke through a smile. And indeed, the powerful parts of his speech, the loud, we'll just say the loud parts of his speech, when you watch them with the sound off, you can, you can see this with the sound on, but when you turn the sound off, you can really notice the shape of his mouth, which is tall and round and his jaw is dropped.

There's a lot of space there. There's a lot of distance between his teeth when he is calling out, making a loud point and it's the fact that his jaw is so relaxed and his mouth is so open that makes that sound possible, and makes it so his voice is not trashed at the end of the evening.

On the other hand, Senator Britt's GOP response to the State of the Union is through a very smiley face, which is typical of her, at least the few other YouTubes that I looked through to see her speaking in another context, like, is she really that smiley all of the time?

And indeed she is. She speaks through a smile a lot of the time. I would even say most of the time. And that gives her voice a bright quality and, a different kind of timbre than President Biden's, setting gender aside.

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And you can see this too with the sound off, if you watch her speech. There weren't as many highs and lows in terms of volume, I think, in her speech as in the President's. But you can see that her mouth stays pretty well closed.

It's smiling, but her teeth are pretty close together most of the time. And you can see that there's tension in her jaw when she's making a particularly emotional point, or when she's saying something that she thinks is particularly important, there's tension in her, in her jaw which affects her vocal quality.

One of the things that Scarlett Johansson parodied was a kind of a, a high pitched, almost squeaky kind of sound that came into Senator Britt's presentation. I don't know whether Senator Britt intended to sound like that or not. It's largely not important, but that's kind of squeak, that kind of, high pitch when it's not something that you want, um, is something that my speaking students have come to me wanting to work on, complaining about it.

Like all of a sudden. I notice that my voice is getting higher and higher pitched and I can't quite control it and I don't know how to, what to do with myself. You know, like how do I deal with that? And I want to say that that is very difficult to do if you are not smiling.

Getting rid of the horizontal tension in your face will go a long way toward helping you modulate your vocal tone so that it doesn't get high pitched and squeaky.

I want to encourage you, if you're interested in learning how to project your voice without hurting it, to watch President Biden's State of the Union, a bit of it, or the whole thing if you want, but watch it with the sound off and notice the shape of his face and try that on for yourself.

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What does it feel like to you to allow your jaw to be that open, to allow your, your lips to be that round and to allow your face to be animated in this way, which is probably not your usual way?

I don't know many people for whom their regular speech has such a loose jaw and such a round mouth. I live in America, that's really not a typical everyday face shape for talking.

But it is a very common face shape for presenting, and it's a very common face shape, um, for sports announcers. So another face to look at is Jon Miller, who's the play-by-play announcer for the San Francisco Giants.

Find a YouTube of him speaking. His jaw is so relaxed from years of calling baseball games that it is, it's just, it's kind of mind boggling how free his jaw is when he's just speaking normally. It's an amazing thing to see a jaw that's that free.

So if you're interested in projecting without excess wear and tear, I would encourage you to watch President Biden with the sound off and notice how his face is behaving.

If you are maybe in another camp where when you give presentations, you notice that your voice gets tense and tired and you don't like the pitch of it and you don't like the timbre of it, I encourage you to watch Senator Britt's presentation with the sound off and just notice how smiley she is. And know that that is contributing to her vocal tone.

It's a legitimate question – how am I supposed to connect with people and demonstrate that I am personable and pleasant and interested in their

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well being if I don't smile at people? And I don't want the takeaway to be that you shouldn't talk and smile at the same time.

What I want to bring to your awareness is how much smiling, what kind of smiling, and how tense is your jaw when you're smiling?

Something that's true for many pop singers and actors on Broadway is that they smile in the rests. They're singing a happy song, but while they're singing, their mouth is in a nice oval, their jaw is open and relaxed, and then when there is a break, they're smiling in the rests.

But when they're holding the long note, singing out, “I love you,” “you're the one for me,” whatever that beautiful line is, their face is as round and relaxed as it possibly can be to encourage that beautiful, clear, easy tone that they can sing eight shows a week or, you know, again and again and again, night after night without vocal injury.

Something else to consider as you're watching these two very different presentations of the President and the Senator is the President is standing. There is just so much more freedom and power available to you as a speaker when you're standing than when you're seated.

So as you watch the presentations, see if you just can notice how much the two speakers move, or are able to move, from the position that they're in. And you might reflect on your own speaking or singing, how much more comfortable do you feel whether you're standing or sitting.

A lot of my students feel more comfortable seated. They feel less on the spot and it's easier to find a relaxed breath and an open posture in their chest and in their throat when they're seated because they're, they're less on the spot. They're under less general emotional stress.

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And there are students who are way more comfortable standing. They feel better that they, when they can walk around or shift their weight, even, even if they're not, you know, wandering around the room, they just feel freer feeling their legs underneath them.

I would say that's certainly true for me in some circumstances. It's a posture that I want to have all of my students to get comfortable with, eventually. I don't demand that you be able to stand and deliver from your first lesson. That's something that we can learn, I can teach you and you can grow into as we work together.

Another difference to note is that the president was speaking to a room full of people, a large room full of people, and his voice was amplified, but there are, you know, over 500 people in the room.

And the senator was speaking direct to camera with, I don't know how many people were home at the time she was recording her response, but nobody was applauding or talking back or providing any kind of feedback for her words. And that's a very different environment to be speaking in.

So, one of the other things you can notice even with the sound off, is how does the audience engagement change the speaker's behavior or change the speaker's posture, add or contribute to the available energy, to speak, to respond, to engage in dialogue? And imagine for yourself, what's that like for you?

Many people, the thought of speaking, the thought of recording something and having it be permanent for all time somewhere on the internet is just terrifying. Like they may have many great ideas about recording audio or video and uploading it to YouTube, all of the things you could teach people, all of the, the beautiful thoughts you could share

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with the world, but you're terrified of staring into that green light and, you know, pushing record.

I'm there with you. I, I know that fear intimately. It's a difficult thing to speak with authentic energy when there aren't other people there with you.

One of the things I teach my students is how to deal with that, how to work with that condition so that you can sound like you're talking to your best friend, even though your best friend isn't there. It's just a green dot.

And also people, you know, the thought of speaking to five, six hundred people and on national television, like that isn't everybody's dream either. Like, that's really stressful.

Even the idea of, you know, a sales presentation to, you know, one or two people is, you know, terrifying. Your knees shake, it's hard to feel yourself on the earth, safe and held and, you know, fine.

One of the things that I think the president did really well was not only to be aware of the energy in the room, to find a way to work with that energy so that it actually fed his own performance.

And that there was a sense of rather than two sides fighting or one person trying to speak against the crowd, that it was to the extent possible, more of a sense of everybody around a common table and that, too, is something that you can learn how to do on a smaller scale.

How to be with other people, and how to sing to them, speak to them, and use their energy, be aware of their energy, and use their energy to

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fuel your own performance, rather than be terrified, threatened, demoralized...any number of negative emotions.

Finally, I want you to remember that this wasn't the first speech that either of them ever gave. They have both been practicing for a really long time. You could argue that the president's been practicing for longer because he's nearly twice the age of the senator, but in any case, the senator isn't a spring chicken. She's been speaking for quite a long time with, obviously, effectiveness.

And so to know that whenever you see somebody doing something on TV or YouTube or whatever, in the pulpit or in some way in a larger arena than you currently occupy, remember that what got them there was practice, and trial and failure and effort and evaluation, figuring out what worked, what didn't, what do I want to do differently the next time? And that that skill of, you know, self evaluation, analysis is available to all of us.

We can all sound better than we have before. It's going to take some noticing. It's going to take a lot of compassion. It's going to take willingness to try again, but improvement is totally possible.

So this wasn't the last speech that the President will ever give, and it wasn't the last speech that the Senator will ever give. And that's true for you too.

I mean, to a certain point. We are all going to die one day, but probably not immediately following the next big thing you're thinking of trying. You probably have a little bit more time than that. And so if you can look on your next adventure, whether it's singing a solo, going to karaoke, giving a presentation at your, business group, whatever it is,

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asking somebody to marry you, that isn't the last speaking that you will ever do.

And however it goes, you can learn from it and sound better the next time, if it's not everything that you would want. I hope that's helpful, I hope it's interesting, I'd love to hear what you think about it all.

Thanks so much for listening.

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