Speak the speech, I pray you, as I pronounced it to you, trippingly on the tongue.

—Shakespeare

We sometimes forget that amplification is not the only way to improve a hearing-impaired person’s ability to understand speech in the natural environment. Intervention at the other end of the communication act, by urging the talker to “speak more clearly,” may yield its own unique dividends. Over the past decade, advocates of “clear speech” have advanced this concept substantially.

Some of the many individuals who have made seminal contributions to a basic understanding of clear speech include Louis Braida at MIT, Dianne Kewley-Port at Indiana University, Sarah Ferguson at the University of Kansas, Karen Helfer at the University of Massachusetts, and Nancy Tye-Murray at CID—Washington University School of Medicine. Research has been focused principally on the effects of slowing speech rate, improving enunciation, emphasizing key words, and inserting pauses at clause boundaries.

In this issue of JAAA, a group of Canadian investigators, Rachel Caissie of Dalhousie University, Melanie Campbell of the University of Alberta, Wendy Frenette of the Chaleur Regional Hospital, Lori Scott and Ilona Howell of the Nova Scotia Hearing and Speech Centres, and Anouk Roy of the Hôpital Dr. Georges L. Dumont, present a fascinating account of a study asking the question “Does intervention with communication partners make a difference?” In other words, to what extent can you help a hearing-impaired person by training his or her spouse or other frequent communication partner in the principles of clear speech?

Caissie et al recorded the speech output of two elderly males whose wives were hearing-aid users. One (the experimental talker) was given a total of one hour of formal training on how to produce clear speech. The other (control talker) was simply instructed to speak clearly. Both talkers recorded sentences from the CID Everyday Sentences Test on three occasions: pretraining, one week after training, and one month after training. These recordings were then played to 15 participants with normal hearing and 15 participants with bilateral sensorineural hearing loss.

Not surprisingly, just asking a talker to speak more clearly improved speech understanding in both groups, but formal training in principles of clear speech was even more effective in improving word recognition. Indeed, when participants were tested in background noise, the hearing-impaired group performed as well as the normal group for the talker trained in clear speech. Caissie et al conclude that: “if frequent communication partners are trained to use clear speech, rather than simply being provided with instructions or general information on clear speech, the recognition of their speech by adults with a hearing loss, in the presence of background noise, potentially can reach levels attained by adults with normal hearing.”

These findings suggest that a brief period of formal training of a hearing-aid user’s partner in the principles of clear speech may pay handsome dividends in improved speech understanding. Can we get a CPT code for this?

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