

**Precis of “The Ground From Which We Speak: Joint speech and the collective subject,”  
Fred Cummins, January 2018. (Available as free in pdf form at [jointspeech.ucd.ie](http://jointspeech.ucd.ie)).**

This book takes a single behaviour, joint speech, and considers it from many angles. Joint speech is an umbrella term covering all unison utterances done by multiple people at the same time. It thus includes communal prayer and ritual, both secular and sacred, but also the impassioned chanting of protesters in the streets. The enactment of group identities in the chants of sports fans provides another central reference point. Although many other examples are discussed, these landmark cases make it clear that joint speech lies at the heart of many highly valued events and practices; such practices are found in every human society and throughout history. Indeed, a case is made that joint speech has played an important role in founding human societies for longer than any written record exists.

Joint speech appears slightly odd if we think of it as we conventionally think of language. In joint speaking, there is no clear distinction between speaker and listener, as everyone is both at the same time. The texts uttered are composed elsewhere, so joint speech is not creative in the way that conversational speech is. Frequently, joint speech is associated with a great deal of repetition, and for those taking part, participation seems to be of the essence, rather than the communication of any novel message. Finally, in surveying joint speech examples, there is no clear border to be found between speech and music. Indeed, the English word “chant” is nicely ambiguous with respect to that distinction, applying equally to the cries of the protesters, the taunts of the football fans, and the plainsong of monks.

So joint speech appears as a common, indeed ubiquitous, behaviour readily amenable to observation and interpretation. Yet we find that there has been almost no empirical scientific inquiry into this behaviour, not because such inquiry would be terribly difficult, but because it has not been thematised in this fashion. Once it is so thematised, joint speech appears as a rich source of potential insight into the practices that found collectives, both transient and enduring.

Chapters 1 to 3 introduce the topic of joint speech with some carefully observed examples from the domains of prayer and protest. Chapter 1 provides an overview of the principle features of joint speech and raises the question of why this has not been thematised. Chapter 2 unpacks some structural characteristics of joint speech that transcend domains, with important examples from preaching and from Occupy Wall Street protests. Here the argument is made that a substantial treatment of joint speech must interrogate boundaries, often treated as inviolable, between natural law and cultural phenomena. With this, Chapter 3 lays out the challenges for science that must immediately arise. Once joint speech is thematised, the reality of collective subjects, collective intentions, and collective passions must be faced squarely, and this is not a straightforward task given the highly individualistic treatment of the personal subject in contemporary scientific accounts.

Chapters 4 to 7 then detail the little scientific work that has been done, much of it by the present author, in the fields of phonetics, movement science, neuroscience and linguistics. In each case, the empirical work is framed by consideration of the challenges arising as we take collective intentionality seriously. Chapter 4 deals with the sounds of joint speech, with a focus first on phonetics. Here we find that speakers given novel texts can synchronise their speech with great precision, and without any prior practice. Speech produced in this fashion is characterised by a large reduction in inter-subject variation, which is of immediate interest to experimental phoneticians. Further consideration of the melodies and rhythms of chant serve to bring to the fore continuities between speech and music, two domains frequently assumed to be contrasting rather than continuous. Elaboration of the characteristics of joint speech can allow us to recognise commonalities here that are obscured when speech and music are considered to be categorically distinct.

Chapter 5 addresses the synchronisation found among speakers from the perspective of movement science. The notion of a synergy, or coordinative structure, describes a goal-directed assembly of biophysical components, perhaps including tools and surfaces, that function as a systemic whole in the service of a particular behavioural goal. Examples of multi-personal synergies are known, but joint speech introduces a new variant that is characterised by a specific error found when pairs of speakers speak in unison, but not otherwise. Under such circumstances, an error by one person can cause the other person to abruptly stop speaking. This unique error is reminiscent of the obvious mechanical dependence found between participants in a three-legged race. If one stumbles, both go down.

In Chapter 6, we turn to the brain. Given that joint speech has languished in obscurity because of an exaggerated role played by the individual subject in the human sciences, and that cognitive neuroscience

takes subjectivity to be essentially individual, it is not straightforward to join neuroscientific practices with the study of passionate chant. However a single recent fMRI experiment is reported that manages to explore brain activity when subjects speak in unison with a real person, or with a recording of a person. In the experiment reported, subjects were never aware that recordings were used, yet brain activity clearly distinguished between the two cases. Raising more questions than it answers, this pilot study brings to the fore the largely unacknowledged importance of real-time reciprocal interaction, in which the goings-on of one individual become entangled with, and hence inseparable from, the goings-on of another. The themes of joint speech speak of embodied presence, not of representation.

The final chapter of this section considers joint speaking as a form of language. Once more, it becomes apparent that a single metaphor, that of discrete minds hermetically isolated from each other, has dominated the theoretical understanding of language, and joint speech provides strong encouragement to consider language and language-associated behaviours somewhat differently. The interaction of the voice and eyes becomes noteworthy, as gaze is an important modulator of face-to-face interaction when conversing, but that interpersonal negotiation becomes very different when a crowd speaks with one voice. A social psychological experiment in which chanting seems to have a positive effect on group performance is presented, and a case is made that the oldest existing form of literature, the Kesh Temple Hymn, provides evidence for a central role for joint speech before the invention of writing.

If Chapters 1 to 3 introduced the topic and the questions raised for science by taking joint speech seriously, Chapters 4 to 7 showed that joint speech is perfectly amenable to empirical study within orthodox paradigms. There is much to find, and some of the results, at least, are low hanging fruit. The final section then explores the broader consequences of taking collective subjectivities seriously. This is a theme that will be familiar to sociologists and anthropologists, but that is difficult to express within a conventional realist scientific framework in which the individual person is treated as a self-contained autonomous entity, while social phenomena are considered as supervenient on such individuals. Chapters 8 and 9 discuss the language of enaction, as it is being developed within the broader field of embodied approaches to cognitive science, and argue that this kind of language, carefully wielded, is appropriate for developing alternative, plural, accounts of ourselves and the collectives we constitute and live among. The resulting science must be less secure in its pronouncements than any view that relies on a simple split between subject (or mind) and object (or matter). Because the very nature of those collectives that ground our being are in play, the work leads to a joint consideration of potentially conflicting claims from scientific, traditional, and legal authorities. It is the articulated structure of modernity and its valorisation of a specific kind of individual that is questioned here. Joint speech, thematised as an object of empirical study, opens doors that lead to new spaces in which a consensus-based account of our own being can be negotiated.

The topic of this book is familiar territory. Every reader will, themselves, participate in joint speech practices. Those who eschew the community participation in an overt *Credo* may nevertheless find themselves joining in a round of *Happy Birthday*, or cheering *Right On!* at a rally. The absence of a rich empirical tradition of scientific and linguistic study seems anomalous at first, not least because such investigation is easy to conduct, and there is much to find. But the absence becomes rather more intelligible as the theme is developed, and it becomes clear that collectives, and their subjectivities are poorly served in a scientific worldview that acknowledges only a single kind of subject, the Cartesian mind, or isolated cognitive system. The car mechanic and the traffic cop have clearly different responsibilities with respect to cars, which we might compare to the roles of psychological and social explanation, respectively. In turning to joint speech, we are led to question any such confident separation. As living beings, we live among collectives; we are constituted by them as much as the reverse. It is this reorientation that the present work encourages us to pursue.

*The Ground From Which We Speak: Joint speech and the collective subject* is being released as a freely-downloadable PDF suited for viewing on large screens or on smartphones. It can be found at [jointspeech.ucd.ie](http://jointspeech.ucd.ie).