

Tooth position and speech—is there a relationship?

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Abstract: Although it is widely accepted that teeth play an important role in speech production, the relationship between tooth position and speech remains controversial. This review paper examines the relevant studies and discusses the difficulties of scientific investigation in this area. The ability of patients to adapt their speech to compensate for abnormal tooth position is recognized, but the mechanisms for this adaptation remain incompletely understood. The overall conclusion is that while certain dental irregularities show a relationship with speech disorders, this does not appear to correlate with the severity of the malocclusion. There is no definitive proof that alteration of tooth position can improve articulation disorders.

Key Words: Malocclusion, Speech

Speech may be defined as a complex psycho-physiological process for putting thoughts into words and organizing these words into a sequence with grammatical context. The physiological media of speech are respiratory, phonatory, and articulatory. The teeth, in conjunction with the lips and tongue, play an important role in the articulation of consonants by air-flow obstruction and modification. Therefore, tooth position may play a role in articulatory speech disorders, which although not the most severe, represent 50% to 60% of all speech disorders.¹

The question as to whether tooth position can influence speech is clearly of interest to the orthodontist. The next logical question is whether alteration of tooth position plays a role in the correction of speech disorder. Potentially, speech disorders could become an indication for orthodontic and other specialist dental intervention, with speech correction as a primary goal. This could also have implications on the timing of orthodontic treatment. Many individuals achieve normal speech despite ab-

normal tooth position, which suggests the potential for compensatory mechanisms.

A complex relationship clearly exists between speech and tooth position. Harvold² suggested three possible mechanisms by which malocclusion and speech may be interrelated:

1. There may be an occlusal and/or skeletal problem and coincidentally an articulatory problem.
2. There may be a genetic or metabolic disorder affecting the central nervous system, which will lead to poor motor control and possible distorted morphogenesis.
3. There may be a true cause-and-effect where occlusal or structural anomalies affect articulatory skills.

Malocclusion and speech

Fymbo^{3,4,5} undertook one of the first scientific investigations of a relatively unselected population. He examined in detail the occlusions of 410 students and analyzed their speech. There was no meaningful analysis of the results, but some trends were identified. Students with a malocclusion had more difficulty with dental sounds than those with normal occlusion. The severity of the speech defect was found to vary directly with the severity of the dental anomaly.

Evidence from Frowine and Moser⁶ with a small case series showed that irrespective of malocclusion, patients presented with satisfactory speech.

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Submitted: July 1998, **Revised and accepted:** January 1999

Angle Orthod 1999;69(4):306-310.

Rathbone⁷ felt that "without question," poor speech and malocclusion were related, but there was no direct relationship between the severity of the malocclusion and the severity of speech defects in a small sample.

In a more extensive study of 101 school children attending speech therapy clinics, Hopkin and McEwen⁸ found that, in general, speech defects were just as likely to occur in subjects with normal occlusion as in those with malocclusion. A slightly more sophisticated approach⁹ involving a randomized longitudinal study of speech, occlusion, and swallowing in elementary school children found that articulation variations showed a progressive increase, from 62% in grade 1 to 71% in grade 5. Malocclusions, however, showed a more dramatic increase, from 23% in grade 1 to 71% in grade 5.

Oliver and Evans¹⁰ examined 35 dental students for precise oral morphology, measuring arch width, arch length, palate height, and volume. These were grouped into normal and poor articulators. They found that poor articulators had more "normal" dental features than normal articulators. Mandibular movements during speech can be examined using a kinesiograph. In a study of nearly 100 dental students, Howell¹¹ found an elongated envelope of movement for all malocclusions. Four distinct patterns correlated well with incisor classification. There were, interestingly, no articulatory problems within the group as a whole.

A series of publications by Laine¹²⁻¹⁴ and Laine and co-workers¹⁵ explored oral morphology in 451 dental students and related it to speech disorders. This approach has the advantage of examining a relatively unselected population. However, this work originated in Finland, and it raises the question of the influence of language in the

production of phonemes. If this is a factor, then comparisons between populations are difficult. Laine¹³ addressed this issue and found that the same sounds tended to be distorted in Finnish as in other languages.

It seems then that there may be an association between tooth position and speech, but there is enormous potential for compensation. These Finnish studies highlight the need for structured research, focusing in detail on (abnormal) tooth positioning, to more fully understand the complex relationship.

Occlusal traits and speech

One might expect labial segment tooth positions and relationships to be the most likely to influence articulation. However, buccal segment relationships, both transverse and anteroposterior, have also been implicated. Exactly how these variations, and indeed other irregularities such as tooth position or spacing, affect speech is not fully understood, but the associations of speech and various occlusal traits will now be examined.

Class II relationships

The relationship between increased overjet and speech disorders was disputed by earlier investigators due to observations of compensatory movements to allow normal speech despite abnormal anatomical relationships. Cephalometric radiography and cineradiographic techniques were employed to study the nature of these compensatory mechanisms. Blyth¹⁶ investigated 200 children attending an orthodontic department. Orthodontic and speech analyses were carried out, and he concluded that skeletal morphology had little if any influence on the production of interdental sigmatism due to compensation. Subtelny and others¹⁷ and Jensen¹⁸ found that tongue position was adapted to compensate for Class II Division 1 malocclu-

sion, rather than mandibular movement. In contrast, Benediktsson¹⁹ found that subjects with increased overjet protruded the mandible to a greater extent than a normal occlusion group in production of the /s/ sound. One interesting study²⁰ showed significant differences in lip position, incisor position, and tongue position, within and between speakers, during production of the /s/ sound, depending on phonetic context.²⁰ This may help explain the discrepancy in the literature.

More recently, Laine and co-workers¹⁵ found a significant relationship between increased overjet and distortions of the /s/ sound and sounds produced too far anteriorly. However, no clear relationship was found for postnormal buccal segment relationships.¹³

Class III relationships

Class III subjects often have a tongue posture that is habitually low and somewhat flaccid. Constriction of the linguoalveolar valve necessary for sibilants is therefore not produced effectively. Bloomer²¹ suggested that this causes no difficulty in speech if the condition is relatively mild, and even a considerable discrepancy may cause no problems.

In a cephalometric study of 12 adolescent subjects with full anterior crossbites, Guay²² concluded that subjects had a lower and more retruded tongue posture at rest than normal. During phonation of /s/, the tongue was retruded, apparently attempting to achieve a normal tongue-tip-to-upper-incisor relationship. Despite compensatory movements, normal /s/ production was found in only one subject.

Laine¹³ found that the mesial location of the mandibular dentition was related to misarticulation of some medioalveolar consonants. In further work, Laine¹⁴ suggested that the risk ratios for producing

consonants too far anteriorly was increased 4.5 times in subjects with mesial occlusion, and 3.7 times in those with mandibular overjet. Possibly the volume of the posterior part of the oropharynx complicates adequate placement of the tongue.

Anterior openbite

Anterior openbite is the occlusal trait most often implicated in misarticulations; indeed, Fymbo³ suggested that 63% of those with openbite had defective speech, and only 4% had superior speech. In a fairly extensive study, Bernstein²³ examined 437 school children with speech problems and matched them to a control group of similar size and age. Occlusion was assessed according to Angle's classification as well as a subcategory of openbite. He concluded that speech defects are not related to malocclusion generally except in openbites, where there is a strong relationship with lisping. The severity of the lisping does not seem to vary with the extent of the openbite. In a similar study, Pomerantz and Zeller²⁴ concluded that openbite or edge-to-edge occlusion was significantly related to defective speech sounds, in particular /s/, /z/, /th/, and /l/.

Laine¹³ found anterior openbite was associated with an anterior misarticulation of the /s/ sound. The risk for producing consonants too far anteriorly was increased 3.4 times in subjects with anterior openbite.⁴ However, incisal openbite alone is rarely associated with articulatory speech disorders, and when present, they tend to be mild. When combined with other occlusal anomalies, especially mesial occlusion, anterior openbite is related more often to more severe misarticulations.

Increased overbite

There is conflicting evidence on the relationship between misarticulations and deep overbite.

Lubit²⁵ studied 300 consecutive patients using occlusal and speech analysis. He found a statistically significant relevance between misarticulation of /s/ sounds and deep overbite, but this was negligible when considering overall articulatory ability.

Ingervall and Sarnas²⁶ examined the relationship of lisping and dental malocclusion and found a tendency for increased overbite to be associated with lateral lisping. Conversley, Laine^{13,15} found no evidence of any relationship between increased overbite and speech defects.

Lateral tooth position and speech

The relationships between articulatory disorders and reduced maxillary dimensions,¹⁰ a narrow palate,¹² and lateral crossbite¹³ have been explored. The size of the mandibular dental arch has not been linked to any articulatory speech disorders,¹² although the risk ratio for producing consonants too far anteriorly was given as 1.7 times greater for those with lateral crossbite compared with individuals without occlusal anomalies.

Others dispute this relationship,^{25,27,28} and some difficulties arise when studies are compared because of variations in measuring points and varying appreciation that palatal dimensions are affected by sexual dimorphism. The reported associations are weak, which might indicate that lateral dimensions are only one of many etiological factors.

Other dental irregularities

The literature seems to suggest an association between speech defects and upper anterior spacing³ or missing maxillary incisors.^{29,30} Laine¹⁵ reported that spacing of maxillary incisors was associated with articulatory disorders of /l/, /n/, and /d/ sounds, or anterior or lateral variants of the /r/ sound. However, there appear to be com-

pensatory mechanisms, and normal speech is achieved by many with anterior spacing.^{30,31} No relationship seems to exist for mandibular incisor spacing, nor upper or lower arch crowding.

An interesting longitudinal investigation of school children 9 to 11 years old found that neither developmental stage of the dentition nor age was related to articulatory speech disorders.³²

Alteration of tooth position and speech

The impact of orthodontic treatment on speech has been studied in two ways. The first is the transient effect of removable appliances, which is similar to placement of dentures and is not considered further here. The second involves the response of speech problems to corrective orthodontic therapy, where there is a surprising paucity of literature.

Kessler³³ observed that when the occlusion is corrected in an individual with defective speech, the speech often improves. Rathbone and Snidecore³⁴ examined the effects of orthodontic treatment on eight patients over a 4-year period, with no speech therapy intervention. At the beginning of treatment, there was a mean of 6.4 faulty sounds, and at the end only 1.5. The same fricative /s/, /z/, /sh/, and /zh/ sounds tended to remain faulty.

A more sophisticated prospective randomized controlled trial examined 25 subjects seeking treatment for functional voice disturbances. Subjects were randomly allocated to treatment or placebo groups.³⁵ The treatment subjects underwent occlusal adjustment to eliminate all interferences and were examined after 2 months. The treatment group showed improvement in voice status, while the placebo group remained unchanged.

Orthognathic surgery and speech

The role of orthognathic surgery in the correction of malocclusion is complex, principally because there are corrections in tooth position as well as jaw position. One of the earliest comments came from Higley,³⁶ who presented two case reports of patients who had undergone mandibular surgery; the general intelligibility of speech improved in one patient, but the second merely substituted an anterior stigmatism for a lateral one. Goodstein³⁷ found no change in speech in five patients who had undergone a reduction in mandibular length. Speech errors may actually increase after surgery as the jaw is placed in a new position.³⁸ A more extensive study by Dalston and Vig³⁹ found that there was no postoperative alteration of speech in 40 female orthognathic patients. In a significant review, Ruscello⁴⁰ concluded that surgical alteration of the morphology of the oral cavity does alter the articulators and improves previously distorted speech. Yamaguchi,⁴¹ in a videotaped speech analysis, found that most of the 15 adult Japanese patients who had had surgery to correct a mandibular prognathism showed clear improvement. There was no statistical analysis of the data, and the need for focused scientific investigation in this area is pressing. Currently, the evidence is equivocal, and certainly no guarantees of improvement can be given to patients undergoing orthodontic or orthognathic correction of a malocclusion.

Conclusions

Many of the traditionally associated links between occlusal traits and speech problems do not have a scientifically sound research basis. The research problem is fraught with difficulties. Speech is an activity unique to humans, and animal experimentation has almost no

place in the study of speech production. The available studies fall into three categories:

1. Subjects with speech problems examined for malocclusion
2. Subjects with malocclusion examined for speech problems
3. Unselected populations studied for coincidental malocclusion and speech difficulties.

Only the last category offers the benefits of nonselection, but many of these studies have been carried out on undergraduate students, which may introduce bias. In addition, there are varying methodologies for specifying articulation defects/distortions/disorders and for identifying malocclusions. Reliability and validity of these measures are seldom reported. Comparisons between different populations and different linguistic areas also present difficulties.

The importance of evaluating individual malocclusion traits is clear. The most consistently reported traits are Class III arch relationships, anterior openbite, increased overjet, and spacing. However, there is no clear evidence of a direct relationship between severity of malocclusion and severity of misarticulation.

Some sounds seem more sensitive to alterations of the oral structures than others. This may relate to the order of difficulty of individual sound production, since the sounds acquired last are those most often reported as distorted.

The ability to adapt and compensate appears to play a significant role. Bloomer⁴² summarized this well:

Normal structure + normal function = normal speech

Abnormal structure + adaptive function = normal speech

Abnormal structure + no adaptive function = abnormal speech

Normal structure + abnormal function = abnormal speech

Thus, the recommendation is to

consider speech carefully when examining and assessing a patient. Recognition of commonly misarticulated sounds should be possible during normal conversation, and any potential relationship to malocclusion made. There is no substantial evidence that orthodontic treatment will influence any articulation disorders, and in such cases co-operation with a speech therapist is essential.

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