

Why stutter more?

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Stutterers want to not stutter, but they also want to stutter. What is this second desire? Why do our minds, our mouths, keep returning to stuttered speech? And can we find pleasure in it, since we keep wanting it, despite ourselves? Can we even start to want to stutter more?

At a bar, I lean toward the bartender to order a drink, and stutter when I say it: “Hi, how are you? Can I have a Bl-Bl-Bl-Blue Moon?” I turn to my friend and say how good it felt to stutter like that, in a one-off interaction, with that kind of a bounce. I’m surprised, because I usually don’t notice the pleasures of stuttering. But there it is: my voice.

Part of it is physical: the exhilaration of stuttering, that little loss of control that resolves itself so beautifully sometimes. I am falling through the air for an instant, then catching the ground again, like Fred Astaire pretending to trip when he dances.

Part of it is about hearing my voice, and knowing others hear it too: the special stuttered fluency that belongs just to me and other stutterers. When I am fluent like non-stuttering people, I am passing, and I know it could end at any second. When I am fluent and stuttering, I am speaking as myself.

Part of it is about personal history: stuttering marks a move away from fear and shame. After years of covert stuttering, every open stutter is a hard-won victory that fills me with a feeling of pride.

And part of it is about language: When I stutter, I’m watching with curiosity the way my listener reacts - confused for an instant - and thinking about how delicate all our conversations are, how sensitive to any pause or interruption. Stuttering may give us special insight into language by breaking it open and exposing its seams.

To a stutterer, spoken words carry a dimension of meaning that’s inaccessible to fluent speakers. This dimension is a site of anguish, anxiety and labour (whether that means speech therapy techniques or secondary behaviours), but it can also be a place for curiosity, insight and social connection.

Stuttering is historically understood by professionals through a medical lens, but limiting one’s engagement with stuttering to these interpretations

is a mistake. As a phenomenon of language, stuttering belongs as much to the arts and humanities as it does to speech pathology or even psychology. Looking at stuttering in this way can reveal deep wells of insight into the phenomenon, and into speaking and language as a whole. It may be a way to make the argument for stuttering more – an argument that seems necessary to counteract the overwhelming imperative to stutter less. How can we play with that second desire, the need to stutter? And how can we rethink its meaning to stop ourselves from understanding stuttering as brokenness?

By stuttering more, I mean something different than ‘avoidance-reduction therapy’ or ‘effective communication’ that integrates stuttering but attempts to clean it and keep its awkwardness in check. Many of us have found that embracing stuttering leads to less tension and fewer blocks, and this itself is a profound experience. I wonder if we can approach stuttering without the language of palliative care, without always associating stuttering (even ‘clean’ stuttering) with pain and fluency with relief.

To do so, we need to make an argument for stuttering itself. But the idea of stuttering more can appear naive or even offensive. It’s easy for some of us with high natural fluency to argue for stuttering, but what about more overt stutters who just want smoother speech so they can live their lives? I don’t want to deny these experiences, but it seems important to offer an alternative. We can’t let palliative arguments stop us from advocating for stuttering as a potentially enriching experience. At the same time, we should keep in mind the discomfort of stuttering and the hostility stutters face from the fluent world. These are inextricable parts of the stuttering experience.

The project of depathologizing stuttering as a way to reduce stigma and shame becomes easier when we engage with it through a different framework: one that allows room for playfulness, for aesthetic insight, and for an analysis of stuttering’s place in culture. Part of this project happens in academia and among speech-pathology professionals, but engaging with stuttering in this way is just as vital and accessible to stutters in self-help groups, in stuttering therapy sessions, and in their daily lives.

One attempt to look at stuttering and aesthetics, by 20th-century French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, creates a window into a new way to understand the phenomenon. Stuttering’s atmospheric quality, as Deleuze puts it in the essay ‘He Stuttered’ (1997), is like a trembling, an oscillation; the quiver, the murmur, the vibrato. These affective characteristics are linked to the speaker, but in novels, Deleuze writes, we can see how they signify more than just the speaker’s speech production. Rather, “language itself stutters”: it’s linked to

the entire atmosphere of the novel, and has significance outside of speech. “Language trembles from head to toe.”

Similarly, it can be exhilarating to think of stuttering not as a speech disorder but as a phenomenon that happens within language itself, and that even improves language. Language stutters, Deleuze says, when it reaches its limit; great works of art “attain pure visions” and expose “an underside, an inverse, an inkstain or unreadable handwriting”. When we stutter, we can imagine ourselves speaking at a limit, exposing the atmospheric potential of words, and bringing to the surface their strange physicality. “Everyone can talk about his memories,” says Deleuze, “invent stories, state opinions in his language,” but this is something else.

One example of ‘something else’: A stutterer at a party stands in a small group. She knows two of the people in her circle, but the three others she hasn’t met yet (maybe the stutterer experiences a trembling of anticipation). After talking for a few minutes, one of the strangers reaches over to introduce herself. As they shake hands, the stutterer goes to say her name, but can’t. Instead, she says something different over and over, to buy time - maybe “um” - and tries to smile as she stares into the stranger’s eyes. The group realizes something is off within an instant. Their hands are still together, but they’ve stopped squeezing. Another three seconds pass and the stutterer glances over into the eyes of one of the people she knows, who immediately says her name for her.

When the underside of language is revealed by stuttering in this way, in the instant before saying a name, it sends an immediate shock through the listeners. In one way, it seems like speech is broken when this happens, but we may do better to understand it as simply something that happens in language. The stuttered introduction carries a unique charge that, when we step away, can almost seem exciting. And the attendant gestures - the long handshake, the glance to the friend, the nervous laughs - are also compelling, atmospheric.

While the surface of conversation may feel relatively level to most fluent speakers, to stutterers, familiar with anticipation, memories, and physical struggles, it’s infused with significance. When introducing ourselves, we see the conversation from above, watch the shock our listeners receive, and navigate their responses as best we can. Stutterers, in some way, become experts at speaking.

Stuttering more can be a way to play with the drama of conversation. And when we think of stuttering as a valid thing that happens in language - ‘language itself stutters’ - it might become easier to experience stuttering without shame.

It might even become something we want to experience, a special dimension of conversation that we can find meaning within.

Stuttering therapy that shows us how to shape our words fluently or be 'successful communicators' will never help us access the underside of language that stuttering can reveal. Stutterers experience a uniquely embodied and passionate version of speech, but we are not usually equipped to observe it with curiosity. Rather, when we seek help, we are given ways to tamp down the strangeness of stuttering. It's essential that speech pathologists understand what language looks like to stutterers. They should do so not only so that they can help stutterers, but also because stuttering is rich with meaning in its own right, and is worth looking at - not just normalizing.

Maybe by privileging the atmospheric power of the stutter, we can resist what we've been taught to value about talking: efficiency, cleanness, and transaction. Stuttering more suggests another set of speaking values: passion, disobedience, curiosity.

References

- Deleuze, G. (1997). He stuttered. In: *Essays Critical and Clinical* (pp.23-29); trans: D.W. Smith & M.A. Greco. Minneapolis, MI: University of Minnesota Press.