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ENGL 393

Sonic Warning Assignment

I created a 30 second sonic warning that warns people about fire hazards in the kitchen. The sequence of sounds starts with dishes clanking on a stove, followed by the sound of the stove turning on. After, a smoke detector goes off, signaling that something is burning. Finally, the stove is turned off, implying that the danger has been handled. To produce this sound warning, I used Capcut, a free audio editing tool that allowed me to layer and adjust sounds to fit the message I wanted to deliver. The process involved recording each sound, placing them in order, and adjusting the timing and volume to create a smooth sequence from calm cooking to an emergency situation.

One of the key choices I made was using common household sounds to create exigency. Most people have heard the sounds of dishes clanking or a stove being turned on, so these sounds immediately feel familiar. This helps the listener connect to the warning, as it feels like something that could happen in their own home. By starting with familiar, everyday sounds, I created a sense of normalcy before the smoke detector comes in to warn.

Another important choice was on deciding the volume level of each part of the sound. In the beginning, when the utensil is put on the stove and the stove is turned on the sound is low and dense. The detector sound is loud and sudden, making it clear that something has gone wrong. It is also shrill and requires attention immediately. This abrupt shift is meant to grab the listener's attention and make them realize the seriousness of the situation. It's the turning point in the sound that transforms a typical kitchen scene into an urgent warning.

The third choice was creating a gradual build up in the sequence of events and providing the listeners with a sharp contrast between the cooking and an emergency situation. The audio starts with the clinking of dishes, which is soft and rhythmic, followed by the quiet sound of the stove turning on. Then, things escalate quickly as the smoke detector rings out, representing an emergency. Finally, silence at the end signifies the sound of the stove turning off bringing the sequence to a close and suggesting the danger has been dealt with. This structure builds tension and keeps the listener engaged.

Another key choice was using an audio clip of a smoke detector that sounds like it is being produced from many places. If the hazard is in a house it is likely that more than one smoke detector will turn on. Therefore, to create this sense of panic and realness I chose to choose a clip that had more than one smoke detector go off. Lastly, the fifth choice was to show that the hazard had occurred due to leaving the stove unattended. I could have chosen the sound of a microwave or an oven that has been burning or forgotten to turn off but I chose the sound of a stove since it was a lot clearer than other sounds and could clearly convey the message that cooking had taken place.

If I had more time and resources, I could enhance the sonic warning in several ways. First, I would want to use sound effects that suggested that the warning involved cooking. This could include the sound of a refrigerator, oven or microwave. While the current sounds work, more realistic sounds would make the warning even more engaging. Since for this audio, I used a clip of a smoke detector, if I had more time I would have created it myself with caution for a more realistic audio. I would also try to overlap the sounds, where the sounds come from different directions, like the stove sounds from the left and the smoke alarm from above, to create a more immersive experience. Finally, adding a more gradual build up to the smoke detector sound, would make the initial calm environment feel more complete, increasing the impact of the sudden shift to the emergency. I also understand that fire hazards occur when the stove has been turned on for a sufficient time but since we had a limit on a 30 second sound clip it was difficult to convey that the stove had been left unattended for a long period of time. Some ways to show this message could also convey the audio better like the sound of a kitchen timer on the side that rang when the food had been cooked signaling that it was time to turn off the stove.

In producing this sonic warning, I was influenced by Pierre Schaeffer’s concept that "sound is the vocabulary of nature." Schaeffer believed that sounds communicate messages about the environment around us. In this project, the smoke detector represents a natural warning system, as it communicates danger without needing words. Ceraso’s concept of multimodal listening also played a key role in shaping my decisions in producing the warning. Ceraso emphasizes how this approach enables us to draw on experiential knowledge which is knowledge gained by personal experiences, and make informed choices about how sound works in contexts. This guided me to use familiar kitchen sounds like the clanking of dishes and the click of the stove turning on to tap into listeners' lived experiences, creating a more immersive and realistic environment.