

4.5.4: Celebrations - Toasts and Roasts

Learning Objectives

1. Discuss the role, function, and importance of a toast.
2. Discuss the elements of an effective toast.

Toasts are formal expressions of goodwill, appreciation, or calls for group attention to an issue or person in a public setting, often followed by synchronous consumption of beverages. Examples often include a toast at a wedding congratulating the couple, toasts at a bar after a tournament win to congratulate the team or an individual player, or a general toast to health for everyone on a holiday or other special occasion.

Toasts serve to unify the group, acknowledge a person or event, mark a special occasion, or simply to encourage the consumption of alcohol. These can range from serious to silly but are normally words that point out something that is commonly known. For example, a toast to the most valuable player in a game may serve to publicly acknowledge him or her for achievements that are already known by the community. The verbal recognition, followed by ritualistic drinking, serves as a public acknowledgement. Belonging is a basic human need that requires reinforcement, and a toast can be characterized as a reinforcement ritual, acknowledging respect for the individual or team, and also reinforcing group affiliation, common symbols and terms, beliefs and values, goals and aspirations (McLean, S., 2005).

Toasts, while common in many societies, are relatively rare in daily life. They are normally associated with informal and formal gatherings of the group, team, or community. Since you may only perform a couple of toasts in your lifetime, you no doubt want to get them right the first time. We will address toasts and one variation in particular, the roast.

Proposing a Toast

One proposes a toast, rather than “making” a toast or simply “toasting,” because for it to truly be a toast, everyone in the group, team, or community must participate. If you propose a toast to someone and no one responds, even if you raise your glass to them as a nonverbal sign of respect and take a sip, it doesn’t count as a toast. Only the community can publicly acknowledge someone with a toast, but it takes an individual to make the proposition.

Sometimes the person who is supposed to make that proposition is already known by function or role. The best man and maid of honor at a wedding, the host of a party, and the highest-ranking manager at a business meal are common roles that are associated with ritualistic toasts.

Standing with proper posture to address the group is normally associated with acts of public speaking, including toasts. If you are understood to be a person who will be proposing a toast, you may not need to say anything to get the group’s attention. As you rise and raise your glass, the room will grow quiet in anticipation of your words. If the group does not expect you to propose a toast, you may need to say, “May I propose a toast?” in a voice above the level of the group. Nonverbal displays also work to capture attention (McLean, S., 2005), such as standing on a chair. While that may be nonstandard, your context will give you clues about how best to focus attention. Striking a glass with spoon to produce a ring, while common, is sometimes considered less than educated and a poor reflection of etiquette. The group norms determine what is expected and accepted, and it may be a custom that is considered normal. Etiquette is a conventional social custom or rule for behavior, but social customs and rules for behavior vary across communities and cultures.

You will raise your glass, raise your voice, and make a brief statement complimenting the person being honored. Your toast should be brief. If you write it out in advance, use thirty words as your upper limit. Common mistakes are for toast-givers to ramble on too long and to talk about themselves instead of the honoree. The toast is not as much about the words you use, though they carry weight and importance, but it’s about the toast ritual as a group expression of acknowledgement and respect. People then raise their glasses to indicate agreement, often repeating “hear, hear!” or a word or phrase from the toast, such as “to success!” They then sip from their cup, possibly touching glasses first.

One common toast that always serves to unify the group is the toast to health. To propose a toast to health is common, well understood, and serves both the role and function of a toast. “Live long and prosper” is a common variation of “to your health” in English. Table 4.5.4.1 lists toasts to health in other languages.

Table 4.5.4.3 Toasts to Health

Language	Toast
Chinese	Wen lie
French	A votre santé
Gaelic	Sláinte
German	Zum Wohl
Greek	Stin ygia sou
Hebrew	L'chiam
Italian	Alla salute
Japanese	Kanpai
Polish	Na zdrowie
Portuguese	Saúde
Spanish	Salud

Sometimes a best man at a wedding will be expected to tell a short story as part of their toast. A common story is how the couple met from the best man's perspective. While this may be your choice, remember to keep it quite brief, positive, and focused on the honorees, not on yourself. Important occasions require you to play your part like everyone else, and your role is to focus attention on the individual, team, couple, or group as you honor them.

Alcohol is not a requirement for a toast, nor is draining one's glass. The beverage and the quantity to be swallowed are a reflection of group norms and customs. Often alternatives, such as nonalcoholic sparkling cider, are served. If you are expected to perform a toast, one that requires tact, grace, and a clear presence of mind, you should refrain from drinking alcohol until after you've completed your obligation. Your role has responsibilities, and you have a duty to perform.

Roasts

Roasts are public proclamations that ridicule or criticize someone to honor them. That may sound awkward at first, but consider the targets most commonly associated with roasts: those in positions of power or prestige. Knocking someone off their pedestal is a special delight for the group or community, but it requires special care and attention to social dynamics, sensitivities, rank, and roles.

A common context for a round of roasts, or a series of public statements intended to poke fun at someone, is at a retirement party. Individuals in the room tell brief stories that may have some basis in truth, but which through word choice and clear communication of exaggeration, allow everyone to look back upon the episode with light humor and laughter. Time has passed and the absurd is worthy of group laughter.

A roast is not an opportunity to say something mean. If you don't think the target will laugh it off, don't say it. Roasts can hurt feelings, and that misses the point. A roast honors someone in a position of power or influence by allowing them to demonstrate they can take a joke at their own expense gracefully. It is not intended to do harm to the individual or create divisions in the community. Ritual public speaking is supposed to unify groups, teams, and communities, and not create division or rival internal groups.

Key Takeaway

Toasts and roasts honor a member of the community.

Exercises

1. You are called upon to propose a toast to your team leader after your group has just completed a large contract. Work on this project wasn't always easy, but now is the time for celebration and recognition. Write a sample toast in no more than thirty words. Compare your results with your classmates.

2. What should someone propose a toast to? How should they propose it? Write your response and include an example. Compare with classmates.
3. If you were the subject of a roast, what would you feel comfortable having people say, do, or show to make fun of you in public? Write your response and include an example. Compare with classmates.

References

McLean, S. (2005). *The basics of interpersonal communication*. Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

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