Episode Book

EPISODE #6410

Why Morning Voice Happens and What Warming Up Does

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SYNOPSIS

Morning vocal stiffness presents a real challenge for voice actors and dataset creators alike. Overnight mucus pooling and vocal fold swelling explain the groggy sound, but the thirty-minute routines narrators swear by rest on surprisingly thin controlled evidence. Controlled trials show massive individual variation for steam and straw phonation, while revealing that straw exercises actually shine brightest as post-session vocal recovery rather than pre-show warm-ups.

TRANSCRIPT



Corn

Hours of reading sentences into a microphone, and the first twenty minutes sound like someone else wearing your voice. Daniel's building a fine-tuning dataset of his own speech, and the problem he's hit is the start of a session, especially mornings, when everything comes out flat and low on energy.



Corn

He wants to know what a proper warm-up looks like for spoken word, what narrators and broadcasters actually do, how long it takes, and whether any of it holds up or it's all folklore.



Herman

Herman Poppleberry here, and I should say the folklore question is the good part. Start with why your voice sounds like that, because it's not in your head, it's in your throat.



Corn

Before the physiology, what's the tension you're about to walk us into?



Herman

The morning voice problem is real and well explained. The routines professionals swear by are remarkably consistent in shape, and thin on controlled evidence. Narrators treat thirty minutes as non-negotiable. The one controlled morning warm-up study I know of used three-minute doses.



Corn

Thirty minutes versus three. Somebody's padding.



Herman

Maybe nobody, maybe it's different things being measured. We'll get there. Physiology first, then what the pros do, then what survives scrutiny, and what it means for a dataset and not just a throat.



Corn

My throat's been the same since Mongolia. Go on.



Herman

Anthony Jahn, a voice specialist, wrote a piece for Classical Singer on exactly this. During sleep we mostly stop swallowing, so mucus transport grinds to a near halt and it pools at the back of the throat. The cilia, the little hairs that sweep it along, also go to sleep and clear less vigorously.



Corn

So you wake up with a swamp.



Herman

Roughly. And the vocal folds don't make their own mucus. They rely on lubrication secreted just above them. Add dry heated bedroom air and the folds are working with a poor supply.



Corn

So the first thing you do when you clear your throat in the morning is basically a reflex to fix the swamp.



Herman

That's the intuition, though throat clearing is a bit of a trap. It slams the folds together, so it's a blunt tool for a delicate job. Swallowing and sipping water do the same work more gently.



Corn

How hard is that slam, really? It feels like nothing.



Herman

Because the folds are tiny and fast. Think of clapping your hands together a few times to get dust off. Once is fine. Do it forty times a morning, every morning, and your palms notice. Habitual throat clearing is a classic thing voice clinicians ask people to cut back on, because the irritation it causes creates the urge to clear again.



Corn

So it feeds itself.



Herman

A little loop, yes.



Corn

Daniel's in Jerusalem. Today's twenty-six degrees, so at least nobody's heating anything.



Herman

Fair, though air conditioning does the same job. There's also swelling. Jahn says that even after a normal, uneventful evening he commonly sees some redness and mild swelling of the folds the next morning. And there's the Lombard effect. We unconsciously speak about thirty-five decibels above background noise, so a sixty-to-seventy decibel restaurant puts your voice over a hundred.



Corn

So dinner out is a vocal workout you didn't sign up for.



Herman

Yes. Your morning voice isn't lazy, it's recovering.



Corn

That reframes "low energy." My own morning voice has always been low energy, and I'd call it a feature.



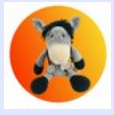
Herman

Your morning voice is your afternoon voice, Corn. Nobody can tell the difference.



Corn

Noted.



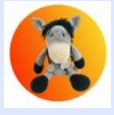
Herman

Jahn's prescription is the shower. Vocalize in the steam, because the warmth and moisture bring the larynx back quickly. Big glass of water, maybe a neti pot, long steamy shower, then any real vocal effort.



Corn

A neti pot first thing. That's a lot of plumbing before a sentence.



Herman

There's also a warning that matters for someone doing hours of takes. Jahn says one sign of small nodules is needing longer and longer warm-up periods. A warm-up that keeps stretching isn't training gain, it's a clinical signal.



Corn

So if Daniel's thirty-minute routine becomes forty-five, that's not discipline.



Herman

That's a doctor. I was a pediatrician, I can say that much with confidence.



Corn

How would he even notice? Creeping change is hard to see from inside.



Herman

That's why a log helps. Write down how long it takes before the voice feels settled. A single slow morning means nothing, but a steady drift over weeks is the pattern worth taking to someone with a scope.



Corn

Okay, so what do narrators do?



Herman

Lesley Ann Fogle, who narrates, says she warms up at least thirty minutes on narration days and says do not skip it. Body first: head and shoulder rolls, wrist and arm circles, side bends that get the rib cage moving. Then lip trills and tongue trills, humming layered on top. Then what she calls mask removal. Blow out the cheeks, trace your teeth with your tongue, gargle, stretch the soft palate, do the yoga lion face.



Corn

Lion face is a lot to ask of anyone before coffee.



Herman

Then vowels, then vowels with inflection. Statement. Question? Adamant question?! Demand! Then consonants, tongue twisters, an open throat drill, like holding an imaginary egg at the back of the mouth, and finally character voices.



Corn

Honestly, the egg is the only part I'd skip. I don't have anywhere to put it.



Herman

Her most transferable habit is a running list of sentences she stumbles over. She pastes them in and drills them. One on her list is "Daniel was feeling agitated that the detective kept ignoring his questions."



Corn

That's a cruel sentence. Agitated, detective, ignoring, all in a row.



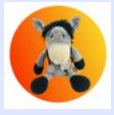
Herman

And for Daniel it's directly usable. Reading sentence after sentence, he'll find his own trouble ones. Say them slowly, then at speed, and the pattern usually shows up as a particular cluster of consonants his mouth wants to merge.



Corn

Right, though for a recognition dataset, the stumbles are arguably the useful data.



Herman

That's a good tension, and we'll come back to it. Another narrator, at Shearwater Productions, describes the load. A singing-heavy show should have only an hour or so of vocal performance, max, and yet she says she can spend eight or nine hours recording on a heavy day.



Corn

So the job description contradicts the health advice.



Herman

Her warm-up is sirens and scales, over-enunciating ordinary words, breath work, whole-body work, bare feet, compression socks. And right before the mic she really chews her face. She needs chew-your-face breaks during long sessions too, because the jaw tightens over time.



Corn

Why would the jaw matter that much? It's the voice that's supposed to be working.



Herman

Because a clenched jaw changes the shape of the space the sound travels through, and it fights the tongue. Tension there tends to make speech sound tight and effortful, which is close to the opposite of what Daniel wants on tape.



Corn

And you can't hear it while you're doing it, I'd guess.



Herman

Often not. You notice around hour two, when your cheeks ache and the recording sounds pinched. A scheduled break to loosen the jaw beats waiting for the ache.



Corn

Compression socks for a voice. I'm sure the donkey in you is thrilled.



Herman

I have never worn compression socks on a donkey leg and I won't start now. But her hydration take is the pragmatic one. It's the warm water as much as the tea that helps your throat. Plain tap water or steam works. Research on dairy is mixed, and caffeine and alcohol can add roughness, but that doesn't mean no morning coffee.



Corn

So the tea ritual is mostly the warm.



Herman

Mostly. She also says warm up the register you'll actually use. A day of high character voices means warming the upper range, a day of low male characters means the lower one. And placing a character right on your break, the passaggio, exhausts the voice faster.



Corn

Daniel's one register, his own. That simplifies it.



Herman

It does. One more practical set: a narrator handout recommends eight to ten glasses of water daily, humidity in the room at forty to sixty percent, and ten to fifteen minutes of steam before long sessions.



Corn

That's the playbook, then. Body, trills, face, articulation, water, steam.



Herman

That's the playbook. Now the evidence, which is where it gets humbling.



Corn

Go.



Herman

The most on-point study is Keltz and McHenry in the Journal of Voice. Twelve young women, three mornings, three conditions: three minutes of steam breathing, three minutes of semi-occluded vocal tract exercise, which is blowing bubbles through a straw into water while saying "oo," and both combined. They measured phonatory threshold pressure before and after, basically how much air pressure it takes to start the folds vibrating. Participants were up about an hour, no shower, no hot drinks, minimal talking.



Corn

Twelve people. Not a crowd.



Herman

And the headline is that the variability within each person and condition was so high the authors said the means and standard deviations were meaningless. Of seven usable participants, steam was best for one, the straw for three, both for three. And steam was also the worst condition for three people, who all reported strongly disliking it.



Corn

So steam is either your best friend or your enemy, depending on who you ask.



Herman

Their conclusion was that these strategies aren't universally successful and should be recommended only after checking they work for that person. And they note that even blowing bubbles can be done poorly, sometimes with counterproductive results.



Corn

You can do bubbles wrong. That's an achievement.



Herman

Where effects showed up they were small. The pressure drop was about a third of a centimeter of water. I wouldn't hang a routine on it.



Corn

A third of a centimeter. I've had longer pauses between my own words.



Herman

Everyone has, Corn. But here's where the support is stronger. Straw phonation as recovery rather than warm-up. A twenty twenty study had twenty-five healthy people do an hour of vocal loading, then either ten minutes of vocal rest or ten minutes of straw phonation. Both helped, but straw did significantly better. And a twenty twenty-six randomized trial with a hundred and fourteen adults tested rest, straw, or a split of the two after loading.

S

Sven

Ah, yes, the morning voice. I can explain it. Think of the larynx as a clock, and the mucus as the oil between the gears. Overnight, the oil thickens. You do not force the gears. You warm the oil, slowly, gear by gear.

S

Sven

The first gear is water. One large glass, exactly at seven minutes past waking. Not six. Not eight. The second gear is steam, and I must correct your host: the study used three minutes, not three and a half. The difference matters.

S

Sven

Then the third gear, the lip trill. Forty seconds, no more. You see, the whole warm-up is a gear train. If you rush the first gear, the last gear is off by a full second, and your recording is ruined.

S

Sven

And the evidence? I am still placing the first gear. The study is small, and the individual variation is large. So the honest answer is that I do not yet know. Ask me again in, oh, forty minutes.

S

Sven

I must go now. Another booking. But remember: warm the oil, count the seconds, and never trust a warm-up that begins with a cough. Goodbye, goodbye.



Corn

So the better-evidenced use is after the work, not before.



Herman

For someone doing hours of takes, that matters. Jahn, by the way, dismisses the idea of warming down the larynx to clear lactic acid. He says he doesn't think it's relevant. Yet straw after load has the best data of anything we've discussed.



Corn

So the doctor says no warm-down and the trials say try the straw.



Herman

Those aren't quite in conflict. Jahn is rejecting one explanation, the lactic acid story. The trials don't depend on it. They just show people recovering better after straw work than after silence.



Corn

So the practice can survive even if the stated reason doesn't.



Herman

Medicine is full of that. Plenty of treatments worked for decades under explanations that later turned out wrong. The outcome is what you test, and the story is a separate question.



Herman

The mechanism-based reasoning is solid, thanks to Titze's work on semi-occluded vocal tracts. Lip trills, tongue trills, humming, straws, all the same family: partial blockage at the mouth raises pressure above the folds and makes vibration easier. That's the physics behind what narrators already do by instinct.



Corn

So the narrators found the physics before the physicists did.



Herman

In practice, yes. Singers have been doing lip trills for generations. The theory arrived later and explained why it feels easier.



Corn

Then why is thirty minutes the standard if three minutes is what's been tested?



Herman

Most of the narrator routine isn't fold loading. It's body work, face work, articulation. My guess is the value there is motor and psychological: getting the mouth sharp, getting into the performing frame. Nobody's measured that.



Corn

I'd have guessed the opposite, that it's all ritual and the throat part is the three minutes.



Herman

Could be both. I don't know how much of the thirty is doing anything physical. What I'd say is the evidence supports the short component and is silent on the long one.



Corn

What about the folklore? There's a guide saying avoid iced drinks for two hours before recording.



Herman

I couldn't find any primary source for cold drinks constricting the folds. Treat it as folklore. Tea is mostly warm water. Dairy is mixed.



Corn

So what's Daniel supposed to do with a literature that says individual response swamps the group?



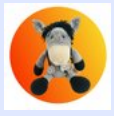
Herman

Treat it as an experiment on himself. He's uniquely positioned, because he's recording hours of audio anyway. Try straw one morning, steam the next, nothing the third, and compare the first twenty minutes.



Corn

Three mornings is thin, though. The Keltz study had the same limit and look what happened to their averages.



Herman

Right, so repeat the cycle a few times, and keep everything else steady: wake time, water, how much he talked beforehand. Otherwise he's measuring his sleep, not the straw.



Corn

And how does he judge "better"? Feeling good is slippery.



Herman

He has an advantage there. He can look at the recordings themselves: how long until pitch and loudness settle, how many takes he redoes in the first twenty minutes. Those are numbers, not moods.



Corn

And there's the dataset side. Early takes sound different from later ones, which could bias what the model learns.



Herman

Warm-up plus a discarded first few minutes is a voice strategy and corpus hygiene at once. Though Corn, your stumble point is real. If he's going to use the model on his normal speech, and his normal speech includes cold starts, maybe some of that flat morning voice belongs in the data.



Corn

That's what I'd do. Keep some of the flat ones. That's the voice that'll be dictating at nine a.m.



Herman

Although I'll admit I don't know how much a model cares.



Hilbert

The first thing is the tax guide, because it's the only book I own with no feelings in it. Nineteen seventy-four edition, orange cover, found it in a box on Sunday. Herman, I'm using it now. Every morning before I ring the plumber's office I read page forty out loud in a Yorkshire accent. Then I switch to normal. The plumber's office is a man named Desmond, and he's complained twice about the accent. I haven't stopped. Corn, you'd say



Hilbert (continued)

the accent is a waste. I say the sentences are so dull you hear only the sound. Page forty is about depreciation on commercial vehicles.



Herman

That's a real technique, actually. If the content has no pull, all your attention goes to articulation, same logic as a tongue twister but without the fun.



Corn

Yorkshire seems like a lot of extra moving parts for depreciation.



Hilbert

It's the only accent I can do with the jaw loose. The book's on the shelf by my desk. I won't replace it, the new editions have a chapter on computers.



Herman

Which is a reasonable objection, given what the old one is for.



Corn

And Desmond has presumably gotten used to the first minute being unusable.



Hilbert

He says the first minute is the best part. I think he's being polite.



Corn

Or the Yorkshire has a following.



Herman

The throwaway minute does something real for Daniel too. If the first stretch is garbage anyway, deliberately burning it off, and not saving it, is cleaner than hoping it goes unnoticed.



Hilbert

I'd still say page forty.



Corn

Can't fault the depreciation.



Corn

The open question I'd leave is whether any of this holds at four hours. No trial has put a narrator or broadcaster through a multi-hour read, so the sense of the voice coming back is practitioner testimony, not numbers. What Daniel has is hours of his own audio and a free comparison.



Herman

And the burned-off first minutes might be the best data of all, whether he discards them or not. The routine's probably shorter than the ritual, and the folklore mostly harmless.



Corn

Thanks to our producer Hilbert Flumingtop for keeping the desk running. If you want more of this, try episode fifteen, AI Gets Personal. This has been My Weird Prompts. If you want more, find us at my weird prompts dot com.



Herman

See you tomorrow.

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