

How To Speak Without Saying Anything

Speak without saying anything? Surely it must be just moving the lips, like they used to do in those old silent movies. Well, that is one way of doing it. But you can't do it in everyday life without being called a nut, unless you are mute, have a laryngeal problem, or a spell of hysteria.

Perhaps if we modify the title to 'How To Speak Without Saying Anything Worthwhile', it will make more sense. It may appear easy, but it not really so. Some people are just naturals at it. Look at the following conversation.

'I want you to sort out beads of different color into different piles in the next fifteen minutes, and label the piles appropriately.

'Duh!'

'And make sure that the glass beads and plastic beads are kept in separate piles.

'Duh!'

The person speaking the 'Duh!' language is a natural. He/she can carry on forever without any trouble. The beauty of the method is in its simplicity. It requires no thinking, no planning, no command on grammar, and no knowledge of any kind. It can cause no stress for the speaker, physical or mental. Its main disadvantage is that it is not very impressive. If we modify the title to How To Speak Without Saying Anything Worthwhile, But Appearing To Do So', the 'Duh!' method will not do. The title becomes too long, but conveys what it is supposed to. If we retain that long a title, half the readers will not progress beyond the title. So we will retain the original title, with the new meaning.

A method more intelligent than the 'Duh!' method is shown in the following example.

'Then he got up and left.'

'Oh!'

'We were all rather taken aback.'

'Ah!'

'It all happened so suddenly that no one even thought of getting up and stopping him.'

'Really?'

'I don't know. Can one just leave like that? Without so much as a word?'

'Yeah!'

You don't need a big vocabulary to carry on a conversation of this sort. You also become quite popular because you are a sympathetic and patient listener, and you agree to everything that is said, or at least appear to do so. If that is your goal in life, you can stop right here. Read no further. If your goal is higher, read on.

That sort of participation works fine in a conversation where your role is supporting the emotions expressed by the other speaker(s). 'Oh!', 'Ah!', 'Hmm...', 'Wow!'. 'Really?', 'Sad!', 'Nice!' are words that will last you for a couple of hours' conversation. But this method does not work when you are asked, 'What do you think?'. Of course you could say 'Um...' there, but that does not appear very intelligent. In that case you need to use the expansion technique. Examine the following conversation.

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‘Then he got up and left.’

‘Just like that? That is odd.’

‘We were all rather taken aback.’

‘It is a natural response to such behavior.’

‘It all happened so suddenly that no one even thought of getting up and stopping him.’

‘Is that so? It must have been so unexpected that there must have been no time to think.’

‘I don’t know. Can one just leave like that? Without so much as a word?’

‘Yeah. It’s difficult to say. Can one really do such a thing?’

This is a lot better. But you do not appear to have original thoughts of your own. It is an elaborate method of agreeing with the other speaker(s). If you want to appear to be able to have original thoughts, the last remark needs to be changed as follows.

‘There are situations like that time and again. It takes a lot of psychological understanding to analyze such actions which are unexpected. For a person in a given frame of mind, it is perfectly explainable, but to others in a different frame of mind, it may be quite disturbing. Then you do wonder if one can do such a thing.’

Note the wisdom in stating a universal truth in line No. 1. Note the implied superior position of your profound knowledge of psychology in line No. 2. Unless challenged, the suggestion that you have that knowledge will pass as a fact. Line No. 3 is a summary of what the other person had said, but in a pseudoscientific language. Saying simple things in a complicated manner confuses listeners. A confused listener is impressed more readily. Line No. 4 is the last statement of the other speaker. You have said a lot of things that sound original without actually saying anything original, and not committed anything at all. You have not contradicted anything that the other person had said, so there is no scope for a conflict. You have to avoid conflicts because a conflict requires a lot of original thinking and composition of original speech. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the other negative aspects of conflicts.

If you want to appear a scholar, you have to change the last bit of your speech as follows.

‘There are situations like that time and again. Thomas Hoover had mentioned it in his speech after he took office. It takes a lot of psychological understanding to analyze such actions which are unexpected. You understand this clearly when you study transactional analysis and apply it to real life situations. For a person in a given frame of mind, it is perfectly explainable, but to others in a different frame of mind, it may be quite disturbing. Then you cannot help wondering if one can react in such a manner. You must read the essay on this subject available on McMaster’s website. It is really good.’

If the others listening to you are like most people in the world are, they will refrain from revealing their ignorance by asking who Thomas Hoover was. If anyone does ask, you can say he was second aide in chief to Benjamin Franklin. To challenge that statement will take a lot of courage, and most people lack it. Mentioning deep things

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like transactional analysis in passing is the stroke of a genius. The listeners immediately consider you a master of that analysis, whatever it is. A mention of a place like McMaster makes you appear scholarly. A mention of its website makes you computer guru. A mention of all such heavy stuff in a simple conversation makes them think you do such things every day as casually as they brush their teeth and eat breakfast.

There may be a few who will see through your guise. They may try to show you for what you really are. The best way to deal with such persons is to interrupt their speech repeatedly, in a voice louder than theirs. After all, one who is heard is the one who is really heard. Remember you must have the last word, because the one who is heard last is the one who is really thought to have said anything worthwhile.