DEAR Labby

Actually, “Actually”

Dear Labby,

At a recent conference, a relatively young PI gave a talk in a plenary session. The work was very good, but the talk was given in such a way that I had trouble listening to and understanding what was being said. One problem was the number of times the speaker said “actually.” Near the end of the talk I began counting and found that “actually” was often used five times in a single sentence. Should I assume that friends of hers will take her aside and tell her about this habit? Is it appropriate for a person from the audience to send an email? It was such a shame to see the presentation style detract so much from the science.

—Distracted

Dear Distracted,

You might first ponder whether a speaking disorder (e.g., a hint of a stutter) or perhaps even a degree of Asperger syndrome may have been at play, particularly since using the word five times in a single sentence goes far beyond the usual. One should be considerate in engaging someone who is coping with such challenges.

An occasional mispronunciation or misuse of a word in a talk is usually noted only in passing and is not a distraction (e.g., the frequent misuse of the of cell culture “media” when the singular is called for, which seems to distract no one but Labby). But this case goes beyond that; you were significantly distracted from the speaker’s content. The overuse of “actually” is more common in conversation than in talks, so even without the word’s use five times in one sentence, this case does seem extreme. (Of course, upon reflection one realizes that the word is rarely needed at all.)

It is possible that this hyper-use of “actually” arose during the 1980s in Marin County, CA, along with “like” and the so-called “Valley Girl” dialect as well as “upspeak,” the increase in the pitch of the voice near the end of a phrase. These nuances of American English can be engaging as a cultural phenomenon. One such quirk in our profession was the introduction, circa 1990, of starting a response to a question from the audience with “So…,” which is both a code for conveying contextual intimacy with the questioner and a bridging word that gives audiences the sense that the speaker is joining right into the question syntactically, as if there should be no hint of a pause between the last word of the questioner and the first word of the response (in order to convey “Oh, we have of course long considered this…”).

It would seem best for you to refrain from contacting the speaker, particularly as her nervous habit may be sufficiently chronic to be picked up by intramural colleagues and mentors. You are empathic in considering contacting the speaker yourself, but this delicate matter is perhaps best addressed by those who are closer to her.

—Labby

Got Questions?

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