

# CARTOON SPEECH

By Kate Ross, MS CCC-SLP



Photo by Alena Ross Becker

created by several artists and writers beginning in the 1930's – issues that over the years have caused controversies.



Two Looney Tune characters are stutterers: Porky Pig and Foghorn Leghorn. Stuttering is a disruption in the rhythm of speech, characterized by repetitive or prolonged sound, word and phrase productions. The original voice for Porky Pig was a Warner Brothers actor named Joe Dougherty, a real stutterer. Porky debuted in 1935 utilizing Dougherty's voice until 1937. After several episodes, the cartoon productions were troubled because of Dougherty's uncontrolled stuttering. Thereafter the studio hired Mel Blanc whose first voices with Looney Tunes were drunken bullfighters in *Picador Porky* in 1937. Blanc was able to make a controlled stutter for Porky, thus was hired.

[http://  
toolooney.goldenagecartoons.com](http://toolooney.goldenagecartoons.com)

While Porky tended to repeat sounds at the beginning of words, such as “B-b-but my

## NONE THE WORSE FOR WEAR

As a kid faithfully watching Saturday morning cartoons in the '60's, and striving to talk like the Jetson's dog, Astro, who initiated each word with /r/, I feel none the 'rorse ror rear' as Astro dog would say. But maybe there's something to this as my chosen career path is speech language pathology.

Several years ago, while teaching graduate students, it dawned on me that almost all of the Looney Tune characters have a form of speech or

language issue or a learning challenge. Look at the persistence of Wyle E Coyote, perseverating on getting that Road Runner after numerous catastrophic poundings on his body. Who would put up with such physical abuse?

And what about Pepe Le Pew's persistence to woo that black and white feline? He just will not take 'no' for an answer. What is that about?

Let's look at some of the more obvious speech and language issues brought about in these cartoon characters

# Of lisping /s/ and funky /l/ and /r/ sounds - What's it all about?

name's not J-J-J-Jack. I-I-I'm P-P-P-Porky Pig", Foghorn Leghorn repeated phrases. Foghorn Leghorn, first presented in 1946 in *Walky Talky Hawky* created by Robert McKimson and voiced by Mel Blanc, is a loud-mouthed leghorn rooster, shouting out aphorisms, such as "You're doing a lot of choppin', but no chips are flyin'." And try this logical math: "Two half nuthin's is a whole nuthin'."

<http://onefoggy.tripod.com>

Often squawking at his innocent little bespectacled nephew, Foghorn, the talkative uncle, wasn't set back by his stutter. 'I say, I say, I say now why don't we get on with it already . . .'



**Sylvester the Cat and Daffy Duck** articulate lateral lisping /s/ productions where air escapes over the sides of the tongue rather than the more accurate air passing over the top front of a slightly curved tongue. Lateral lisping /s/'s are sloppy, excessively juicy sounds, thus the flying saliva episodes of both Sylvester and Daffy. Sylvester created by Friz Freleng in 1945, began his cartoon career in *Life with Feathers* with his first words "Sufferin' Succotash." These first words were actually 'thufferin' thuccotash', which became Sylvester's trademark phrase. Mel Blanc was again the genius

of the vocal play for both Sylvester and Daffy.

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Daffy Duck had many incarnations in the cartoon world, mostly in the zany duck role and often as sidekick for others, such as Porky Pig with whom he first appeared. Daffy's voice is really just a sped-up version of Sylvester – thus both carry that sloppy lateral lisped /s/ that could have used the expertise of a speech language pathologist. [http://  
toolooney.goldenagecartoons.com](http://toolooney.goldenagecartoons.com)

Elmer Fudd, funny little old bald guy, originally named Egghead, who constantly bickers with Bugs Bunny, has a babyish voice, most often spoken by Arthur Q. Bryan. Depending on the cartoon, you might detect a bit of a vocal fry or raspiness in Fudd's vocal quality. "You siwwy wabbit," Fudd often says in his frustration with Bugs.

During my career as a speech language pathologist, teachers often ask me about preschoolers speaking like Elmer Fudd; is it ok? Many preschoolers, kindergartners and even first graders speak like Fudd, distorting /l/ and /r/ sounds. Young children take a long time to perfect these 'gliding' sounds; gliding into what proceeds and succeeds their placement in words and phrases. At his mature age, Fudd really should have figured

this out. A speech language pathologist could have helped him during his mid-elementary years.

And then there's sweet little Tweety Bird, again voice provided by Mel Blanc. A phonological process known as stopping is Tweety's speech challenge, favoring /t/ and /d/ sounds as in "I taut I taw a puddy tat. I did, I DID tee a puddy tat." Though Tweety goes a bit overboard with these favored sounds likely to add humor, I have actually heard young children speak like this. Is it because they watch too many cartoons? I don't think so. This phonological process is developmentally typical because it's easier to produce 'stopped' /t, d/ sounds than the continuous airflow of friction-produced /s/ and 'th' sounds. Stopping is one of many phonological processes young children produce to help them make sense of and simplify our sound system. Phonological processes are essentially patterns children make. Typically these phonological process errors are self-corrected through practice, but occasionally intervention is necessary to achieve intelligible speech.



**U**tilizing children's speech and language characteristics within cartoons may be

# What I hear and . . . what is my point?

## Utilizing children's speech in cartoons

controversial. Adults really should model good speech habits, clearly enunciating sounds in words and using appropriate grammar. But what sells in media, prevails. And the Rugrats add to this controversy.

The Rugrats created by Arlene Klasky, Gabor Csupo and Paul Germain, debuted in 1991 for Nickelodeon cable network. The babies and toddlers speak babyese, while fully understanding what adults say to them. However, they age-typically take figurative language literally - 'I don't see the cats and dogs raining outside. Where the heck are they?' the toddlers might say.

The Rugrats' communications consist of developmentally typical sound and grammar errors, such as deleting smaller function words ('of', 'the' and 'to'). Tommy Pickles, still in diapers, might say, "Chuckie go bye-bye?" Chuckie Finster, perhaps three years old, might respond, "Yeah, I'm goin' bye-bye." Chuckie's nasal vocal quality is not prevalent in preschool aged children, but can be heard in children with frequent colds or adenoid issues. <http://www.lonympics.co.uk/rugs.htm>



Photo by Larry Becker

**One of my favorite cartoon character names** is Sponge Bob Square Pants - quite a mouthful for preschool children. I once visited a two-year old boy at his home because his mom was concerned he wasn't saying any words yet. Lo and behold, during this very visit, my first with this child, he brought a picture of Sponge Bob Square Pants to his mother and said, "Sponge Bob" - not that clearly of course - it was more like Bah Bah, but we all knew what he meant due to the contextual cue of that picture. The mother was beside herself with joy. Her son had spoken! Thanks Steve Hillenburg for creating Sponge Bob Square Pants!

I hear anywhere from "Bob Bob" to "Wear Pants" to "Punge Pant". It takes a while for me to recognize that a child is speaking of Hillenburg's creation, which debuted in 1999. Hillenburg, a marine biologist and artist, thought it would be fun to develop an ocean sponge cartoon character. He chose a yellow rectangular

kitchen sink sponge, added belted brown square pants and a white Oxford shirt topped off with a short red tie. Originally he named his creation Sponge Boy, but that name was already trademarked, so he changed to Sponge Bob. <http://www.factmonster.com/spot/spongebobfacts.html> Square Pants was tagged on and ta-da . . . another successful cartoon character, though my speech language pathologist ears are offended.

Another aspect of the Sponge Bob cartoons that is concerning as a speech language pathologist is the frenetic approach - reportedly contributing to the attention deficit of our youth. Scenes in the popular cartoon fly by within seconds. How can a young child's brain process such rapid-fire information? A very good question, but I also question how adults process the auction-like speed of lists of side effects in the every ten-minute pharmaceutical commercials on TV during peak TV watching hours? I don't think even younger adult minds can keep up with that pace. So why is Sponge Bob under scrutiny while we ignore the sometimes life-threatening drug side effects flying by in TV ads?

**J**ust what, you ask, is my point? If children are the ultimate users of the names, why are we

# Share conversational bonding with your children . . . it's rewarding!

creating such phonologically difficult names like Sponge Bob Square Pants? Why are we allowing cartoon characters like the Rugrats and Looney Tune characters to speak with articulation errors and inappropriate grammar when the primary audience is young children? What does this teach them?

Several years ago when speaking with a highly unintelligible four-year old boy, I looked to the mother for guidance because she seemed fairly confident in her conversations with her son. She shared that he faithfully watched the Pokemon show and knew the names of all the Japanese characters, of which there were apparently over a hundred. Once I researched and

learned just a small handful of those names, I too was able to widen my conversation topics with this child. As I entered his world of media knowledge we related better. And perhaps this is part of a solution.

Over the years as I listen to young children struggle to create a conversational bond with caring adults, who may not watch the same TV programs or movies as their children, children who increasingly rely on technological means to entertain themselves vs. relishing in personal contact with important caring adults, I question: What are the connections today's children are making?

Adults need to take the time to learn the interests of their children. Participate in TV and movie watching alongside

your child. Show a desire to be together. At the same time, media needs to be aware of the names, words, and language they choose in their programming –encouraging easy pronunciation and appropriate grammar to foster common conversational bonding.



**And that is all folks!**



## WEBSITE RESOURCES

<http://www.factmonster.com/spot/spongebobfacts.html>

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A 25 year veteran speech language pathologist and early childhood educator managing my own private practice for over a dozen years - I've heard much of it - I'm certain not all. I love my job because I get to play as I work! Who can ask for anything more? Hoping you find this self-published article helpful. Check out more information at my website:

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