

Unit 1: *How Voices Get Made*

Jan. 6, Jan. 8

Exploring what is voice

Voice is a carrier of information. It is the channel through which our thoughts and ideas become speech and sound.

But it is the **sound** of a voice that makes feelings happen. Voices carry information, but more than that, they express emotion; they stimulate feelings in us as listeners.

The sound of a voice involves **tone** (something that is high/low, or loud/soft), and it also involves **timbre** (whether it sounds thin, flat, warm, round, nasal, etc.), and the **rhythm** or flow of our speech performance, and the connection to **our bodies** (gesture, facial expression, physical compartment, etc.)

Voices are contextualized

Voice is both a sonic and material phenomenon, but it is also a powerful **metaphor**.

How are voices sound are *never* independent of the **social and cultural meanings** attributed to that sound, to its body, and to context within which it is sounded.

Voice brims over with **values**, and those values are never stable, but rather are negotiated with each utterance and each listening.

Kreiman and Sidtis

"It is not known in detail how the limbic system (seat of emotions), subcortical nuclei (motoric and motivational control) and the cortical lobes (engaged in cognition and planning) operate convergently to formulate the psychological characteristics that are manifest as attitude, mood, and personality, but it has been repeatedly demonstrated that all of these are 'heard' along with personal identity in the voice, leading to the oft-repeated statement in medical (Woodson,

1999), religious (Cumming, 1856), and literary writing (Longfellow, 1866) that voice is revelatory of mind and soul." (72-73)

Voice is not innate, it is cultural

Borrowing from the work of Nina Sun Eidsheim, we are reminded that "vocal choices are based on the vocalizer's position with the collective rather than arising solely as individual expression...The decisive factor in honing each voice's potentiality...is not individual preference but collective pressure and encouragement." *The Race of Sound* (11)

Western Binaries of Voice

"The binary set up in Western philosophical and linguistic thought between the signifying, authorial voice and bodily, material vocality was closely articulated with a social project central to Euro-Western modernity. One of the ways the subject of the European Enlightenment identified himself was by differentiating *his* language — rational language, purified of unnecessary association and suited to expressing 'universal' concepts — from the language of the lower-class folk, which was mired in custom and superstition.

In the Western cultural imagination, this binary between a signifying voice and a vocality that is outside of referential meaning is recursively elaborated in other contrasts: human versus animal; language versus music; male versus female." Amanda Weidman, "Voice" in *Keywords in Sound* (2015)

Sum-up

Our experience of voice is often physical; it confronts our senses. But our assumptions about voice—its utterance, gesture, timbre, and style—involve a process of sense making.

Voice is therefore vested with cultural value. It is often contingent on cultural context and negotiations of identities that are shaped by dynamics of power.

From Representation to Construction

Like images and texts, performances of our voice cannot simply reflect realities. There is a process of construction at work.

We now understand that such a process is transactional, and communal; it involves us sounding our voices, and others conceiving that sound and translating that into meaning.

Thus, the material and sonic experience of voice—whispering, laughing, speaking, singing, yelling—seems to be natural and universal. But such experiences of voice are never independent of the cultural meanings attributed to that sound, and to the real or imagined notions of that body.