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## Speaking Out “The Power of Words”

By Gloria Lazar

President Barack Obama sprang to the attention of most Americans with his eloquent keynote address during the 2004 Democratic National Convention. If one considers that presentation as his entrance into the American consciousness, his inaugural speech could be viewed as his coronation. What captivated the public's attention with that first speech? And with so many of his speeches from the Presidential debates to his inauguration? Certainly the ideas he presented. But the first impression many people remembered from August 2004 was his polished speaking, the words he chose and the way he spoke: his articulation, voice, phrasing, intonation, and body language.

The old adage, “you are what eat” can be applied to communication through the phrase “you’re remembered for what you say, and how you say it.” It is not unusual for intelligence, ability, even competence to be judged in terms of how someone speaks. President Obama happens to be a unique individual in his use of language and his speaking abilities.

From their earliest years, most children find words are the best way to express their needs and interests. Gaining the attention of parents, teachers, and even peers, frequently depends on how well a child speaks. In job interviews, adults often make the cut, or don't, by the way they speak. The ability to translate ideas into words and present those words so they are understood

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and appreciated is a miraculous skill only human beings possess. No other species has evolved to the point of being able to use language in a spontaneous way as human beings do. This facility seems to develop naturally in most children and becomes more refined in adolescence and adulthood. How does this happen?

Psychologists and linguists have speculated for years with theories about the language skills we are born with, but no one knows for sure. It does seem that most people possess a language processor that allows us to learn the words and grammar of the language spoken around us. In other words, we are hard-wired to develop language. Children learn by imitating what they hear at the same time as their own coordination for speaking develops. But sometimes one lags behind the other. In that case, their articulation may be faulty, or their choice of words or the arrangement of those words in a sentence may be incorrect.

Physical problems can make speech difficult, like ear infections that affect what the child hears, or the coordination of the movements the tongue must make in speaking.

In the case of adults, illness, injury, even aging can hamper a person's ability to understand what is being said, or make it difficult to express oneself. Communication is a skill that is completely taken for granted – unless something happens to short circuit and alter that ability. We may not have the facility to express ourselves as smoothly and eloquently as most politicians, but we do expect to be able to use language to communicate our needs, interests and opinions.

Fundamentally, we human beings like to be rewarded for our efforts. Watch the happiness on a two-year old child's face if he receives the cookie or juice he's asked for. Language takes on a reinforcing role early in life. When adults successfully use words to explain their thoughts or persuade others to believe in them, it comes down to the basic fulfillment of human needs and desires. Can you change your life with your words? Affect the lives of others around you? There's a good chance you can if you speak well. Can you change the course of the world, as in President Obama's case? Time will tell, but he's certainly had some success already. ♦

Gloria Lazar has a private practice for speech and language pathologies in Tarrytown.