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UNRAVELLING THE MYTHS: ANALYSING SOME MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT PUBLIC SPEAKING

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Abstract

The acquisition of public speaking skills can be hampered by belief in certain misconception, which have the propensity to intimidate and discourage even the most capable individuals. Some of the myths, commonly associated with public speaking include speakers are born; not made, speaking requires *special* ability and vocabulary, speaking is more about eloquence than, material substance, public speaking addresses personal frailties, public speaking is required by select professions, and public speakers do not experience nervousness. Belief in any of these myths, can potentially lead to heightened emotional instability, anxiety, avoidance and self-doubt. However, unravelling these myths is crucial in unlocking the immense potentials within each individual. Therefore, the primary objective of this paper is to provide compelling, convincing and counter-intuitive evidence to debunk these myths as lacking in any scientific or logical basis. Thus, with the right preparation, positive mind set, and proper preparation, anyone can develop the public speaking skills needed to engage confidently and persuasively any audience. A deconstruction of these unfounded narratives can help more people embrace public speaking as a powerful tool for personal and professional growth.

Key words: Public speaking, Misconceptions, Myths, Eloquence, Positive mind set

Introduction

Public speaking is often surrounded by a web of myths that can intimidate and discourage even the most willing and capable individuals from its pursuits. Even when it is most obvious that what lies on the side of these pervasive misconceptions are keys to unlocking the potential within, its grip-like stranglehold creates unnecessary barriers to success. Misconceptions are assumptions, notions, beliefs, positions or thoughts about *something* or *someone* which are derived from faulty thinking, limited worldview, ignorance, illiteracy, religious dogma, nepotism, bias, prejudice, malice, hypocrisy, etc. Martin, Sexton and Gerlovich, cited in Thompson and Logue (2006, p. 553), define misconceptions as "...ideas that provide an incorrect understanding of such ideas, objects or events that are constructed based on a person's experience."

Hanuscin, cited in Thompson and Logue (2006), identifies types of misconception to include perceived notions, non-scientific beliefs, naïve theories, mixed conceptions and conceptual misunderstanding. By and large, misconceptions can be described as a wrong conclusion that is derived, essentially, through faulty thinking or factual inexactness. Most often, credible sources such as parent and teachers are responsible for “misunderstanding factual information” (Varga, n.d.).

The implication of such stoic standpoint is that misconceptions, when they are not subjected to intense logical scrutiny, can be a hinderance to a revolutionary and disruptive mindset. That is, one has to adopt an open mind and be ready to admit any error of omission. There are quite a number of misconceptions that people have come to believe is *true* because they have not been to circles where such could be debunked. The point is, whatever points of view one holds that lacks any factual basis or that cannot reasonably provide substantial, incontrovertible and irrefutable explanations for, might just be one of those *old wives* tales that should be discarded.

Misconception is a pervasive phenomenon that bares its fangs on many, if not all human enterprises. And public speaking too is no exception to some programmed disinclinations, which have been beatified with frenzied inveterate mindsets. Unfortunately, “human beings have a great capacity for sticking to false *beliefs* with great passion and tenacity...” (Lipton, 2015, p. xiv), and this is self-limiting. Some of the misconceptions associated with public speaking, which invariable have hindered its acquisition are presented and analysed as follows:

Myth #One: Speakers are born, not made!

One major misconception about public speaking is the erroneous belief that it is an inherently endowed ability. That is, “you either have it or you don’t; and if you don’t, there’s nothing you can do about it” (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 6). This mindset indirectly foregrounds the thinking that ‘speakers are born and not made’. To believe this is to confuse ‘talking’ with ‘speaking.’ Although most times, the two concepts are treated as synonyms, actually, they are not. Every human being has the potential to ‘talk’, provided they do not have any physiological defect that could affect the organs designed for the production of speech, while ‘speaking’ is an acquisition of the knowledge required to use speech in a well-intentioned way to achieve a desired course of action in an audience. Perhaps, an analogy to differentiate the two would suffice. A child that was born deaf and dumb could, through miraculous means, regain the use of their speech organs to *talk*. However, such a child would need to be formally enrolled in a *school* to learn to *speak*. Speaking, according Mansfield (2018):

...consists in giving reasons. It is not just the communication that other animals can engage in, often very effectively, without supplying reasons; only humans give reasons. Speaking is an appeal to fellow human beings who share the power of reason; so, speech presupposes that man is a rational animal. The power of reason is to appeal to others persuasively at some level of generality to gain the assent of someone besides yourself. It is more than a cry of pain or a grunt of pleasure, and it must issue in a complaint or a statement of gratitude that lifts the communication above your private feeling. It is the "rational" that rises above the "animal." Speech is a claim upon the attention of another, a prayer or a demand to be heard; it is an argument, if nothing else, against indifference.

Mansfield's explanation clearly indicates that speaking is a complex and dynamic activity that requires some level of cognitive competence which can only be achieved through some form of teaching-learning engagement. Hence, to harbour the idea that public speaking cannot be taught, *ab initio*, would mean that people would not make any attempt to seek help; such people then would resign to fate, blaming their predicament on Providence.

The story of Demosthenes, one of the greatest orators in ancient Greece (c.384BC-322BC), is a remarkable signpost that points to public speaking as an art and act that can be learned. Demosthenes refused to be encumbered by his speech defect, weak lungs and a spastic shoulder, sought to "study legal rhetoric and pursue oratory" because "his desire was to see the scoundrels who had wasted his father's wealth be punished" (Omar, 2016).

Demosthenes achieved this incredible feat despite having been born with a severe stammer; his sentences were inarticulate and incoherent. Hence, to overcome these challenges, Demosthenes embarked on self-improvement programmes: to cure his stammer, he Demosthenes stuffed his mouth with pebbles, and practised speaking with them ever so slowly; he learned to overcome audience noise by going to the seashore, where he practised speaking above the roar of the waves; he practised breath control by reciting poetry as he ran uphill. To resist the temptation of going out into society until he was ready, Demosthenes shaved one side of his head so that he would be too embarrassed to show himself in public. He stood beneath a suspended sword to train himself not to favour a shoulder that kept hitching. He practised facial expression in front of a mirror. With these devices, Demosthenes honed his speaking skills until he was able to hold his fellow Athenian spellbound on any subject and

under any condition. Through his resolute nature, Demosthenes overcame his stuttering and developed a strong voice. His fame as a speaker became so great that many centuries later, his name is synonymous with extraordinary speaking ability (Francis, 2009, p. 470; Omar, 2016).

Another pointer to the fact that public speaking is not innate was demonstrated by the persistent pursuit of Abraham Lincoln to enhance his speaking capabilities after realising his deficiencies. According to William H. Herndon, "Lincoln's voice was, when he first began speaking, shrill, squeaking, piping, unpleasant; his general look, his form, his pose, the colour of his flesh, wrinkled and dry, his sensitiveness, and his momentary diffidence, everything seemed to be against him, but he soon recovered" (<http://www.abrahamlincolnonline.org/>). It is instructive to note, according to Lincoln scholars, that Abraham Lincoln's "speaking abilities did not develop overnight and they did not seem to come to him easily. What did he do right?"

Abraham Lincoln was not in denial of his speech disorder; he was a stutterer and he faced it headlong. Lincoln hired the services of a teacher in 1846 and at the age of 37, worked very tirelessly to overcome this weakness. He practised his speaking skills with sermons and stories told to friends and family as a form of therapy. He was not in any way deterred by how he was perceived by people, rather, he was motivated because he knew that to be a successful lawyer and legislator, he would need to overcome this barrier of public speaking.

In one of his attempts for election to the United States Senate, Lincoln lost the election to Douglas, but his ability as an effective and highly engaging speaker was well established during the debates. His oratorical skills endeared him to the Republican Party such that he was nominated as the party's presidential flagbearer. Abraham Lincoln's efforts at overcoming his speech disability should inspire confidence and assurance "of how a young, highly motivated man was able to overcome his stuttering to become one of the most accomplished orators in US history" (New Beginnings, n.d.).

The Gettysburg Address, according to Freedman (2015), remains one of the most iconic speeches ever. The speech was presented on Thursday, 19 November, 1863 during the American Civil War at the dedication of the Soldiers' National Cemetery in Gettysburg, Pennsylvania, and lasted just over two minutes. Abraham Lincoln is as well known for this speech as he is for helping to abolish slavery. The speaker before President Lincoln on that historic day gave a two-hour address but no one remembers his name. Mr. Lincoln's place on the agenda was considered an afterthought and look what happened!

At 272 words, the speech remains a masterpiece of brevity, vision and practical purpose. Lincoln...

used the Gettysburg Address, for example, to reposition what had become an unpopular presidency responsible for an unwinnable war, more conscription and freeing slaves. Speaking not only to the citizens gathered on the day but, through the press, to his wider public, Lincoln used a mix of logic and emotion to reinterpret the negative perceptions of his government into positive reasons (Stockwell, 2009, p. 414).

The experiences of Demosthenes and Abraham Lincoln clearly debunk the misconception that public speaking is an enterprise that cannot be taught and learnt. As a matter of fact, “abundant evidence shows that the study of public speaking can make poor speakers good and good speakers better” (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 6). The lives of these accomplished persons whose imprints in history cannot be wiped away is a testament to the fact that public speaking is a skill that can be learned, regardless of the daunting and seemingly insurmountable challenges.

Myth #Two: Being Articulate is a Vice

The second common misconception of public speaking has to do “with the mistaken value many persons put upon inarticulateness. It is exemplified by the common distrust of anyone who seems to do anything too well or too easily.” For instance, because “He sounded too good; he was too smooth; he must be a scoundrel” is a criticism as basically unsound as it is frequent” (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 7). In other words, people who are perceived as *smooth talkers* are often considered suspects and patrons of suspicious enterprise. Sometimes, people are cautioned to be wary of individuals who are skilful with words because they cannot be trusted. Such people are perceived to be manipulators. Unconsciously people become unnecessarily wary of being articulate let alone of honing the speaking skill. Though erroneously, “it is believed that only the evil or false can be pleasant to behold; that the greater the truth and the sounder the teaching, the more unpleasant must be their expression!” (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 7) Unfortunately, there is the “ambivalent feeling that... something sly, unpleasant, and frequently silly, yet also a weapon of devastating power for ‘getting at’ people with or without their consent...” (Brown, 1963, p. 11) is associated with people who speak well.

Isocrates provides a critical connection between the ability to speak and the riveting display of intelligence. His treatise on the Greek civilisation of the fourth century BCE is remarkably indisputable. He wrote speeches for Athenian law courts and then became a teacher of composition for would-be orators. Also, Isocrates set up a school of rhetoric in Chios and also established in Athens a free school of *philosophia*, which involved a practical education of the whole

mind, character, judgement and mastery of language. About the relationship between speech and intelligence, Isocrates, cited in Nicholas (2016), has this to say:

And, if there is need to speak in brief summary of this power, we shall find that none of the things which are done with intelligence take place without the help of speech, but that in all our actions as well as in all our thoughts speech is our guide, and is most employed by those who have the most wisdom.

History is replete with men and women who have been guided in their thoughts by speech and have shown the most wisdom. The likes of Mahatma Ghandi, Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Nelson Mandela and Maya Angelou most fittingly belong to the class of sages. However, the examples that will be examined as a buster of this myth Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammed (PBUH), the two leading lights of the major religions of the world, Christianity and Islam, respectively.

Jesus Christ

The teaching ministry of Jesus was “marked by the HIGHEST DEGREE OF ELOQUENCE,” (emphasis added) according to The Scottish Congregational Magazine. In 1883, Reverend Thomas Alexander Hyde published a book about the oratorical excellence of Jesus with the title *Christ the Orator: Never Man Spake like this Man*, where he was eulogised as the “Orator of the Universe.” However, Reverend Hyde said that there was nothing divine about the speaking attributes of Jesus which speakers cannot learn or benefit from (Genard, 2013).

Further reiterating the impressive speaking ability of Jesus Christ, Charles Haddon Spurgeon in a sermon entitled “The Unrivalled Eloquence of Jesus” recounts the exemplariness of Jesus’ masterly use of words as follows:

THE chief priests and Pharisees sent officers to lay hold upon the Saviour, lest his preaching should altogether overthrow their power. *While the constables who had mingled with the throng were waiting for an opportunity of arresting the Lord Jesus, they themselves were arrested by his earnest eloquence; they could not take him, for he had fairly taken them, and when they came back without a prisoner, they gave their reason for not having*

captured him in these memorable words, “Never man spake like this man.” (mine emphasis)

He continues:

The officers are fully armed, and quite able to complete the arrest of the preacher; he has no weapons with which to oppose them; he stands unarmed amid the throng; probably none of his disciples would lift a finger to defend him, or if they did, he would bid them put up their sword into its sheath; and yet the officers cannot seize the non-resistant preacher. What stays their hands? It has come to a combat between body and mind, and mind prevails. *The eloquent tongue is matched against the two-edged sword, and it has won the day.* No fears or qualms of conscience hampered the constables, and yet they could not lay their hands on him; they were chained to the spot whereon they stood, spellbound by the mystic power of his speech. His very tones fascinated them, and the discourse which he poured forth so fluently held them fast as his willing captives.

Spurgeon concludes about the extraordinariness of Jesus’ eloquence as follows:

The priests and Pharisees would naturally select for the seizing of the great Teacher those who were least likely to be affected by his teaching; and yet these men— doubtless men of brutal habits, men ready enough to do their masters’ bidding, showed within themselves sufficient mental capacity to feel the power of the matchless oratory of Jesus Christ. Those who were sent as enemies came back to rehearse his praises, and so to vex his adversaries.

Charles Spurgeon enumerates the defining qualities of Jesus’ eloquence as follows: His style is singularly clear and perspicuous; He spoke with unusual authority. Also, He was a dogmatist but never with proud self-sufficiency; He wonderfully combined faithfulness with tenderness and remarkably mingled zeal with prudence; His teaching dealt out truth with courageous fidelity and generous affection; and He was a “preacher whose head was in his heart, and whose heart was in his head” (Spurgeon, 1870).

Prophet Mohammad^{sa}

The Holy Prophet Muhammad^{sa} is an epitome of outstanding and exemplary personality, whose chequered eloquence played a significant role in the spread of Islam. The pure amazement of the Prophet's^{sa} power of the spoken word is one he acknowledges himself, when he rightly asserts that "*I have been given the keys of eloquent speech and given victory with awe (cast into the hearts of the enemy), and while I was sleeping last night, the keys of the treasures of the earth were brought to me till they were put in my hand*" (Sahih al-Bukhari). The bestowal of "the keys of eloquent speech" is consequentially an arsenal in the armoury of the Prophet^{sa} – more important than weapons of mass destruction— in disarming the enemies and gaining access to the "treasures of the earth." By this declaration, not only was the Prophet^{sa} providing an insight into his divine mandate, but also presenting an example for the faithful to emulate.

The *call* of the Prophet Muhammad^{sa} is akin to that of Moses who also gave an excuse thus: "O Lord, I'm not very good with words. I never have been, and I'm not now, even though you have spoken to me. I get tongue-tied, and my words get tangled" (Exodus 3: 10 NLT). The Prophet^{sa} retreated into the cave of Hira in protest "against the mischiefs, misdeeds and the many vices of the people of Mecca" (Ahmad, 2009) where he worshipped God, day and night." It was in this cave that he saw a vision in which Angel Jubril instructed him to make a recitation. In responding, the Prophet^{sa} said "he did not know what or how to recite. The figure insisted and at last the Prophet^{sa} made the profound statement that is recorded in *Surah* 96- Al- '*Alaq* as follows: "Recite thou in the name of thy Lord Who created, created man from a clot of blood. Recite! And thy Lord is the Most Beneficent, Who taught man by the pen, taught men what he knew not" (2-6) (Ahmad, 2009, p. 25). These verses, which were the first to be revealed to the Prophet^{sa}, instructively point at the recognition that speaking is neither innate nor an alienable component in the fulfilment of divine mandate.

The eloquence of the Prophet^{sa} began to manifest as "God began to talk" to him in "another tongue." The manifest impact of his message began to tremendously redefine the perspective of the people of Mecca in such a way that they wilfully embraced the *new way*. Accordingly, the "youth of the country began to wonder. Those in search of truth became excited. Out of scorn and derision began to grow approval and admiration. Slaves, young men, and hapless women began to collect around the Prophet^{sa}" (Ahmad, 2009, pp. 29-30)) Undoubtedly, the message and the teaching of the Prophet^{sa} offered "hope for the degraded, the depressed and the young." Such that "women thought the time for the restoration of their rights was near. Slaves thought the day of their liberation had come and young men thought the avenues of progress were going to be thrown open to them" (Ahmad, 2009, p. 25).

The agency of speech as an essential power source of transformational leadership has been established through the life-changing contributions of Jesus Christ and Prophet Mohammad^{sa}. It is evident that through their ‘ministries’ that “[T]ruths cannot walk on their own legs. They must be by people to other people. They must be explained, defended, and spread through language, argument, and appeal” (Campbell, 1996, p. 3). The impact of the messages of these faith bearers on humanity is legendary. However, their messages might not have had the spellbinding effect on their immediate hearers if they had not been able to articulate their thoughts in a compelling and convincing manner. No doubt, these men in the discharge of their assignments “employed the business of rhetoric” which “is to make pictures of virtue and goodness, so that they may be seen” (Francis Bacon). It never was, and would never be that inarticulateness will be dignified virtuously. In order to succeed in life, therefore, everyone should aspire unpretentiously to seek the knowledge of public speaking “even if you have to go as far as China” (Wang, 2019).

Myth # Three: Speaking Requires “Special” Ability and Vocabulary

Speech is an index for gaining self-awareness, negotiating and expressing deep-seated convictions. However, some assumed that to deploy this essential skill for the nobler cause of human survival, one requires such *out-of-this-world* manner of speaking, and a language that is quintessentially alluring. Neither of these notions is a necessary requirement for effective speaking. In other words, the thinking is that a “speaker must adopt a studied, somewhat “affected” delivery, insincere sentiment, and elegant, inflated language” is the hallmark of consummate speakers (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 8). This also, is a myth that will be debunked with dispassionate argumentation.

Speaking does not require the use of “pretentious inflated” or “high sounding language with little meaning used to impress people” (Oxford Language). Unfortunately, many confuse effective speaking to being bombastic. Bryant and Wallace (1948, p. 9) offer more clarification thus:

Good public speaking does not demand a “special” manner and vocabulary which set it apart and make it different from ordinary talk. It is ineffective and useless so far it seems to be engaged in for itself. It must be communication fitted to the manner and fashions of the persons talked to, and it must not be out of harmony with the ideas and feelings the speaker is trying to communicate.

People with a penchant for *big* words or what is generally referred to as *vocab* are victims of what Bryant and Wallace (1948, p. 8) describe as “oral monstrosities and spectacular nonsense.” Speakers in this league are more

interested in performative acts, and not in the actual communication of ideas. It may even be that such persons lack the rigorous depth of critical and stimulating engagement.

In a media chat, an interviewee, was confronted with the fact that many members of his audience do not understand what he says. In his apology he says:

It is an opportunity for me again to use the platform of Sahara reporters, a latitudelarian platform to render an unreserved apologia to my audience if at any point in time; they find it a little bit difficult to comprehend what I am saying. I want to apologise that it is not intentionally at all excepting you are saying that I should be deaf and dumb, excepting you are saying that I should not speak. You know, so an apology again. I can't stop reading (Olatunji-Mason, 2010).

The above excerpts bear testimonies to the vainglory in attempting to be impressionistic by using high-sounding words that are bereft of any meaning. The speaker is “more concerned with lyrical bravado than with meaning” and “more in love with verbal exuberance.” It is a “case of the sacrifice of substance on the altar of stylistic convenience” (Kperogi, 2022). It is important to further reiterate that a “broader vocabulary obviously does not mean attempting to astound the audience with verbiage and verbosity, but an articulate and eloquent speaker commands more respect than one who appears to be stuck in middle-school English class” (Lee, 2001). Effective speaking is one that puts the audience at the centre of the communication encounter. It is instructive to note that the audience holds the key to the success of any communicative encounter. Hence, any public speaking activity that leaves the audience more confused as to what the intent of the speaker is, smacks of nothing but speaking for speaking sake. Speaking, therefore, does not require any “special” ability and vocabulary for it to be communicative—it is about constructively sharing intelligent meaning with the audience.

Myth #Four: Speaking is More about Eloquence than Material Substance

The assumption that it is possible to learn to “make speeches” quite apart from learning to say something worth listening to, is, to say the least, unsettling. The significance of having something of importance to share with the audience above the manner of how it is shared is foregrounded by Jenkin Lloyd Jones (1843–1918). Speech, in the reckoning of Jones, is a contractual obligation between a speaker and their audience; and the onus is more on the speaker to

ensure that they deliver on the purpose of the speaking engagement without failing, otherwise they are hugely indebted to the audience. In his words:

A speech is a solemn responsibility. The man who makes a bad thirty minutes speech to two hundred people wastes only a half hour of his own time. But he wastes one hundred hours of the audience's time – more than four days – which should be a hanging offence.

The import of the above statement is hinged on the presupposition that the intentionality of a speaker to tailor their message to address the needs of the audience is of utmost importance. A speaker who, therefore, chooses to ignore this definitive aspect of the speech process risks jeopardising everything about the communication encounter. Eloquence, combined with content, therefore, is the hallmark of oratory.

Subscription to the assumption that public speaking is about the wanton display of eloquence without priority given to content is exemplified by the Sophists school of thought on oratory. The Sophists, from whose style of oratory we got sophistry, apparently signify a troubling marker in the annals of defining the essentialness of what effective speechmaking is—speaking for speaking sake! Aristotle in *Metaphysics*, describes this manner of speechmaking as "wisdom in appearance only" (Nordquist, 2019).

The philosophic underpinning of the rhetoric of sophists was described by Socrates as "mercenary and pretentious" (Dupriez, cited by Nordquist, 2019) and by Plato as "shopkeepers with spiritual wares." This pejorative perspective was duly informed by the philosophical orientation of sophism being largely "indifferent to content, and this indifference prevents it from integrating what it knows into a well-ordered and meaningful whole." Consequently, "Sophistry can 'know' this or that, but it cannot see how these things hang together or how they fit into the cosmos, because to do so would require genuine knowledge of the good" (Schindler, cited by Nordquist, 2019).

There is no such thing as a speech in and for itself. There is only a speech on a specific subject, for a specific purpose, delivered by a specific person, before a specific audience, at a specific time and place. Hence, a public speaker must have something of consequence to say, which requires the exhibition of the following qualities:

The man who knows most about most things and most people--he who has thought most about most things, has read most, has experienced most, has

observed most, has become most familiar with the minds and hearts and manners of his fellow-men, and has retained most completely the knowledge and insight thus gained--this man, if he has also learned the principles of public speaking and has cultivated the will to communicate, will be the best speaker (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 10).

Speakers, who today, are lauded as exemplars of virtuous wordsmiths of all time, and whose speeches have forever changed the course of humanity were not accorded such prominent place in the Hall of Fame because of their eloquence but more significantly because of their impacting and penetrating words. Johnson (2017), in a listing of speakers, who “changed the course of history with their words”, which include Winston Churchill, John F. Kennedy, Socrates, Adolf Hitler, Martin Luther King Jr., James Baldwin, and Mister Rogers, says: “a speech is more than a set of spoken words. It’s a combination of the speaker, the context, the language, and these things working together can make it far greater than the sum of its parts.”

Myth #Five: Public Speaking Addresses Personality Frailties

Another misconception that has come to be accepted as true is that “learning to speak is a miraculous treatment for the cure of *all* the deficiencies of personality.” Without doubt, “it is a common observation that faulty, fumbling, confused, ineffective speaking often accompanies shyness, timidity, nervous maladjustment of many sorts, and other obvious deficiencies of what we loosely call “personality” (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, pp. 11-12). However, there is no factual evidence or empirical data to the effect that a progressive improvement in platform speaking, over time, would remediate such personality disorders such as shyness, timidity or nervousness. Put differently, that a speaker is shy, timid or nervous does not foreclose the possibility of giving an engaging and brilliant speech.

The personality frailties that is being discussed is quite different from human foibles. While there are speakers who have mastered the art of public speaking and who at the same time have managed their shyness, timidity and nervous maladjustment of many sorts. Some others have not been able to make the necessary adjustments. Thus, it is important for individuals to be aware of their personal inadequacies or limitations, consciously seek help, and be determined to give it all it requires to overcome them. Being a public speaker is not a sufficient parameter in the reordering of an individual’s personality; intentionality is required.

The dimensions of personality as they relate to personality traits apparently reveal that all peoples are bestowed with both strengths and weaknesses at the

same time. These traits, to a large extent, define the behavioural parameters of individuals in their relationship or interaction with others. The point is, every mortal, no matter how powerful or influential, has personality frailties which may or may not be obvious to others. This fact is further buttressed by Williams (2017) thus:

Everyone has personal weaknesses. Those of us who are wise recognize them and try to overcome these character flaws. Others ignore their personal weaknesses and find themselves repeating mistakes and leading unfulfilled lives. The secret to self-improvement is to discover your fallibilities and either correct them, or find a way to turn them into strengths.

Fear is one of the most devastating of all personal weaknesses, and it is not surprising that this has been a limitation in the acquisition of public speaking skills. Glossophobia, or a fear of public speaking, is a very common phobia which is believed to affect up to 75% of the human population. Symptoms may include a slight nervousness at the very thought of public speaking or a “full-on panic and fear. One significant way to overcome fear is to actually face whatever it is you are afraid of head-on. Eleanor Roosevelt once said, “you gain strength, courage and confidence by every experience in which you really stop to look fear in the face. You must do the thing which you think you cannot do” (Williams, 2017).

Improving personality inadequacies is a task that individuals must be ready to undertake with all devotion. Although it is quite possible that learning to speak could be a morale booster for addressing personality frailties, it should neither be assumed that training in public speaking will improve all sides of a personality, nor that if some persons improve their personalities in some respects, other areas will improve simultaneously. One thing, which most certainly is undisputable, is: “you may observe that as you improve your speaking, you become more confident, more alive both mentally and vocally, more facile in expression, and more clear-headed than you used to be” (Bryant and Wallace, 1948, p. 12).

Myth #Six: Public Speaking is Required by Select Professions

A very popular myth among people who enjoy the comfort zone of inarticulate speaking is the impression that public speaking is exclusively required by some professions. It is not surprising when some people opine that professional such as clergy, lecturers, politicians, salesmen, legislators ought to be public speakers or demonstrate rhetorical flourish. This position, obviously, is based on the

inauthentic notion that such enterprises thrive principally on the trading of words. This myth is decisively addressed by Bryant and Wallace (1948, p. 3) in an equivocal manner as follows:

We ordinarily recognize that the clergyman, the lawyer, the lecturer, the politician, the statesman, the senator, the member of congress or parliament or legislature ought to be a good speaker. A little reflection and observation however, will make it clear that men and women in most other occupations and walks of life--situations in which you and I are somewhat more likely to find ourselves--also depend for real success in an ability to speak well. One need only think casually to realise that business, industry, politics, the professions, and education depend largely upon conference discussion, debate, and speechmaking for the forces that make them function.

Similarly, Eromosele (2003) refutes this narrow-mindedness and faulty thinking about competence in speechmaking being distinctively meant for some vocations. He argues that the universality of speech as a principle of success cannot be sidestepped in the ascent of accomplishing life goals. Hence, he counsels with the profound conviction of a soothsayer that "every man and woman who has anything to do with the business of life, should try and practice the art of eloquence." The centrality of speech to all walks of life is further reiterated by Bryant and Wallace (1948, p. 3) when they stress its importance in a way that leaves no one in doubt about the inseparability of speech and success. According to them: "...men and women in most other occupations and walks of life..., situations in which you and I are somewhat more likely to find ourselves... also depend for real success on an ability to speak well."

When the importance of speech communication is considered "as an agent of social control in our complicated pluralistic society" and conceived as a tool "to generate agreement among people and cultures" (Ross, 1974, p. ix), to now firmly hold to the assumption that speaking is a skill exclusive to some professions is troubling. Just as earlier misconceptions have been dealt with, this too, shall be addressed with justifiable reasons through the establishment of the realistic need of public speaking for everyone regardless of their enterprise.

One of the potential benefits of learning to speak is the development of self-confidence. Perhaps, the question should be asked if there is any profession that does not require individuals to display some measure of self-confidence in the

course of discharging their duties? I am not sure if any of such exists. One consequential avenue through which individuals can have their self-worth built and enhanced is public speaking. No doubt, public speaking builds confidence and the ability to communicate effectively in public is an invaluable asset in both personal and professional life. It is apposite to note that people who hold back from speaking in public do so on the assumption that they lack the requisite seductive lure that could make their views to be acceptable to an audience. One of the most intriguing facts about “self-confidence is that it is a great and useful thing to have, but not the ‘right’ thing to have.” Indeed, “...it’s neither right nor wrong to be full of self-confidence or to lack self-confidence”. However, “it’s a question of *how do you want to be and why?*” The implication of this question is that the responsibility lies with individuals on the propriety or otherwise of being equipped with self-confidence as a prerequisite for the pursuit of their personal aspirations and goals. Despite this perspective, “if you currently have low self-confidence (or even no self-confidence at all), this is a completely valid and acceptable way of being, so don’t spend even a second feeling bad about it.” However, you would have to “appreciate this: your life improves in every way the more self-confident you become. So that’s why it’s worth your time, effort, and energy to do so” (Fonvielle, 2022).

Myth #Seven: Good Public Speakers Don’t Experience Speech Anxiety

The pushback against the acquisition of the public skills is further compounded by the sheer ignorance that outstanding speakers do not experience *butterflies* in their stomachs. It is significant to state that having speech anxiety is not out of place and there is every good reason to be scared; and these reasons shall be discussed later. However, a self-indulgent feeling that good speakers do not feel any anxiety constitutes a formidable hindrance to learning public speaking. Esposito (n.d.) succinctly provides an illuminating perspective about what the embrace of public speaking anxiety could do to an individual. The Association notes thus:

The fear of public speaking or performance, often called stage fright, exacts a huge toll on self-confidence and self-esteem and causes some people to leave school or a job or pass up a promotion. Many, including seasoned professional performers, suffer in silent terror. And because they feel embarrassed, people try to keep their fear a secret, even from a spouse or other close family members or friends.

The myth that good public speakers do not experience an iota of fright or nervousness was addressed by Edward R. Murrow, when he says that the “best speakers know enough to be scared...the only difference between the pros and

the novices is that the pros have trained the ‘butterflies to fly in formation’” (Berkum, 2010, p. 12). That is, the likes of Chief Bola Ige, SAN (Cicero of *Esa Oke*), Adegoke Adelabu (*Penkelemesi*), Dr Yusuf Maitama Sule (*Dan Masanin Kano*), Dr Martin Luther King, Jr., Malcolm X, Barack Obama, and a host of other fantastic speakers who were, and are still revered with godlike adoration also experienced some form of nervousness when face-to-face with crowds.

Studies have established that *all* people suffer or experience some temporary form of speech fright of varying intensity in different communication contexts such as interpersonal, group and public speaking. For instance, a survey carried out at Wayne State University reveals that “beginning speech communication students consider speech fright (or what is often called stage fright) a serious problem” (Ross, 1974, p. 91), while findings from another study indicated that “60 to 75 percent of students in college speaking groups admitted that they were bothered by nervousness in speaking; 35 percent considered it a severe problem” (Baird and Knower, cited by Ross, 1974, p. 91). The very import of these data implicates the fact that both the individual that is perceived as a *gifted* speaker and the one who appears *stuck* at the sight of an audience are biologically wired with the “fear-response systems”. Scott Berkum, while discussing the “Attack of Butterflies” in his book *Confessions of a Public Speaker*, says “when thinking about fun things like death, bad surveys, and public speaking, the best place to start is with the realisation that no one has died from giving a bad presentation” (2010, p. 13).

In spite of the perceived negative orientation that people have about speech anxiety, it is ironical to note that it is an essential ingredient in the making of an effective speech because a “speaker with stage fright can produce better not inferior works. It is perfectly possible to redirect fear and use it as a basis for success” (T. A. Weaver). In other words, there is a hidden treasure in this unsettling feeling that envelopes people when they have to speak in the public. Against this backdrop, Gregory (2002, p. 30) warns that “you should not try to banish all your fear and nervousness. You need a certain amount of fear to give a good speech.” An old saying also has it that “speakers who say they are as cool as cucumber usually give speeches about as interesting as a cucumber” (Gregory, 2002, p. 31). The lesson, therefore, is that every speaker needs some doses of anxiety in order to give an impactful speech that would endure and resonate with the audience. Evidently, there are values that can be tapped when that anxious feeling sets in when about to, or while giving a speech to an audience.

One of the values of fear is that it energises the body to perform at an unusually unexpected tempo. So, when faced with a threatening situation, the body produces a hormone called adrenalin which equips it with an appropriate ‘chemical’ to cope. Adrenaline (epinephrine), also known as the “fight-or-flight

hormone” is released by the adrenal glands and some neurons in response to a stressful, exciting, dangerous, or threatening situation. In other words, adrenalin rushes in to help individuals fight the threat or run from danger. The secretion of this hormone helps the body react more quickly, makes the heart beat faster, increases blood flow to the brain and muscles, and stimulates the body to produce sugar as fuel for “fight-or-flight.” However, Clella Jaffe notes that the body, unfortunately, “doesn’t distinguish between physically threatening situations (where you actually need the extra physical energy to make your escape) and psychologically threatening experiences (where your increased heart rate, butterflies, and adrenaline rush only add to your stress)” (2007, p. 26).

As a potential public speaker, you suffer from a ‘tunnel vision’ when you rein in the adrenalin rush, which could work to your advantage because you perceived it as inimical to your success. Jerry Seinfeld’s take on public speaking, though arguable and unnecessarily exaggerated, strikes at the heart of how much people dread facing an audience. According to him, “people’s number one fear is public speaking. Number two is death. Death is number two. Does that sound right? This means to the average person, if you go to a funeral, you’re better off in the casket than doing the eulogy” (Beckstrom, 2021). Gratuitously, the “fight-or-flight hormone” which the body produces in the event of a perceived unsettling situation such as described by Jerry Seinfeld, though gloomy, is also the elixir that can be used to neutralise the threatening effects of facing an audience.

Good speakers, indeed, experience anxiety because it is a human phenomenon. However, there should not be any pretence in the admittance of fear in the engagement of public speaking because doing so implies denying “yourself the natural energy your body is giving you.” An unassailable fact is that “anxiety creates a kind of energy you can use, just as excitement does.” This fact is also reinforced by the experience of Ian Tyson, a stand-up comedian and motivational speaker who says that the “body’s reaction to fear and excitement is the same...so it becomes a mental decision: am I afraid or am I excited.” In the heels of this, Berkun (2010, p. 18), advises that if your “body can’t tell the difference, it’s up to you to use your instincts to help rather than hurt.”

Conclusion

Public speaking is an incredible tool that can be used to harness and develop the elevation of personal and professional opportunities. However, this will remain a mirage when misconceptions are upscaled to underserving height of influence that blurs the potential benefits or values inherent in public speaking. The real challenge with misconception, if not frontally tackled, is that once embraced and ingrained, they become extremely difficult to unlearn. And this could have severe implications on attitude and behavioural change. The analysis of these misconceptions have shown that they lack any scientific or logical bases. Hence,

“it will be well, therefore, if students” and by extension everyone who has anything to do with the business of life “cast aside [these] hoary misconceptions[s] so they may get the most profit from their time and effort” (Bryant, Wallace and McGee, 1982, p.1). Despite the myths surrounding public speaking, it is a skill that can be formally learned, honed through consistent practice, and strengthened with the right mindset.

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