

Speechcraft: Learning elocution in the olden days

by [Martin E. Marty](#) in the [February 24, 2004](#) issue

Just in time to help me understand the 2004 political campaign and church scene, my son Micah presented me with *Appleton's School Readers Fifth Reader*. Back in 1878-79, when it was published, elementary school children could still read Shakespeare and Byron. They were also to learn elocution, tutored by Mark Bailey of Yale College, whose lessons appear among the readings in a variety of "how to" sections.

When policy or statistical wonks prepare to report, they should turn to Bailey's section on "how to render matter of fact and earnest ideas." Advice: use "moderate" degree of "force" and "time" and "slide" of voice."

"How to render noble ideas" is next. A phrase such as "the greatest candidate for president" should evoke such words as "heroic, grand, sublime, glorious, magnificent, . . . heavenly, godlike, etc." To convey this, Bailey tells us, "the QUALITY of voice here should be "pure," not "aspirated." When all the breath exhaled in making a vowel sound is vocalized, the tone is "pure" in quality. When only a part of the breath thus used is vocalized, the tone is "aspirated" in quality.

Next is "how to render sad ideas"—in present-day politics, for example, "I am forced to drop out of the primaries" and in religion, "benevolences are down, and we have to cut staff." The *Fifth Reader* recommends words like "pathetic, pitiful, distressful, lamentable" as appropriate. Elocutionarily, try this: "The 'semitone' is the most characteristic element in the expression of pathos . . . "the 'long slide,' . . . when shortened by a semitone, . . . expresses earnest pathos, or manly and womanly sorrow."

Next is "how to render humorous ideas," where "good-natured wit, raillery, pleasantry, jesting, punning, etc." call for a "compound slide" or "circumflex," with smoother stress. But humor is in such short supply in state and church that we will waste no time on it.

“How to render impassioned ideas” deserves attention. Real or fake passion is abundant on political television or in denominational debates. Expressing “anger, defiance, revenge, hatred, terror, intense scorn, remorse and shame” demands no new elements, just “the extreme degree” of all the elements of speech: “very loud force,” “very long slides,” “very abrupt stress,” all of which come naturally.

This leads up to relevant advice for the next step, when the political ads turn killer and church-body disputes become lethal: “How to render scornful and sarcastic ideas.” The *Reader* says, “This head includes irony, mockery, scoffing, caustic wit and raillery, indirect accusation, insinuation of evil, etc.” Let’s illustrate from religion: “They think they can just pick and choose which biblical commands they want to follow,” from one camp, versus “If they were consistent, they’d notice that they have departed from the Bible by abolishing slavery, letting worshiping women’s heads go uncovered and obstreperous kids go unexecuted. But they *would* have a hang-up about a few verses about homosexuality.” You get the drift.

Elocutionally, here is where Bailey’s advice grows most complex. Sometimes, our teacher writes, “compound abrupt stress is the characteristic vocal element which expresses this scornful spirit. The . . . quality of voice is more or less aspirated, to suit the nature and intensity of the feeling.”

Better duck. There is a lot of aspirating coming our way. Now, when trash mouth and in-your-face speech and gesture replace the gentler practices of children tutored long ago, many of us feel a lot of “compound abrupt stress” coming on. It’s going to be a long year.