From 'shrill' housewife to Downing Street: the changing voice of Margaret Thatcher

The former Prime Minister took lessons in the 1970s to make her voice seem firmer and more powerful

Powerful and persuasive, yet at the same time soft and cajoling, Margaret Thatcher’s distinctive voice was one of her most potent political weapons.

But at the start of her long career, the former prime minister was seen as too “shrill” even to take part in party broadcasts.

So before her election in 1979, she took lessons with a speech coach at the Royal National Theatre, which helped lower her pitch and develop a calm, authoritative tone.

Her biographer Charles Moore wrote later: “Soon the hectoring tones of the housewife gave way to softer notes and a smoothness that seldom cracked except under extreme provocation on the floor of the House of Commons.”

On Tuesday it emerged researchers who carried out a study into Mrs Thatcher’s voice had found power does indeed change the way people speak. Here, expert voice coach Dee Forrest charts the transformation of the Iron Lady's voice from Grantham housewife to Number Ten.

**The happy housewife**

In this clip from 1960, Mrs Thatcher was interviewed at home shortly after she made her maiden speech in the House of Commons. Her young children Mark and Carol can be seen playing beside her.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “At this early point in her career we hear a fair amount of variety and pitch use along with a soft vocal quality and even manner of delivery. Her voice has the crispness of the acquired High Received Pronunciation accent.”

**Joining the top table**

Shortly after Edward Heath won the general election of 1970, Mrs Thatcher entered the Cabinet for the first time as Secretary of State for Education and Science.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “In only 10 years, there is a marked change in vocal delivery. What we now hear is a slower, more measured and firmer quality. The tone or resonance has become very slightly deeper and the brighter tones have strengthened.”

**Growing in stature**

Mrs Thatcher amused the Conservative Party Conference in 1975 by doing a spot of spring cleaning. It is around this point that she was reportedly taking coaching to make her voice more authoritative.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “We hear her confidence really bedding itself in. The voice has even more depth of tone and we hear the steely quality of those more strident bright tones lending her greater command. The voice has a winning vocal recipe of strength, calmness and determination.”

**Becoming the Iron Lady**

Mrs Thatcher’s staunch opposition to communism earned her the nickname of Iron Lady from the Soviets - a tag she relished and joked about in a speech to the Finchley Conservatives in 1976.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “Here her steely voice is truly transforming her into The Iron Lady. This has a lot to do with her newly developed unswerving vocal tone.”

**Power at last**

In 1979, Mrs Thatcher entered Downing Street as Prime Minister, quoting St Francis of Assisi as she stopped to speak to the press outside.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “In this victory speech we really hear the use of repetitive pitch, stressing and melody along with a steady measured pace. This suggests to the listener that she is extremely calm and very capable of leading.”

**Peak of her powers**

In what was perhaps her most memorable line, Mrs Thatcher told the 1981 Conservative Party Conference “the Lady's not for turning”.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “Here she is vocally at her peak. The strident tone and the use of volume to overcome any interruptions are all familiar techniques to command her audience.”

**Cracks showing**

By 1989, the wheels were starting to come off the Thatcher premiership. The Prime Minister was ridiculed after she referred to herself using the royal ‘we’ when grandly announcing the birth of a grandchild.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: “A softer, mellower and more maternal quality is to be heard at this point.”

**The end**

It all came crashing down in 1990, when Mrs Thatcher was forced out of office. As she tearfully left Downing Street for the last time, the once-powerful voice broke as she said goodbye.

Voice expert Dee Forrest says: "We hear a more relaxed and merrier quality in this speech, and her diction is slightly less crisp. Perhaps we are hearing a sense of relief after these many years at the top? The strident bright tones have gone as have the repetitive qualities once needed to drive a message across."