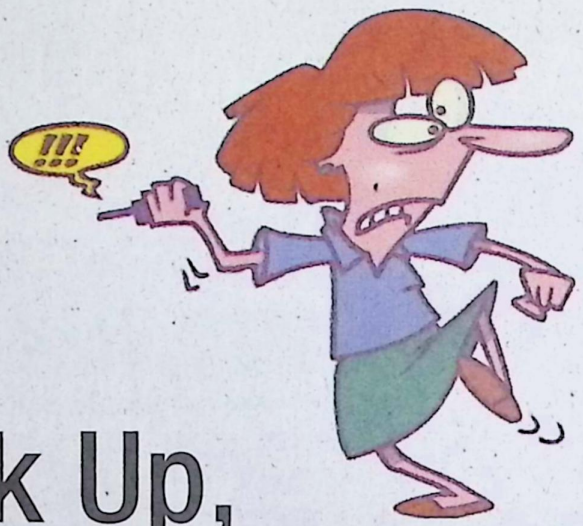
Speak Up, Don't Mumble

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One of the things your mother will probably tell you at some point in your life is to "speak clearly" and not mumble. Unless of course she herself is the mumbling sort, though one should never admit such a thing to anyone. But in general, mothers hate it when their children are inarticulate and say things that are semi-audible or involve monosyllables like It'sok, huh? dunno, nope and yup. Usually it's because of two things. Either the child has done something wrong and is therefore not particularly enthusiastic about spilling the beans - or, she has just acquired a language that only her peers seem to understand. Whatever the reason, mothers get very irritated by this inability to understand their offspring, especially when there was a time when they knew precisely what every hiccup, cry or regurgitation, meant.



There is another reason why mothers are so obsessive about articulate speech. Not only does it open doors in the cruelly competitive world where the gift of the gab is the gateway to success, it avoids a lot of unnecessary grief.

People generally like those who are soft spoken even though they can barely hear what they are saying. Maybe it's the soothing tone that appeals though more likely it's because they just don't want to listen to anyone. The danger lies however, when the person is mumbling something of relative importance: *I wonder if that's a fire alarm. I saw some smoke coming out of your computer, remember I told you, maybe it's from that...*

Sometimes it's not just the lack of assertiveness of the speaker but the lack of comprehension/hearing or more likely, because the listener hears only what he wants to hear. This gap in communication is what Chinese Whispers is based on: when a phrase or sentence gets totally distorted as it spreads to more and more people. Gossip mongers, in fact, are professional Chinese Whisperers.

This is how it works. You tell a Nosy Parker at work that you just met a very nice-looking person at the bus stand - -admittedly an unlikely happening, but just go along with it anyway. By the time you get to the office cafeteria your colleagues - even those who never even *looked* at you - will be congratulating you on your impending wedding. Someone may even ask to be treated. In case you are already married it will be much worse and you will be wondering all week why people are giving you dirty looks.

Sometimes people are so preoccupied with the task at hand that their brain is programmed according to only that reality, blocking out all other possibilities. A woman gets a call from 'Rafique' and demands: "So when are you actually going to give it? Do you think I'm an idiot? Or do you think I'm a nutcase?" The person at the other end mumbles "Apa, I am Rafique, I have already sent it". Apa is infuriated : "What! Are you saying I am a liar? If you have sent it where is it? Has some ghost taken it? You think you are so clever. You always play this game with me..." The conversation takes an ugly turn as Rafique's patience wears thin: 'Why would I do that, Apa why are you getting so agitated? I sent it within the deadline...' Suddenly Apa's ball of fury disintegrates into nothingness, replaced by horror and mortification. The Rafique at the other end is not Rafique, the master tailor who has as usual, taken Apa for a ride by not delivering her clothes, it is Rafique, her colleague from work who was supposed to send in a report. She had saved both numbers as 'Rafique Bhai'. All she can do at this point is mumble: "Sorry Rafique Bhai, I thought you were my tailor". This does not do much to improve relations but at least it gives a somewhat plausible explanation to the bewildered person at the other end.

Thus whether you are articulate or not may make a huge difference to where you will be in life. You begin to appreciate your mother's insistence to "Speak Up" while forcing you to recite Baa Baa Black Sheep in front of a room full of strangers when, years later, you are at a game show and you mumble the right answer that could make you a millionaire - if only they could hear you.