

Speaking on the Radio

by Antje Schwarzmeier

I. No fear 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 or they speak a dialect, they do not have a “radio-voice” or maybe because they keep saying “ee” instead of “i”. But who says that someone speaks “well” and someone else does not? What is “right” and what is “wrong”?

Language is something very individual. Nevertheless, there are tips and rules that help to express oneself clearly on the radio. Speak your own language.



How to reach your audience

Goal of a radio show is to reach the listeners. Whether or not this works depends on the audience feeling addressed. Therefore, it is worthwhile to think about how to speak to the listener, how to structure your texts, which wording and style to choose and how to create images in the minds of your listeners.

Radio language is oral language

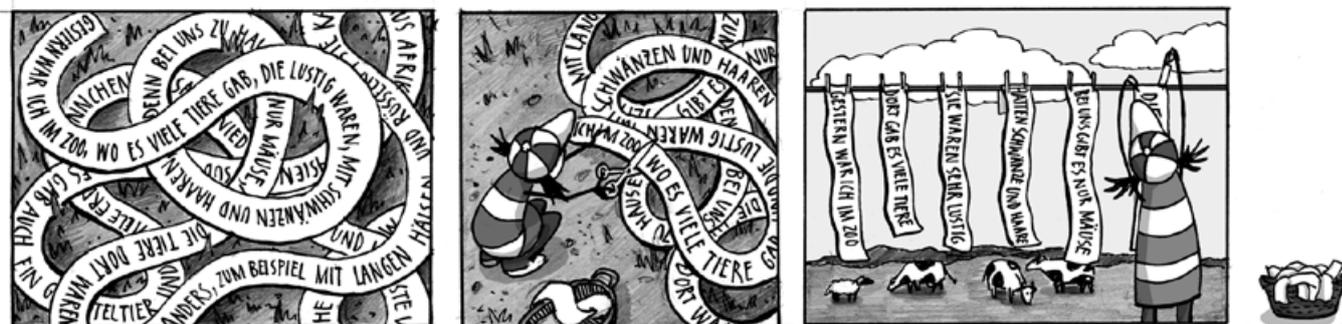
When we listen to the radio in the best case we feel spoken to directly. This is even more the case if the presenter speaks “our” language, which means the language we communicate in every day. This sounds easy but it is not all that simple- because most of us have become accustomed to use a special written style. This language differs – at least in several language areas- a lot from the language in which we speak. Although it often might sound as if the radio texts are “spontaneous”- this impression is false, radio texts are well prepared, are often written up completely or are carefully arranged using cues. This makes sense to ensure that information reaches the listener accurately and without unnecessary fillers. To create texts that we use on the radio we have to give up the acquired written style. That is why writing like you speak takes practise.

II. Composition and structure of radio texts

Radio texts are linear

The audience needs to understand what is being said in the very moment of listening. The speed with which they have to grasp the content is determined by the speaker. As opposed to written texts, with an oral text the listener does not have any visual aids like headings or paragraphs to structure the text. Also, when listening you cannot turn back a page like with a newspaper. So that the listener can follow all the same, a radio text needs to be composed logically, structured through linguistic elements, and have a simple sentence structure.

Plain sentence construction: One piece of information per sentence



The most important thoughts must be sorted and put in consecutive sentences. Convoluted sentence structures, i.e. subordinated clauses are problematic. As a rule of thumb: one semantic unit per sentence is enough – one subordinated clause is maximum.

Select and reduce

You achieve a plain and simple structure in a radio text by concentrating on the essential information. Too much information, images, facts and thoughts confuse the audience. Extra information that is interesting but distracts from the topic must be rejected. In written texts you can put this kind of information in subordinated clauses or brackets – in radio texts they need to be cut out. This means that when writing one needs to reduce the material that one has at one's disposal and make a choice.

The “W- questions”

To structure and select using the “w-questions” is helpful:

Who is speaking/acting etc.? **What** is happening? **Where**? **Why**? **When** was that? **How many**?

To provide information it is always useful to go through the “w-questions”, to answer them and on this basis to put them in order

Structuring a radio text

A radio text's structure should be organised plainly and simply. This structure should also be communicated orally so that the listener is able to relate to it. In doing so the introduction functions as a headline telling the listener what it is all about.

In the course of the text the ideas should follow each other in logical order and should be well connected. The longer a text is the more important it is to structure it according to logic units, and for example to give subheadings. For longer texts acoustic signals like pauses, changes in voice or music should be used.

The opening

The first sentences decide whether the listeners will "stay tuned" and keep on listening or not. Their purpose is to create an interest in the topic and to arouse curiosity. So it is worthwhile to carefully think about how to open. For all news texts the rule is: most important information first – that is in the first sentence. For all other genres you can deal with the opening a bit more creatively and playfully to arouse curiosity, to create an atmosphere or suspense. However, the audience should not be kept in the dark for too long as to what the following radio text is about.

Tip: Be careful with chronological structures! They are not suitable for the radio at all. It is a lot better to start now and here. This creates a connection to the listener's every-day life.

Repetitions are allowed and beneficial on the radio

The audience cannot remember everything that has been said over the course of time. Also, they cannot, unlike to reading a newspaper recapture a subheading with their eyes. Therefore, it helps the listener when central ideas are repeated and when the topic that is being talked about is mentioned once more. In doing so the same words can be used again, unlike in written language – this also helps the listener to understand the subject. Central ideas, theses and fundamental trains of thought should be repeated. It is also highly beneficial for the audience to get small summaries of what has been said, in particular before a new aspect is introduced.

II. Tips for plain and vivid language in radio texts

Texts on the radio are solely supported by oral language. In contrast to television texts, newspaper texts or conversations in person there is no visual aid for what is being said. No pictures, but also no gestures or facial expressions. Instead there is the vocal expression that supports the contents. So that the listener can develop images to what is said it is necessary to speak a very concrete language which describes closely and that evokes associations, understanding and images in the mind's eye.

Concrete instead of abstract

It is important to describe objects, people and situations so precisely that the listener can imagine them. The basis for concrete linguistic descriptions is the accurate observation and perception when researching. By the way: only when you have fully understood something you can express it precisely. This also becomes obvious in our example.

Abstract Language: *the typical spring flora*

Concrete Language: *primroses, snowdrops and crocuses*



Verbs move

Particularly, through verbs, the so-called “do-words,” texts seem vivid and dynamic because they express acts in very diverse ways. For example already the phenomenon “moving on two feet” can be expressed in uncountable ways: *e.g. walk, run, skip, stroll, trudge, prowl, hasten, trot etc. etc.*

Be careful with adjectives

There are descriptive adjective like red, soft, clear etc. that support and concretise the image that the listener has. However, when stringing together too many adjectives and no verbs are inserted the text will seem stiff. There is also another problem with adjectives: often they relate to an evaluation. As a listener you like to form your own opinion on whether you find something is „beautiful“, „interesting“ or „bad.“ Evaluative adjectives therefore often seem patronising.

Active instead of passive

Sentences that are constructed in active voice relate directly to the listener and are more vivid. Advantage: the agent is specified. Variante: In German another advantage of active voice constructions is that the verb does not move to the end of the sentence.

Example:

Passive: “the music was composed at an altitude of 2500 metres.”

Active: “Hans Meier composed this music at an altitude of 2500 metres.”

Avoid fillers

Fillers disturb the listening. When we speak without being prepared we use them to fill the pauses that we need to think and to hide any uncertainties. On the radio they should be strictly avoided.

Example:

e.g. so, basically, and, as I said, just, like, I'd say, yeah...

Avoid flowery phrases

Imagery, metaphors and descriptions have to be correct to evoke concrete images in a listener. With flowery or set phrases and unsuitable images you achieve the opposite.

Avoid foreign words or scientific languages

Complicated wording, scientific terms or foreign words make listening harder.

Beware of numbers!

Numbers are hard to understand on the radio therefore as a rule they should be avoided or simplified. The date: "28-06-2005" can be substituted by temporal words like: "yesterday", "today", "the day after tomorrow" etc. Instead of "9.30" – "half past nine", instead of "9.28" – "around half past nine" is better. Or maybe "in the morning" etc. if it does not have to be so exact. But be careful: any date needs to refer to the show's time of broadcast. Statistics can often be simplified. Instead of "3412 of 10.000 respondents stated that..." – "one third of the respondents stated..." Also comparisons ("as big as a soccer-field") make numbers easier to comprehend.



Describing situations from within

When describing a situation it is useful to concentrate – on a place, a time or a person. In the following the author has chosen a snapshot of a chosen place before the beginning of a show.

Example:

Wednesday evening in the Pavillon at the Weinberg in central Berlin. At 9 o'clock there are no seats anymore and still young people by and large are pushing into the room already completely filled with smoke. They lounge on the black artificial leather sofas, grin at the mirrored walls and drink beer. The Pavillon with its sixties atmosphere is hip and hip are also the protagonists of this event: the Surfpoeten

Situations should be described in a way that addresses all senses of a listener – so you can describe what it smells like (filled with smoke), what it feels like (crowded) etc.

Speaking rhythm

A text in which all sentences are built the same in principle seems boring. How you construct sentences has a lot to do with dynamic and rhythm of a text. So you can leave out a verb now and then to go directly into the situation. Also you can look at oral language for guidance.

Be careful to write intelligibly

Write in large fonts (12-14 pt) and use large spacing (1.5 spaced). When the text is complete you should definitely read it out loud to check that what you have written is easy to say, i.e. if you would say it that way orally.

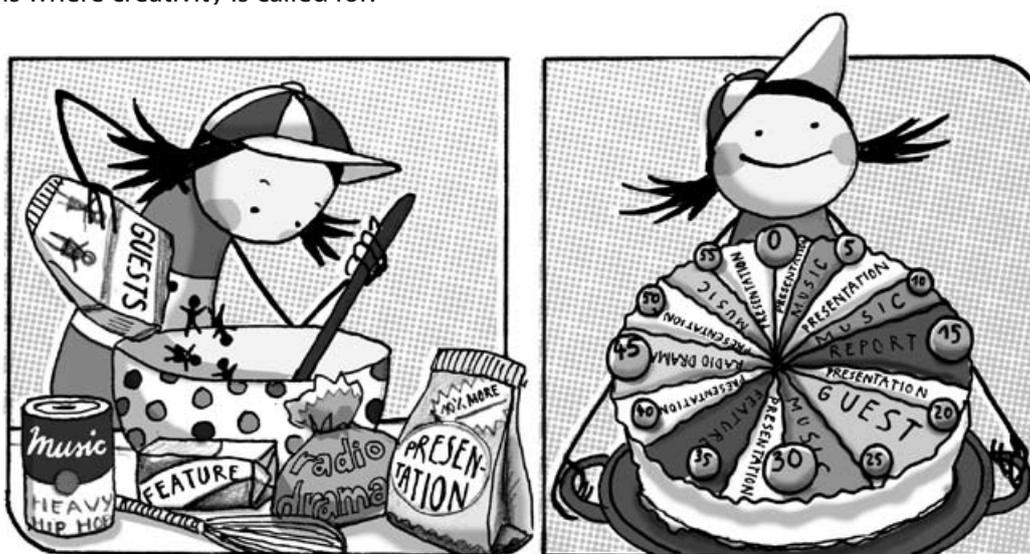
Presentation

by Antje Schwarzmeier

A presenter is the person who guides through a radio show. The texts that he speaks are called “presentations.” This means the presenter has two central tasks at the same time:

- to structure the show in a plain and simple language
- to intrigue the audience, to entertain and to whet an appetite for the subjects

This is where creativity is called for!



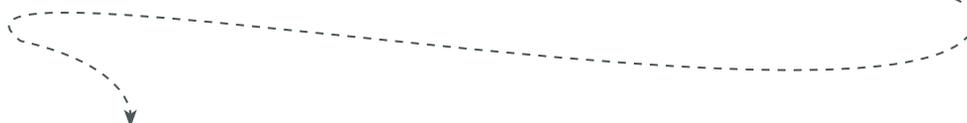
The following is part of the individual tasks of a presenter:

- He/She gives the listener an overview of the nature and events of a show (eg. overview of the topic or the topics of the radio show in the beginning)
- He/She arouses the listener’s curiosity about the subjects of the prepared programme features
- He/She guides through the show and accompanies the listener during the programme and thereby indicates the “thread”, eg. by creating passages between the different items of the programme
- With his/her personality he/she shapes the style and atmosphere of a show

Presentation technique: keyword script

In presentations it is even more important to speak freely and not to sound like it is being “read off” than in all other radio texts. However, not everything is what it seems: good presentations are only in the rarest cases spontaneous improvisations. Quite the contrary: presentations need to be well prepared to be the way they were supposed to be and to avoid unnecessary fillers and flowery phrases.

You can write down a whole text and highlight the most important words with a highlighter. However, it sounds best if you work with a keyword script. There is a special technique to do this which we will present in the following. However, quite some practise is necessary to feel comfortable using it. Let’s take the following example:



Example:

Hello and welcome in today's radio-show here at Radio Corax with Mohini and Barbara.

Our topic today is: women between cultures. What kind of problems can result from a life in different worlds?

And, can the life-experience from different countries also enrich?

In addition, we have picked some corresponding music – and were astonished ourselves just how many women have made songs about life in different worlds.

Greeting, Interaudio radio-show

<i>Topic today:</i>	<i>Women between cultures</i>
	<i>Problems?</i>
	<i>Enrichment?</i>

<i>Picked corresponding music</i>	<i>Life in different worlds</i>
	<i>Astonishing!</i>
	<i>Many women</i>
	<i>Many songs!</i>

On the left-hand side the central idea, the main information, is taken down, on the right side detailed information, differentiations and additional information follows – often there are more verbs there.

Exercise

Try to spontaneously create a presentation from these keywords:

Cycling trip, downpour, kids tired, town still far away

Working with keywords takes a lot of practise – the system shown above is further developed individually by everyone who works with it.