



## Lips don't come with subtitles: the joys and perils of lipreading

By: Daniel Basch-Tétreault

Growing up with a profound hearing loss, I had to learn how to lipread pretty early in order to understand people. It's a common misconception among



hearing people that children need to learn how to speak first, before learning how to read. This is completely backwards when it comes to newborn children who can't hear. I learned how to process language by learning how to read, then by converting those lines on paper into sound. I also learned by deciphering pictures and text from the many comics I grew up with, and by having my parents and teachers read to me.

Just as I find it perplexing that there are people out there who have trouble reading lips, I find it amazing that people are able to understand what's being said without help. Even so, it took me several years to be able to learn how to talk correctly. Until I was able to master the aspects of tempo, timing and pacing, people had trouble understanding me. I've been told that I have something of a Deaf accent, which is imperceptible to my imperfect pitch. As for sign language, I tried learning it but never warmed up to the finger dexterity, though I still do retain the basic alphabet and numbers.

Living with Asperger's compounds my already disabled communication ability beyond the usual social gaffes. In addition to being intimidated about talking to someone new, I have a hard time remembering, let alone understanding, people — even those who've known me for years. If I haven't seen them on a regular basis (more than twice a week) I forget about them. As a child, I had a next-door neighbour who happened to be the school commissioner. On occasion, I sold him some fundraising chocolate bars. When he finally got the chance to talk to me at a meeting some time

later, he reintroduced himself as someone on our block and tried to jog my memory.

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However, I had absolutely no idea of what he was saying, even though he repeated his sentence five or six times. It was only when my mother intervened and said, "You sold him chocolate" that I understood. Until that point, he hadn't quite realized the gravity of the uphill struggle I lived with on a day-to-day basis, just to have a simple conversation. To be fair, there were several factors against him — he was taller than me, he had an accent, and I'd never talked to him before. From that point on, he was an invaluable help in getting me an interpreter through High School. Interpreting helped me navigate the chaos of high school, and I would have been lost without it, but that's a topic for another time.

Another thing that Asperger's and deafness have in common: Most autistics look away from the eyes as a way to avoid being overwhelmed by the visual stimuli those ovalar orbs provide. I managed to slip

through the cracks of that social barrier by simply focusing on the lips instead. They're a more consistent source of information, and people can hardly tell the difference of where I'm looking at anyways. (Go ahead, try it out. See if anybody notices.) Even so, it takes me a while to get used to a new person's mode of speech, since every person is different, and they have their own mannerisms. One of the most annoying tricks is when someone smiles all the time as a way to hide their nervousness. That might work with reassuring total strangers, but it plays havoc for someone who relies on reading lips. If all you see are teeth, it's harder to tell what sound is being made.

Context is also important — my ability to read lips can't help me unless I get a sense of what's going on. It doesn't help that a lot of words look exactly the same. A 'd' looks a lot like a 'g', and even completely unrelated words can look exactly alike. For example, 'dancer' looks a lot like 'gangster' on the lips. So, if there was a gang war in a ballet studio, you would have trouble telling the words apart, unless you could hear the person's voice. What would really be helpful would be audio Google glasses that pick up what people are saying and display them on my screen as mini-subtitles so I don't have to struggle with what everybody's saying. Of course, given how YouTube subtitles have yet to grasp the

concept of human speech, we've still got a long way to go before that project becomes a reality. I for one, cannot wait.

In the meantime, I'll have to rely on my innate lipreading ability to comprehend such situations, and try to figure out what all the fuss is about some dancers at the bar.

Some helpful tips when talking to me or a fellow lipreader:

1. Face me
2. Don't smile too much
3. Have a low noise level in the room.
4. Don't talk louder, but more clearly.
5. Use another word if one is difficult to understand.
6. Emphasize moving your lips.
7. Use gestures where appropriate.
8. Slow down a bit. ◀

*Daniel Basch-Tétreault was born profoundly deaf, but learned to lipread and speak. He graduated with a diploma in Information and Library Technology from John Abbott College. He was diagnosed with Asperger's Syndrome (on the autism spectrum) in his late teens. His interests are comics and writing. In addition to his blog, Sunday Comics Debt (<http://sundaycomicsdebt.blogspot.ca/>), he is also a frequent contributor to the parody site Square Root of Garfield Minus Garfield (<http://www.mezzacotta.net/garfield/author.php?author=90>). He currently resides in Dorval, Quebec and is an enthusiastic volunteer at CHIP.*



## Tips on Communicating With a Hearing Loss

Excerpt from Eva Basch's Communications Strategies presentation

🔔 **Admit you have a hearing problem.** Most people know already, and the sooner you admit it, the sooner you can do something to improve your quality of life.

🔔 **Your hearing loss is more noticeable than your hearing aid.** Wear them! They'll help you distinguish between words that sound similar.

🔔 **Don't withdraw from social activities!** But you'll enjoy them more when rested—following conversations takes a lot of energy.

🔔 **Communication is a shared responsibility.** Tell others what they can do to make it easier and more pleasant. Don't bluff; ask for clarifications if needed. Thank them when they make the effort.

🔔 **Keep your sense of humor!**