

Tony Lapidus as LBC broadcaster James O'Brien

The art of making a good impression

How is it possible to change your voice and sound like someone else? Babel editor Dan McIntyre sat down with impressionist Tony Lapidus to find out.

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In Britain in the 1970s, the comedian Mike Yarwood made his name impersonating famous figures of the day. By the 1980s, Yarwood's cosy comedy was looking old hat but impressions were still an integral part of the alternative comedy that replaced it. Spitting Image, a satirical puppet show, made use of the voice talents of now famous performers such as Steve Coogan, Harry Enfield, Kate Robbins and Jan Ravens. And in the 1990s Rory Bremner made it big with impressions of British politicians such as John Major and Tony Blair, paving the way for later performers such as Alistair Macgowan, Ronnie Ancona, John Culshaw and Debra Stephenson, all of whom enjoyed mainstream success in the 2000s. The latest addition to this illustrious list is Tony Lapidus, whose impressions of famous names from the world of sport, entertainment and politics are uncannily accurate. But just how do you go about changing your voice to sound like someone else? I sat down with Tony to find out how he does it.

Tony, when did you first discover you could do impressions?

Very young. I think my very first impression was of Gaston from Beauty and The Beast. I remember it even today. It wasn't that it was accurate because for a start I was only about 6 and my voice still sounded like I was on helium. Speaking of which, I was always able to do a really good helium voice when I was younger. But then my voice broke. But with Gaston, I got the inflection right and it made my family laugh. Then it just went from there.

How do you go about developing an impression? Can you talk me through the process?

On the one hand, I would say 60% of it is natural. I suppose that is where what they call 'natural talent' comes into it. The closer you are to someone or the more exposure you have to them, the more naturally you pick up on things. That is why, when I was young, teachers and friends were my strongest impressions. I knew them inside out. I subconsciously pick up on people's mannerisms, tics, eye movements, mouth movements and hand gestures and of course their voice. I don't try to. It just happens. But this 60% has to be strong. There are plenty of people who are observant but if that 60% doesn't allow you to use your voice in a particularly unique way, you probably won't be a contender in the world of impressions. You will probably only take it as far as the playground and to a few workmates.

Then there is the remaining 40%. This is the part where your study comes into it and a bit of humility. Just because you can impersonate doesn't mean you have mastered everyone you have watched in a video or two. There are some people you know you can get, you recognise their mannerisms and even their voice, but you can't quite communicate that through your voice box [linguists call this the larynx; see 'The science of speech' for details]. In that case, when you know you have the potential the key is to watch them, listen to them over and over again. Don't consciously look for mannerisms. Just let it in by watching them and dedicating yourself to absorbing their way.

Kids don't consciously learn. It is subconscious and all comes from exposure to the people they are around. So, I watch and I watch and I listen and I listen and then I merge it with the 60% that was already there.

It is also key to know that the first attempt will sound very different to the later attempts. I still have recordings of when I first did certain people before I started doing this publicly and they are awful. Really, awful! When I watch them I think, how did I ever have the nerve to think I was good when this was my best attempt. But it is like everything else. Dedication, confidence and skin thicker than a rhino's.

Are there particular features of speech that you tend to pick up on when developing an impression of someone?

Absolutely. Imitable people tend to have something unique about how they speak. It may be the emphasis of certain words, particularly when they are trying to make a point. Take an easy example like President Trump. He tends to elongate the word 'and' in between sentences. When he says the word 'two' or 'too', he does so in a unique way. He doesn't pronounce it normally. He curls his lips in [what linguists call lip-rounding] more than usual and that changes totally the way he pronounces it.

LBC presenter James O'Brien is another one. He tends to really drag out some of his words when making a point. It also depends what mood he is in. If he is listening to one of his callers and allowing him to speak even though he completely disagrees with everything the caller says, he tends to intermittently throw in a very sarcastic but half-baked 'yeees' which tends to be pronounced more like 'mmyes'.

One impression I am known for is heavyweight boxing champion Tyson Fury. It is all in the 'T's at the end of each word. His whole family does it and he clearly gets it from his Dad, John Fury, who does the same thing. It is no good just doing a husky or gravelly voice to imitate those two without pronouncing certain consonants or vowels in their own unique way.

What kind of physiological changes are involved when you're doing an impression?

Small changes are key. Tightening your throat has to be done in some impressions but then you have to go up and down an octave or two depending on who you are doing. So even though some people may sound similar, the change of pitch will completely differentiate them. Some of them really take a toll on your throat though and you have to strain. Al Pacino, for example. Tyson Fury is another one. They are both gravelly so, like any muscle, you have to train your throat to get used to it so that you can go for longer while straining it.

Then there are people like Tony Soprano. Your tongue has to move to other places on the floor and roof of your mouth if you are going to pull that one off. Your jaw also alters positions because you are literally copying him. He sets the rules and if you break them too much, you will just be doing a generic New Jersey accent. All these changes alter the entire pronunciation and enable you to speak with a strong New Jersey accent but also in Tony's unique way. Another one would be Tony Montana. You will struggle to do an impression of him if you don't position your mouth like his in an upside-down smile.

Are some impressions harder to do than others? If so, what makes an impression difficult to do? And, conversely, what makes an impression easy to do?

To be honest, it is rarely the case that you decide at the very beginning of hearing someone that you can imitate them, although some are just easier. For example, Alan Carr is so distinctive that all you need to do is familiarise yourself with him a little bit.

For me, some accents cause me problems – partly because I didn't grow up around them. An example is the Crumlin accent of Connor McGregor [the MMA (mixed martial arts) fighter]. But I also don't watch everyone closely enough unless I am drawn to them. The Geordie accent seems difficult for me sometimes but I know that if I watched someone enough and listened and became better acquainted with the accent, I would be able to imitate people from there.

Then there are those who surprise you. Listening to someone who is quite dry and mundane like Jeremy Corbyn [English politician], you would never think there is anything there to imitate on first sight. But actually, there is plenty and actually he is one of the characters I enjoy doing the most even though they are more infrequent since he lost the election.

Do you have a favourite impression?

I have a few. I love doing characters from The Sopranos because I think I am really the only one in the world who does certain characters such as Junior Soprano and Livia Soprano. Plus, they offer so much comedic potential. I love gangster ones like Michael Corleone, although he is naturally less funny. It used



Tony Lapidus

to be Tyson Fury because not only did I master his voice, but the material was so easy to write because of his character.

Since I did my first James O'Brien video that went viral recently, I realised that I think he is actually my favourite one. I've watched him like a hawk and because I enjoy his humour and listening to him so much – putting politics aside – all his idiosyncrasies were absorbed like a sponge. His mannerisms, his voice inflection, his linguistic ingenuity, his wit, his choice of words. All that allows me to be creative and funny in my writing and deliver it with what I like to think is a very accurate impression. I didn't decide that by the way; his fans and haters did when my video got about half a million views in a few days which was great. He himself gave it an incredibly flattering and kind review and he articulated it in a way that only he could, which I am also very grateful for.

Is there anyone you can't do?

I have struggled to do Connor McGregor. I've been told that I improved a lot and there is a certain kind of impression of him that I can do but I have never managed to speak freely in his accent. I can hear it in my head and I know exactly how he pronounces all his words but for some odd reason, they don't always come out of my mouth in the way I hear them and I just end up stuttering and it sounds a little odd and inconsistent. That is ok, though. I try and focus on what I am good at, on who I actually enjoy watching and on who I can be original with. If every impressionist did the same classic people, that would be a little boring.

How long does it take you to perfect an impression?

It does vary. But I think if you are starting to work on someone brand new, with me at least, I watch them and listen to them for about two weeks. If I feel I can do it, I will. If not, I will take a break for about a week and then go back to them and suddenly things start to click. But, they are always a work in progress. My very first impression of Trump was awful. The difference between then and now is like night and day. My first Pauli Malignaggi impression was lacking but then became a favourite of my boxing fans.

But I think it is also important to know when it just isn't working and when to throw in the towel. In my opinion, if you don't enjoy who you are watching, that will just show in the impression. That is why I don't do football impressions despite requests. I am just never going to know the details well enough to make some cracking content. And one very, very important thing is this: never listen to a video of anyone and then try and imitate exactly what you heard. It will never ever come out right because you will find that you are trying to imitate electronics and microphones.

How important are gesture and mannerisms when you're doing an impression?

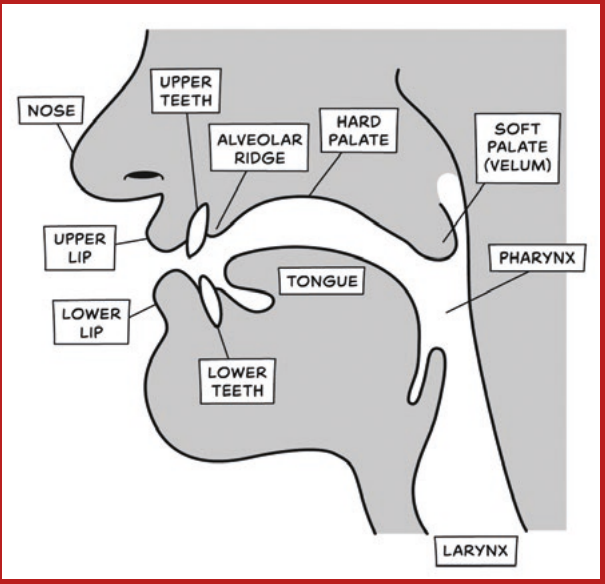
Physicality is everything in an impression. I would even say at least equally important as the voice, and sometimes even more so. I see so many people imitate Tony Soprano and some of them are great. The vocals are fantastic. But I pride myself on my observation of movement. So even if you have a weaker vocal impression, you can make it a million times better by using your eyes, the correct hand gestures, the correct body movement. That is where I think a big part of my 'talent' comes into it, if I can say that myself. I have always been able to move like people without too

THE SCIENCE OF SPEECH

The art of the impressionist lies in the science of speech. So how do we produce speech sounds?

In English we do this using an egressive pulmonary airstream mechanism. This just means that we produce speech sound by breathing out. Egressive means outward-flowing and pulmonary means relating to the lungs. As we breathe out, air travels up the trachea, or the windpipe as you might know it, and into the larynx. Inside the larynx are two bands of ligament and muscle known as the vocal folds. You might have heard these referred to as the vocal cords but 'vocal folds' is the term that linguists use. If the vocal folds are close together when the air passes through them, they'll vibrate and you'll get what's known as a voiced sound. Put your hand against your throat and say zzzzzzzz. You should feel a buzzing. Now say sssssss. This time you shouldn't feel any buzzing at all. That's because /s/ is a voiceless sound. Your vocal cords are apart when the air passes through them, meaning that they don't vibrate.

The air passes through the larynx and into the pharynx or throat. From there it can be expelled either through the mouth or the nose. And what you do with your tongue, lips, teeth and other articulators (see diagram) at this stage determines the particular sound that comes out. For example, to produce a /d/ phoneme (as in dog), the tip of your tongue needs to rest against your alveolar ridge before being moved away. A /ʃ/ phoneme (as in ship) requires the blade of your tongue to be positioned behind the alveolar ridge and for air to be channelled along a groove in the tongue and expelled against the teeth.



This is how we produce speech sounds. But the skill of the impressionist is not just in mimicking other people's individual speech segments. In addition, you need to be able to mimic voice quality. A key aspect of this is controlling phonation, or vocal fold vibration. Here are some of the phonatory settings that an impressionist might choose to mimic:

Whisper: The vocal folds are attached to the arytenoid cartilages, which form part of the larynx and enable the vocal folds to move. A whisper is created by bringing the vocal folds closer together but retaining a gap between the arytenoid cartilages. This means that the vocal folds are not vibrating against each other and the speaker produces only voiceless sounds. Listen to the naturalist David Attenborough for an example.

Breathy voice: This is what you produce when your vocal folds are vibrating normally and there's a continuous turbulent airflow passing between them. Listen to Marilyn Monroe and you'll hear lots of breathy voice.

Creak: This is produced when air passes through the vocal folds at a slower rate than usual and they vibrate at low frequency. Think Mick Jagger or Kim Kardashian for prototypical examples (though creak is actually very common in British and American English generally).

Now you've got the basics, who are you going to impersonate first?

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much work and not just steal their voices. In my opinion, and I don't say this to disrespect any of the incredibly talented impressionists out there, to watch an impressionist do a fantastic voice without the right gestures and mannerisms is half-baked. It is like serving a pizza with no tomato on it. Forget it.

Many people hate listening to recordings of their own voice – you never sound the way you think you sound! When you're practising an impression and you listen back to a recording of yourself doing it, does it always sound the way you imagined it to sound?

It's a funny one because when I hear myself in my own voice, I feel the same: it sounds weird and not so much like how I think I sound. But when I do impressions, they normally come out how I heard them in my own head so that is good for me. Sometimes though, I realise how subjective it can all be. I will hear one person love and rave about an impression, and another critic think it is terrible. I wonder is that just them being trolls or me just not realising how bad it is? I don't know. I just go with what I think and the people can decide. You are always going to get Danny downers on your work, whatever it is. Just go with your gut and don't kid yourself into thinking something is good when it clearly isn't. And never force anything. Do what you think sounds good. I used to ask people what impression sounds better. I don't really do that anymore. Now, I may consult on material, but almost never on the voice. 10 people will tell you 10 different things and confuse you. You just have to go with what you hear. ¶

SIX OF THE BEST

Try these videos and judge Tony's impressions for yourself!

James O'Brien
Tony's recent impression of the talk radio presenter went viral, ratcheting up tens of thousands of views on Twitter, YouTube and Instagram

youtube.com/watch?v=Q53WMeIdT8s

The Sopranos
Tony Soprano hears his mother Livia and his Uncle Junior conspiring to get him off his diet of ice-cream…

youtube.com/watch?v=fdxRcxi-lj8

John and Tyson Fury
A quick Q and A with the boxing father and son

youtube.com/watch?v=eu2YoRqMYp0

Dragon's Den
David Attenborough tries to interest Peter Jones and Touker Suleyman in investing in his time machine…

Peaky Blinders
The Birmingham crime drama redubbed…

youtube.com/watch?v=GiKuMMYru40

Saying Goodbye to 2020
Tony's New Year's Eve video sees a host of celebrities bidding farewell to the hell that was 2020. Donald Trump, Liam Neeson, Al Pacino, the Queen and Gollum are just some of the voices featured

youtube.com/watch?v=F7650b5cW4w

Tony Lapidus is an impressionist and voiceover artist.
Dan McIntyre is co-editor of Babel and Professor of English Language and Linguistics at the University of Huddersfield.

Find out more

Follow Tony on Twitter @TonyLapidus and Instagram @tonylapidusimpressions, and find on Facebook and YouTube by searching 'Tony Lapidus Impressions'.

And if you want to know more about the mechanisms of speech, try *The Babel Lexicon of Language*, available later this year from Cambridge University Press.