Intonation: An Introduction to the Speech Stairs Method and The First Step for Immediately Improving Your Speaking Skills

Speaking while moving up and down in pitch is the intonation melody style news broadcasters, political figures, executive officers and trained business professionals use, and it is considered to be the best speaking model for professional situations. Many professionals learn how to speak using different pitch tones, which is the foundation for this program and the most beneficial communication strategy you will learn. How communication is used is the framework for one's leadership image.

The best approach for changing your intonation is to think of your speech moving up and down a staircase. Many speech-language pathologists and linguists make this comparison, and I use this analogy throughout the entire program. It is the foundation for improving the clarity of your speech. The visual analogy of a staircase is a helpful technique for understanding how to move your speech and therefore change your speaking style by speaking with sharper articulation and improved diction.

Speaking with more professional intonation is not a hard skill to learn, but it will feel funny and slower than how you are currently speaking. It will take a few weeks to get used to this new speaking pattern. After some practice, this new skill that once felt funny will feel natural, your speech melody will be more American sounding and your accent will begin to reduce.

The approach to how to use American intonation effectively is to begin your statement in your “natural” tone. Then move up one step higher on the speech stairs early in your statement, which is typically on the second or third word. Then move your pitch down the imaginary speech stairs on each syllable for the rest of your statement. Learning to speak along the speech stairs will immediately increase the clarity of your words because your speech rate will be controlled and you will have better range of motion with your speech articulators (lips, tongue and jaw), positioning you to say sounds and words more clearly. Your speech will be clearer because you are speaking with your new business intonation style.

Moving Up and Down Using the Speech Stairs Method

- In the first example, there is a rise in pitch on the word “cat.” Then the melody moves down in pitch on each syllable for the rest of the statement. The rise up in pitch followed by moving down in pitch on each syllable creates the melody.
In the second example, the rise in pitch is on the first syllable of “very.” The phrase “She is” stays at the same pitch. As soon as there is a rise in pitch, there is a drop on every syllable for the rest of the statement.

Notice the same pitch style in the other two examples.

**Note:** As a reminder, a syllable is an individual sound segment or beat in a word, which is usually a consonant and vowel combination. For example, “cat” is a one-syllable word, “pizza” is a two-syllable word and “computer” is a three-syllable word.

The next time you watch the news pay close attention to the broadcasters. You will be able to identify pitch changes and hear the “speech stairs” intonation in their statements. A good activity for improving your understanding of the speech stairs is to repeat lines from news broadcasters. Mute the television and try to say the line you just heard in the same spoken style.

**Be flat on each step:** When you are coming down the stairs on every syllable, be sure your speech is flat on every step to avoid an upward inflection in pitch on the vowel sounds. This is a common habit for accented speakers. English does not have any significant pitch rises on individual vowel sounds. I like the analogy of a staircase because steps are flat and do not curve up. Likewise, your pitch should not move up in inflection on vowel sounds.

**Hold the vowel sound longer on each step** to slow your speed and decrease your force, if you are a fast talker or have the habit of mumbling.

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