

SMOOTH TALK

What we listen for in a voice

The sound of a sexy voice can echo for generations ("Happy Birthday, Mr. President..."). And the dissonance of an ear-blasting cackle can turn away even the most interested suitors (call it the Fran Drescher effect). But between these extremes, how much do we weigh the voice of a potential partner—and what do we listen for when they first open their mouths?

Accents affect our perceptions, as do speed and pitch. We judge fast talkers to be more educated, and those with varied inflection to be more interesting. Men prefer higher voices in women, and women like deeper voices in men (especially when ovulating or looking for a short-term relationship). Pitch correlates only loosely with height, but is closely tied to hormone levels—meaning it's a good indicator of fertility or dominance, as well as health and attractiveness. "In general, people with attractive voices have attractive faces," says David Feinberg, a psychologist at McMaster University.

If your voice eclipses your face as your star quality, keep your mouth moving. A recent study showed that hearing tones that matched men's or women's voices made androgynous headshots appear more masculine or feminine. In other words, a sonorous voice can actually enhance your looks.

