



Radio language: writing for the ear

Don't be afraid of speaking!

Many people are afraid to talk on the radio because they think they do not speak "well" enough.

Maybe they think so because they have an accent, because they speak a dialect or because they do not have a "radio voice". But who actually decides who speaks "well" and who does not, or what is right and what is wrong? Spoken language in particular is something very individual.

Nevertheless, there are certain tips and rules which help a speaker to express themselves clearly on the radio.

Radio language is spoken language

When we listen to the radio, it is best if we feel that we are being spoken to directly. The more the language spoken resembles "our" language, i.e. the language we communicate in every day, the more likely we are to feel this way.

Even though what is said on the radio often sounds "spontaneous", this is an illusion: radio texts are well prepared and often written down completely in advance. This is because, unlike everyday speech, what is said on the radio must reach the listeners clearly, directly and without unnecessary filler words. The information is clearly worked out, punch lines are rehearsed beforehand and the verbal imagery, examples and comparisons are selected appropriately.

However, these predefined texts should sound as if they were quite naturally "said in passing".

Such texts do not have much in common with the written language learnt at school. Writing in the way that people speak takes a lot of practice.

Composition and structure of radio texts

Radio texts are linear. It is essential that radio texts can be understood as soon as they are heard. In order for the listeners to be able to follow, a radio text must be put together simply and logically, and it needs to be structured with linguistic elements.

Plain sentence construction: one piece of information per sentence. The important ideas must be arranged logically and expressed in consecutive sentences.

Convolute sentence structures do not belong on the radio. Subordinate clauses are only used very sparingly.

Select and reduce. Composing a clear and simple radio text means concentrating on the essentials. Thus, anyone who wants to write such a text must choose the most important or interesting information from what is available. This choice is subjective – and it is allowed to be!

The "w" questions. When structuring and selecting, the "w" questions help: Who is speaking / acting etc.? What is happening? Where? Why? When was it? How many? etc.

Structuring a radio text. A radio text should be organised clearly and simply. Its structure should be communicated, so that the listener can follow it. Here, the introduction usually acts as a headline which announces what it is all about. Afterwards, the ideas should follow each other in a logical order and should be linked together.

The opening. The first sentences should arouse curiosity because they determine whether or not the listener "stays tuned". Therefore, it is worth putting careful thought into the opening.

On the radio, repetition (redundancy) is both helpful and allowed. It helps the listeners if central ideas or important terms are repeated in the text. Brief summaries of what has been said, especially before a new aspect is addressed, also make it easier to follow the content of a text. This beneficial repetition in radio texts is also referred to as redundancy.

Tips for clear and vivid language in radio texts. Anything said on the radio must be very specific in order for the listener to be able to take it in properly. Descriptions and vivid comparisons ensure that the listener can "picture" what is said.

Concrete rather than abstract. Accurate observation and perception during research work is the basis for clear linguistic description. Only someone who has really "grasped" something can express it precisely.

Abstract language: typical spring flora

Concrete language: snowdrops, crocuses and daffodils

Verbs move. It is mainly verbs which make texts seem lively and dynamic. It is important to use strong, descriptive verbs. For instance, just for the phenomenon of "moving on two feet", there are countless expressions: walking, sprinting, lolloping, running, ambling, strolling, bustling, trotting, etc.

On the other hand, in radio language, nouns are not used for expressing actions. Only bureaucrats do this.

So instead of: making an objection

say: objecting

Careful with adjectives. There are descriptive adjectives, such as red, soft, clear etc., which paint pictures in the listener's mind. However, if too many adjectives are strung together and too few verbs are used, the text will seem stiff.

Often, adjectives not only describe, they also evaluate. But as a radio listener, I would like to form my own opinion. Evaluative adjectives can easily seem patronising.

So instead of: I now welcome to the studio a very interesting guest.

say: I now welcome Hans Meier. He composed the piece.

Active instead of passive. Sentences which use the active voice seem lively and speak directly to the listener. They are also easy to understand, because the person carrying out the action is specified. In German, another advantage is that the verb does not move to the end of the sentence.

Passive: "The music was composed 2,500 metres above sea level."

Active: "Hans Meier composed this music 2,500 metres above sea level."

DON'Ts: filler words, empty phrases, foreign words and jargon. Radio texts should be as straightforward as possible. One key difference between everyday language and radio language is that on the radio, everything unnecessary is left out.

What is said, should be said clearly. Verbal imagery is often used wrongly. Comparisons can be clumsy. So always look at your text very carefully and think about whether it really says what you mean.

If possible, foreign words, little-known jargon and abbreviations should be avoided or explained.

Beware of numbers! Numbers are very hard to understand on the radio, so as a rule they are to be avoided or simplified. If a more complex number has to be used for information purposes, it should be repeated at least once in the text.

Instead of 23.7 percent, it is better to say about a quarter.

Instead of 2008, it is better to say two / five / ten years ago.

Describe situations from within. When describing a situation, it is useful to choose a certain perspective – that of a place, a time or a person. Radio then becomes a film in the listener's head. Situations should be described in such a way that all of the listener's senses are addressed. The corresponding "w" questions are:

What does it smell like? What does it feel like? etc.

Example: It is early Wednesday evening at Helvetiaplatz. People flood into the plaza from all directions in small groups. Every little group is equipped with wine, cheese and bread, as well as fondue cutlery, complete with burner and pot.

Rhythm of speech

A text in which all sentences are structured according to the same principle feels boring. The dynamism and rhythm of a text has a lot to do with the sentence structure. Leaving out a verb now and then and going straight into a situation loosens up the text and makes it sound more like spoken language.

Example:

Post-war Baghdad. Everything is in short supply, but the occupied city is alive. Hard to imagine: Every day, there are hundreds of cultural events people come to attend – despite instability, roadblocks, military patrols and terror warnings.

Ensure good legibility. To enable a radio text to be read and spoken well, a font size of 12 to 14 points and line spacing of 1.5 lines are usually used in the script. Once a text has been written, the presenter reads it aloud to check whether what they wrote can also be spoken well. Wherever they stumble on their words, the text should be changed.

Sources

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