

Introduction to the Conference "When to Speak is to Silence"
Jérémie Ferrer-Bartomeu (UCLouvain/GEMCA)
University of Luxembourg – Belval – 16/10/2025

**Speech, Silence and the Performance of the Speech Act in the Early Modern Period
(16th-18th Century)**

Ladies and Gentlemen, dear colleagues,

It is with great pleasure that I welcome you today to the opening of our international conference entitled "When to Speak is to Silence: Speech, Silence and the Performance of the Speech Act in the Early Modern Period". This scholarly gathering marks the culmination of the first cycle of work by the research group on the Political and Religious Anthropology of Speech in the Early Modern Period, a cycle that has spanned the years 2022 to 2025, and whose intellectual trajectory I should like briefly to trace by way of preamble.

The Research Group's Journey

Our research group took shape in February 2022, during a first international conference organised at the University of Geneva and devoted to the theme "(Ab)juring One's Word: Promising War and Committing to Peace during the Crises of the Early Modern Period". This first Genevan gathering, which brought together scholars from several disciplinary and national backgrounds, enabled us to interrogate the promise through the medium of speech in its various forms: oath, charter, pledged faith, profession of faith, confession, threat or indeed malediction. We then enquired into the performance and power of speech acts, into the linguistic, institutional and ritual modalities that underpin them, and into the bonds of trust, distrust, mistrust and alliance that speech enables one to establish or to rupture. Two central questions structured our reflections: how is the promise constructed? What does it produce in terms of impact upon the politico-religious temporalities of its enunciation? This first gathering thus laid the methodological foundations of our collective project by placing the notion of performativity at the heart of the analysis, whilst insisting upon the necessity of a resolutely interdisciplinary approach attentive to the materiality of practices.

Six months later, in September 2022, we reconvened at the University of Luxembourg, in Belval, for a second conference entitled "In Speaking, In Writing: Complementarity, Competition and Hybridisation between Written and Oral Forms in 16th and 17th Century Europe". These two days pursued the enquiries begun in Geneva by shifting our gaze towards the complex relations between the two modalities of expression and communication that are the oral and the written. In the wake of the performative turn that has marked the humanities over recent decades, we wished to reaffirm the central place of words, whether spoken or written, in the various sites, strata and socio-political structures of early modern Europe. Far from considering the oral and the written as two hermetically separated spheres, we explored their relations of complementarity, competition, and also hybridisation, paying particular attention to administrative *savoir-faire*, to the material practices of giving form to and preserving speech, as well as to the communication strategies developed by institutional actors.

Between these two key moments of our collaboration, and beyond them, we also organised three source-reading workshops that enabled us to deepen our reflections in a more restricted and intensive setting. These workshops were held at the Centre d'Études Supérieures de la Renaissance in Tours, at the Centre de Recherches Universitaires Lorraines d'Histoire in Nancy, and at the Groupe d'Analyse Culturelle de la Première Modernité in Louvain-la-Neuve. These working sessions offered the opportunity for close dialogue with primary sources, in an

approach that one might characterise as an archaeology of speech, where the meticulous analysis of archival documents, treatises, chronicles or diplomatic correspondence has enabled us to reconstitute the concrete modalities of the production, circulation and reception of speech in the early modern period, within the following three domains: diplomatic and curial speech, religious speech, and speech as represented in the iconography of the early modern period.

When to Speak is to Silence: Stakes of the Conference

The conference that brings us together today and tomorrow thus constitutes the third major moment of collective reflection for our research group, and it is inscribed within a logic of thematic progression. Having explored speech in its promissory dimension and in its articulation with writing, we now turn towards what might seem its reverse, its negative, indeed its absence: silence. Yet, and herein lies the entire stake of our gathering, silence cannot be reduced to a simple sonic void, to a lacuna or to a deficit of speech. On the contrary, it constitutes a performative modality in its own right, endowed with a specific power to act that escapes both the sovereignty of power and the complete mastery of the subject.

In the early modern period, political and religious silences are inscribed within a complex economy wherein they can simultaneously manifest the exercise of authority – when it is a matter of silencing others –, constitute a form of resistance – when the subject chooses to remain silent –, offer a strategic resource – when one decides to conceal information –, or indeed participate in a ritualised practice – when one observes silence within a ceremonial or liturgical framework. This polysemy of silence, these multiple modalities of its inscription within the field of political and religious action, merit interrogation in their historical specificity, avoiding the pitfall of an essentialising approach that would reduce silence to a universal and timeless category.

The very title of our conference, "When to Speak is to Silence", deliberately borrows from John Austin's celebrated formula, "How to Do Things with Words", in order to effect a significant displacement. If Austin magisterially demonstrated that certain utterances do not merely describe the world but accomplish acts – promising, swearing, baptising, cursing, declaring war –, we should today like to explore the hypothesis according to which certain forms of speech, far from producing noise, information or supplementary meaning, on the contrary operate a reduction and reconfiguration of other possible speeches. To speak, in certain institutional and ritual contexts of the early modern period, is simultaneously to silence, to circumscribe the space of the speakable, to trace the frontiers between what can be enunciated and what must remain within the unsaid.

Yet silence is not merely the product of a speech that silences. It also constitutes a presence, a specific texture of acoustic, ritual, social and political space, which can be invested with multiple and sometimes contradictory significations. Silence can be suffered as a violence, when it is imposed by censorship, repression or fear. It can be chosen as a strategy of protection, withdrawal or contestation. It can be cultivated as a spiritual ascesis, in monasteries and convents where silence becomes a pathway to access the divine. It can finally be ritualised, inscribed within ceremonial protocols that make of it an instrument of social distinction and staging of power. It is, lastly, one of the eminent political modalities bearing upon the past reconfigured as impeded memory: silencing troubles in order to reweave the bonds of a political society formerly deeply divided.

Two Scenes of Language: Between the Vacancy of Power and Its Absolute Concentration

To illustrate this complexity of silence in its relation to power and to speech, permit me to set in dialogue two scenes of language apparently very distant from one another, yet which seem to me to illuminate in complementary fashion the stakes that will lie at the heart of our discussions. The first scene is offered to us by the anthropologist Pierre Clastres in his foundational work, *Society Against the State*, published in 1974. The second comes to us from the Byzantine Empire, between the 9th and 12th centuries, and is transmitted through the accounts of foreign ambassadors who attended imperial ceremonies.

In the Amerindian societies that Clastres studies, and more particularly amongst the Guaraní Indians, the chief finds himself in a paradoxical position that the anthropologist summarises in a striking formula: the chief has the duty of speech. Contrary to what one might expect of an authority figure, the Indian chief does not impose silence upon his subjects the better to make his own voice heard. On the contrary, it is precisely because he speaks constantly, because he pronounces each day, at dawn or at twilight, long discourses wherein he celebrates the norms of traditional life and exhorts the community to follow the example of the ancestors, that the chief can occupy this function. His speech is not a speech of command, but an empty speech, a speech that says nothing new, that decides nothing, that orders nothing. It is a ritual speech, tirelessly repetitive, which no one truly listens to, but whose constant proferation precisely guarantees that power does not crystallise in the person of the chief.

As Clastres writes: "The chief's speech is not spoken to be heard. Paradox: no one pays attention to the chief's discourse. Or rather, one feigns inattention. If the chief must, as such, submit to the obligation to speak, by contrast the people to whom he addresses himself are held only to that of appearing not to hear him". This anthropological configuration reveals an essential truth about the relation between speech and power in societies without a State: the chief who speaks is a chief who cannot act as chief, that is to say who cannot arrogate coercive power over the community. The duty of speech of the chief is in reality the guarantee that forbids the man of speech from becoming a man of power. In these societies without a State that Clastres studies, speech is that which occupies the place of power the better to prevent its concentration. It fills the political space in order to maintain it empty of all effective domination.

Let us now transport ourselves to Constantinople, in the audience hall of the Great Imperial Palace, the Magnaure, between the 9th and 12th centuries. We are in the presence of an exactly inverse configuration. The Byzantine emperor, considered as the terrestrial lieutenant of God, appears during great ceremonies as a living icon, immobile and silent. Around him unfolds a sonic apparatus of extraordinary complexity: hydraulic organs that resound with power, mechanical automata that roar and beat the air with their wings, choirs of eunuchs who intone hymns to imperial glory. Yet at the centre of this acoustic orchestration, the emperor himself remains absolutely mute. He never speaks in his own voice during public audiences. When he must communicate with a foreign ambassador, an officer called the *logothete* stands before the throne and speaks in his name, whilst the emperor contents himself with slight nods of the head to manifest his assent.

This staging of imperial silence, masterfully described by Marie-Emmanuelle Torres in her article on Byzantine silences, responds to a precise theological and political logic. In Byzantine ideology, the emperor is no longer quite an ordinary man: he has become a terrestrial image of celestial power, and his public appearances are conceived as theophanies, manifestations of the divine. Now, God being by nature inaudible, ineffable and inaccessible, his terrestrial representative must also manifest himself in silence. The mutism of the emperor is thus neither a lack nor a deficit of sound: it is a resounding affirmation of absolute superiority. His silence is his official mode of being, his obligatory sonic regime.

Yet this imperial silence does not float in a void. On the contrary, it is carefully constructed, protected, enhanced by an entire institutional and ritual apparatus. A specific officer, the *silentiary*, has the function of imposing silence upon the entire assembly during ceremonies.

The court, composed of thousands of functionaries and dignitaries, must remain immobile and mute for hours, forming a frozen human hedge that contrasts violently with the powerful sonorities of the instruments. This collective performance of silence installs an insurmountable distance between the emperor and the rest of the world. It creates an experience of inaccessibility, of sacrality, which literally astounds foreign ambassadors. Liutprand of Cremona, an Italian bishop received in audience in 949, describes his wonder and stupefaction before this apparatus: the emperor who rises mysteriously into the air by means of a mechanical throne, the golden lions that roar at his approach, and above all this absolute silence that reigns in the assembly and renders impossible any direct communication.

The Dialectic of Plenitude and Void

These two scenes of language, that of the Indian chief who never ceases to speak and that of the Byzantine emperor who never speaks, place us before a fascinating dialectic of profusion and scarcity. In the first case, power is prevented from concentrating precisely because speech constantly fills it, because it occupies its place in order to maintain it vacant. The chief speaks without ceasing so that no one, not even himself, can seize power. His speech is a constant flux that dilutes authority instead of concentrating it. In the second case, power attains its maximal degree of concentration precisely because speech is evacuated from it, because imperial silence creates a sonic void that is immediately filled by the quasi-divine presence of the emperor. The absence of the imperial voice is not a lack of power, but on the contrary its most striking manifestation.

Between these two poles, we find the entire gamut of political uses of silence in early modern Europe. Silence can be a tool of government, as in monarchical ceremonies where protocol imposes moments of contemplation that dramatise royal authority. It can be a diplomatic weapon, when the refusal to respond to a demand or to a provocation becomes a negotiation strategy. It can be a practice of resistance, when persecuted communities choose to remain silent rather than to abjure their faith or denounce their co-religionists. It can be a spiritual technique, in contemplative orders that make of silence a path of mystical union with God.

Yet in all these cases, silence never functions alone. It is always caught within a broader economy of speech, within a play of contrasts and alternations that give it meaning and efficacy. It is because there are moments when one speaks that moments of silence can be significant. It is because some speak that others can remain silent. It is because certain things are said that others can be left unsaid. Silence, in this sense, is never autonomous: it is always relational, always inscribed within a system of differences and oppositions that constitute it as such.

The Axes of the Conference

It is precisely this complexity that our conference intends to explore, through four research axes that will structure our exchanges. The first axis will focus upon the economies of silence, that is to say upon the dialectic between silence and speech, upon the apparatuses of silencing such as censorship and interdiction, upon voluntary practices of silence such as withdrawal or contemplation, and upon the values and uses of silence in relations of power. Several papers will address these questions by examining notably strategies of diplomatic mutism, practices of secrecy in political negotiations, or indeed forms of repression of speech in contexts of religious censorship.

The second axis will concern itself with the forms and manifestations of silence, exploring its corporeal and gestural dimensions, its sonic codifications, its inscriptions in writing in the form of blanks or lacunae, as well as its ceremonial ritualisations. How does the body signify silence? What are the gestures that accompany or replace it? How can writing bear the trace of

silence, and what are the conventions that permit one to represent it? How do political and religious rituals integrate silence as a constitutive element of their performative efficacy?

The third axis will focus upon the contexts and situations wherein silence takes on meaning and value. We shall examine institutional frameworks such as the liturgy, ceremonies and assemblies, hierarchical interactions wherein relations of authority and obedience are at play, collective configurations such as communities and crowds, as well as diplomatic and negotiation situations. The objective will be to show how silence never has the same meaning nor the same function according to the context in which it is inscribed, and how its interpretation always depends upon the social and institutional frameworks that render it possible.

Finally, the fourth axis will explore the resistances and subversions of silence, that is to say the moments when silence becomes a tool of contestation or refusal, when it is diverted from its official uses and reappropriated by dominated actors. How can silence become a weapon for those who do not have access to legitimate speech? How do persecuted communities use silence as a strategy of survival or resistance? How are communities of silence formed that draw their collective identity from their refusal to speak?

Over the course of these two days, you will hear papers that will address these questions from highly varied corpora: literary texts, diplomatic archives, travel narratives, historical chronicles, theological treatises, but also iconographic and architectural sources. This diversity of sources and methodological approaches testifies to the richness of the field we are exploring and to the necessity of a resolutely interdisciplinary approach in order to grasp the complexity of silence in early modern Europe.

A New Stage: The Parole(s) Series

Before concluding this introduction, I should like to share with you excellent news that testifies to the vitality of our research group and to the recognition that our work enjoys within the international scholarly community. We have indeed just signed a publishing contract with Brepols Publishers for the creation of a series entitled *Parole(s): Political and Religious Anthropology of Speech (Early Modernity)*. This series, directed by Paul-Alexis Mellet, Monique Weis and myself, intends to examine, from a comparative and interdisciplinary perspective, the forms, functions and uses of public speech in Western and Central Europe in the early modern period.

The volumes, initially collective ones, will treat precise themes articulating political and religious history, cultural history, anthropology of language and studies of communication practices. Several volumes are already in preparation with your contribution, which will enable us to publish the proceedings of our successive conferences but also other works issuing from our research network. I have no doubt that the exchanges during these two days will contribute to nourishing this series and to making it a reference point for studies on speech in the early modern period.

Conclusion

In closing this introduction, I should simply like to invite you to listen, over the course of these two days, not only to what will be said, but also to what will remain unsaid, not only to the words pronounced, but also to the silences that surround them, punctuate them, render them possible or prevent them. For if we have entitled this conference "When to Speak is to Silence", it is precisely because we are convinced that speech and silence are not two separate and opposed realities, but two modalities of a single speech act, two faces of a single performance that can be understood only by thinking them together.

I wish you all fruitful exchanges and thank you for your presence.