climbing commands

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Clear and unambiguous communication is critical to safe climbing, whether it be outdoors where distance, wind and other sounds of nature can significantly impede communication between a climber and belayer, or at a crowded indoor gym where many voices compete for attention. To minimize mistakes and maximize safety, climbers utilize sets of short, simple climbing commands or signals. While regional and cultural variations exist, the following commands are commonly used within the climbing community:

STANDARD CLIMBING COMMANDS

COMMAND	STATED BY	MEANING
On belay?	Climber	Asked as a question to the belayer- in other words, are you ready to belay me?
Belay on	Belayer	I'm set to belay.
Climbing	Climber	I'm climbing.
Climb	Belayer	Go ahead and climb, I've confirmed that I'm ready and paying attention.
Up Rope	Climber	There's too much slack in the rope. Take rope up. The belayer could acknowlede (e.g. "thank you").
Slack	Climber	The rope is too tight. Give me some slack. The belayer could acknowlede (e.g. "thank you").
Tension	Climber	I want a very tight rope; usually given because the climber feels insecure.
Take	Climber	Lock of the belay, I'm letting go. Usually given at the top of a route or when finished.
Off Belay	Climber	I'm in a safe position, it's okay to stop belaying.
Belay Off	Belayer	I'm finished belaying and the rope is clear of the belay device.
On Rappel	Climber	I'm starting my rappel, alerting others including a belayer.
Rappel Off	Climber	Rappel is over and I'm completely detached from the rope.
Rock!	Anybody	Something is coming down - a rock, carabiner, sandwich, whatever. Alerts others below.
Rope	Climber	Used when a rope is dropped from above. Climber should wait to hear "clear" from below.
Clear	Belayer or others	Used to let climber who is above that it's okay to drop the rope.
SITE SPECIFIC CLIMBING COMMANDS (used at our indoor climbing wall, for example)		
Lower	Climber	I'm ready to come down and am in position to be lowered.
Lowering	Belayer	Let's the climber know that lowering is beginning.

The Importance of Syntax

Syntax (word arrangement and pattern) helps climbers communicate effectively, especially when out of earshot of each other. For example, a lead climber reaches a belay ledge after a long section of climbing, anchors in, and yells down to her belayer "Off belay!". The belayer, out of sight and out of immediate earshot does not hear "Off belay!", but " uhh......buhh, luuh". Without hearing the actual words, the belayer knows what has been communicated and yells back "Belay off!". The climber above does not hear the words, but hears " buhh, luh ..... uh", and similarly knows what the belayer has communicated. In each case, the syllabic structure is different for these commands and if the climbers are on the same page, they know exactly what was communicated. Another example: there are two syllables in the command "up rope", and one in "slack". Without hearing the words, the belayer knows what has been communicated.... so long as he/she can hear sounds.

The takehome from the above example is that even though you may be in a climbing gym where communicating with your climbing parter is relatively easy (most of the time) get in the habit of utilizing a set of climbing commands that can be transferred to the outdoor environment where climbing routes are longer, and environmental challenges make communication much more difficult.

What happens when you cannot hear words at all, even though your climbing partner is yelling at the top of his lungs? Consider utilizing rope tugs in tune with the syllabic structure of the command you are sending. For example, "belay off" would be two rope tugs in quick succession, then a pause followed by one rope tug. And "off belay" would be one rope tug, a pause, and then two rope tugs in quick succession. Obviously, a certain amount of trust is required when using rope signals and you should practice in a controlled setting before using them in a desperate situation.