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Vain repetitions: The role of joint speech in enacting collective subjectivities

> But when ye pray, use not vain repetitions, as the heathen do: for they think that they shall be heard for their much speaking. (Matt 6:7, KJV)

1 Introduction

The charge of "vain repetitions" in practices of ritual and prayer has been levelled at non-Christians and Catholics alike, often from a Protestant standpoint (Yelle 2013). The underlying logic of the charge seems to assume that language has a prosaic function in which messages with determinate meanings are exchanged in a communicative transaction. If a message is coded and transmitted, there seems to be no obvious reason why one would transmit it again (unless the transmission channel is particularly noisy). The implied purpose of uttering that motivates this charge seems to be well aligned with the view adopted by default by most linguists, for whom language is a species-specific form of communication, conducted using codes with names such as "French," "Yoruba," or "English." An utterance, within this utterly familiar ideology, is a message whose content has a determinate meaning that has been encoded for transmission from speaker to listener.

While this communicative view of speech and language is undoubtedly useful and has been very influential, there are many reasons to approach this framework with caution and to make some of its inherent limitations explicit. It is trivially true that we use our voice for more than simple message passing. Our repertoire of nods and grunts, greetings and routinized exchanges is extensive; a great deal of our use of the voice in face-to-face interaction is best understood as phatic, rather than communicative, resembling in many respects grooming behavior among primates that serves to enact and maintain social bonds (Zegarac 1998). When we interact face to face, our voice is not distinct from the entire embodied context in which it arises; speaking is a whole-body activity that employs gaze, manual gestures and posture, as well as the voice. We speak with a great sensitivity to context, moving easily from a whisper to a shout, from formal to informal registers and from simple monosyllables to complex diatribes, as the

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situation demands. This is true today and was true long before the complex forms of social organization that we think of as human societies arose, before the normative practices of education that distinguish the grammatical from the sloppy, before texts as free-floating entities were possible and before one might conceive of language as being a distinct thing over and above immanent embodied behavior centered around the voice.

The characterization of language as a communicative code serves to divide up a whole-body, context- and interlocutor-sensitive activity into, on the one hand, a set of mutually contrasting elements (words, phonemes) that can be reproduced indifferently in speech or in print (i.e., language) and, on the other, everything else. This act of reification, which is the first act of the linguist, is only possible once literacy is widespread and written texts are freely reproducible (Ong 2013, Olson 1996). Both literacy and the widespread dissemination of texts are innovations of the last 500 years or so, and the object, "language," that is thereby constructed is curiously divorced from the whole context in which it (an utterance, a written sentence) arises.

The use of the voice in embodied, situated interactions is far, far older, and this is surely where we must look as we consider how language may have transformed our species and contributed to the development of a largely shared human lifeworld (Cummins, 2021). Perhaps we might acquiesce to the use of the verb *languaging* to point to a broad range of coordinative and affiliative forms of interaction involving the voice, rather than to the much more narrowly defined sense of language-as-code? The use of a single term for both language-as-code and for this sense of a much broader set of socially agglutinating activities serves only to shield from our vision those very activities that have given rise to the human world, as imperfectly shared as it may be.

Which brings us back to the vain repetitions of prayer, rite and ritual. What is going on when the same sounds are uttered over and over by a collective, in a specific context, frequently one that itself recurs, thereby nesting repetition within repetition? The language-as-code frame seems to be of little use here, but the broader notion of languaging may allow us to interrogate this very widespread behavior with fresh eyes. I have found it useful to define *joint speech* as utterances produced by multiple people at the same time and with this simple definition, a rather different frame arises that points us in interesting directions (Cummins 2018).

2 Introducing joint speech

Definition: Joint speech is found wherever multiple people utter the same sounds at the same time.

This empirical definition allows us to approach a wide variety of culturally saturated activities in which joint speaking takes place and to ask about commonalities and differences among them. It thus allows us one way of approaching the broad areas of prayer, rite and ritual, without an a priori definition of such activities and without insisting that they can be understood through a single lens of religion, or even of practice. Wherever joint speaking is going on, it seems, there are significant activities afoot that are likely to be understood as consequential and binding by those taking part. For joint speaking does not occur in arbitrary contexts. It is a form of languaging that is inextricably bound to context, however greatly those contexts may vary. The definition given above avoids use of elements constructed within linguistic theory, such as words or sentences, and it also self-consciously avoids drawing any principled division between speaking and singing. It is instructive to inquire about the kinds of contexts in which joint speech occurs.

Perhaps the most frequent form of joint speech is in prayer, the home of the vain repetitions we began with. The copious repetition of short prayers or mantras is found within many traditions, often accompanied by the material scaffold of prayer beads or *mala*. Such repetition can be done alone, but it is entirely unexceptional for this to be carried out by a congregation, frequently with distinguished roles for uttering specific phrases. The call and response structure of the Catholic rosary is not much different from that of the *kirtan* of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) congregation. The preponderance of repetition leads to prosodic stylization, with rhythmic exaggeration of specific elements and often with intonation or melodic contours that are quite idiosyncratic.

Prayer is a frequent element in *ritual*, of course and ritual or liturgy is frequently the context for highly articulated joint speaking. The recurrence of ritual adds a further element of nested repetition, and the spoken forms of ritual and liturgy are frequently stable across many generations. It is a remarkable characteristic of such practices that the language (as code) employed is sometimes not intelligible to those taking part, as witnessed by the role of Hebrew prior to the founding of the modern state of Israel, of Coptic in Egypt, Ge'ez in Ethiopia, of Latin before Vatican II, or, indeed, the singing of the quotidian ritual of Happy Birthday in many non-English speaking countries today.

Besides the liberal use of repetition and joint speech, secular and religious rituals share many formal characteristics such as the use of synchronized and

coordinated gestures and movements. The rather loose alignment between hand gestures in conversational speech becomes specialized, invariant and obligatory in ritual, alerting us that if we wish to understand this reserved form of languaging, we would do well to avoid the somewhat arbitrary divide between the voice and the hands.[1]

Beyond ritual and prayer, the next domain of human activity that calls out for recognition is the use of repeated unison speech in protest. Whether spontaneous or planned, officially sanctioned or prohibited, protests the world over employ short, repeated phrases enunciated by large groups of participants who are again both speakers and listeners. The agencies addressed in such chants are frequently abstract (the state, the ruling elites) and nobody would mistake the repeated clamor for one half of a conversation. Repetition begets both rhythmicity and melody, and the chants of protesters occupy a position that is not clearly to be apportioned to either speech or song. The English term "chant" encompasses this ambiguity nicely. The relation of prayer to the broader theatre of ritual has an analogy in the relation of protest chants to chanting in rallies, meetings and assemblies of a political nature. The recent centrality of the rather ugly chants of "lock her up" and "build the wall" in the United States of America provide unfortunate but relevant examples.

A third very well populated domain of chant is the manner in which group affiliations are enacted and displayed among supporters of some kinds of sports, specifically those sports in which achievements are collective and the associated team identities persist over years, decades and even across generations. Soccer has very well-developed chanting traditions with many local nuances. Rugby employs singing rather than chanting. But chanting in tennis, golf or snooker would be anomalous and there are no obvious persistent collective identities that might be nourished by chanting.

Across all cultures, we find the use of chanting or joint speech in educational practices directed at the very young. This includes the performative recitation of culturally valued texts (pledges, scripture, poems), memorization by rote (multiplication tables) and playful forms of interaction that probably serve the purposes of crowd control and the focusing of collective attention. Inevitably, such educational practices are established and shaped by ideological concerns, though young school children will make independent use of joint speech in the playground, too, in practices of bullying and team formation.

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1 I have elsewhere argued, along similar lines, that voice and gaze need to be jointly considered as a matter of course (Cummins, 2021).

3 Joint speech and the foundations of the social order

Collective unison speaking is found in many other situations, but the domains just listed stand out in several ways. They seem to be ubiquitous, in that they are found in countries with very different forms of economic activity, of political ideology and across the widest variety of cultural and religious orthodoxy. Each of the domains mentioned plays a central role in bringing into being, maintaining and expressing diverse kinds of group identity or attachment. These practices lie at the foundation of human social activity.

They also seem to long predate the spread of literacy. Perhaps the oldest piece of written literature known is the Kesh Temple Hymn from Sumer, which has been found in relatively invariant form over a period from 2,600 BCE to 1,600 BCE. In that time, the ambient language changed from Sumerian to Akkadian, but the text, which is understood to be liturgical in nature, did not change. The text consists of alternating verses and an invariant chorus, strongly suggesting that collective chanting was already an established feature of robust, stable ritual practices by the time of the advent of writing (Cummins 2020).

Ritual stabilizes and joint speech is part of the make-up of the basic anatomy of ritual. Indeed, although there is almost no prior literature that has thematized joint speech, Roy Rappaport identified ritual as "the performance of more or less invariant sequences of formal acts and *utterances not entirely encoded by the performers*" (Rappaport 1999, 24, emphasis added) thereby alluding to one of the defining characteristics of joint speech. He returns to the peculiar nature of joint speech in ritual when he says:

> It is of great interest that ritualized utterances eschew one of ordinary language's special talents: its ability to split and split again the world into ever finer categories and conditions and conditionals. It is virtually definitive of ritual speech that it is stereotyped and stylized, composed of specified sequences of words that are often archaic, is repeated under particular, usually well-established circumstances and great stress is often laid upon its precise enunciation (Rappaport 1999, 151).

But formal ritual is usually associated with specific kinds of institutions or ideologies. The empirical definition of joint speech serves to illustrate commonalities between highly formal, stable and recurring rituals that serve explicit purposes within such frameworks and the much more improvised assemblies that we partake in. The ritual of singing Happy Birthday in an informal setting, or the ad hoc assembly of a crowd of taunters in the playground to bully another, also draw on our capacity to bring into being a shared stance born of communion, common-

ality or shared purpose that finds expression in and through joint speech. When a street performer seeks to assemble an audience, a well-worn technique involves doing something to pique the curiosity of onlookers and then to address them with a cry such as "Do you want to see a show?" When the crowd responds univocally with "yes" (which may require more than one attempt), the collective assent transforms each person from an individual into a member of the audience, committed to watching, at least for now, and sharing purpose with everyone else. The repeated use of "amen" in a religious setting does much the same thing, renewing the commitment of participants, bringing forth once again their common purpose.

4 Speech acts: what joint speech *does*

I have suggested that joint speech is best understood by suspending our conventional framing of the notion of language as a code that can be understood independently of the context in which it occurs, and that the context in which joint speech occurs is central to any understanding of what it is and the role it plays. Making the context explicit alerts us to the centrality of such activities in the establishment and renewal of various kinds of identities, or, as I will suggest, of kinds of collective subjectivities. The activities are anything but neutral: they are the means by which congregations of many kinds are assembled, identities are renewed through joint participation and joint commitments born of mutual entanglement arise. The collectivities that are thus enacted may be relatively transient or may persist for centuries, but they are all enacted, or brought into being, through the joint activity. Taking part in the rituals, chants and assemblies of a football club is essential to renewing one's identity as a supporter, which is not guaranteed by birthright or certificate, but by participation. The same can be said of many a church, society or gang.

Participation and performance go hand in hand. It is not enough that words be spoken; they must be spoken again, be meant again. On a coarse timescale we can see that rituals must be performed for the institutions, ideologies and identities they support to persist through time. Those who wish to belong to such must participate. There is no need to dig down to subterranean levels of belief or sincerity, to debate authenticity or to read the tea leaves of hypothetical cognitive structures and representations to see what is going on. This is public, overt, unashamed and resolutely empirical. At a finer timescale, the repetition of the football chant, the prayer and even the 3-times-table can be seen as part and parcel of the sustaining activity that enacts the respective collective. To enact means to bring forth by doing: there is no shortcut, no textual substitute, no finality.

A reaction against the hegemony of the view of language-as-code enshrined in modern linguistics was provided by the Ordinary Language movement within philosophy, which birthed the notion of a speech act, as pursued most famously by J. L. Austin and John Searle (Austin 1962, Searle 1969), and which was conducted in a spirit well aligned with the thrust of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*, to resist asking what lies behind or beneath words, but to ask instead how they are used and what they effect. The basic question underlying this is what one can use words to do, what are the acts that they facilitate or, indeed, perform?

Austin famously introduced the notion of a performative, as exemplified by the phrases "I dub thee knight" or "I now pronounce you man and wife." A performative is not *about* something, it *does* something. After the utterance, if conditions are felicitous, a person's status is transformed, from peasant to knight, from single to married. The importance of felicity conditions in scaffolding a performative of this sort necessarily draws our attention to the *context* in which an utterance is produced and which imbues the utterance with its meaning. Performatives of this explicit sort are relatively rare and typically can be invoked only once, as the change they demarcate is considered to be persistent. Joint speech seems to demand a more generous sense of performativity: taking part in the chanting achieves something, but not a single something, no more than eating a sandwich settles the matter of appetite for once and for all. To join in a chant is to transiently coalesce with others, to become part of the enactment of a collective stance, where the continued persistence of the collective is the effect, but not one that is ever final. Unlike formal performatives, joint speech sometimes seems to create its own felicity conditions. Protest marchers typically do not ask for permission and no elaborate conditions need obtain for group worship to succeed.

The manner in which performatives are understood might be augmented by consideration of their instantiation in joint speech, where they can serve the kind of role Austin discusses, but where they can also bear repetition in the service of renewing those institutions within which they function. Public performative recitation of specific phrases sometimes provides the necessary and sufficient conditions for religious conversion. Conversion, like being knighted or married, typically happens once only and need not be collective, but the same phrase that signals conversion may be repeated then as a central part of those foundational activities that renew and enact the associated collectivity. Thus, for many Muslims, recitation of the *shahāda* is both part of the mechanics of conversion, but also an assertion to be jointly and publicly repeated in daily prayers. The Caliphate structure of the Islamic State attracted performative pledges of allegiance, or *bay'ah*, by groups who wished thereby to signal their fusion with

the larger movement, whilst the Pledge of Allegiance is also part of the routine by which American (US) patriotism is signaled on a daily basis in classrooms. I do not wish to suggest that Austin's justly famous analysis of felicity conditions and performatives can be simply extended to the speech acts accomplished by joint speech. Rather, it seems to me that the non-dialogical setting of joint speech presents challenges that might call for an expanded analysis of performatives and their felicity conditions.

But performatives provide only one way to consider the accomplishments of joint speech. In everyday conversation we use words to achieve all kinds of things. Searle and Austin list many kinds of illocutionary acts, as indexed by verbs such as "assert," "command," "promise," "argue," etc. Some of these are achievements that are entirely at home in joint speaking, some make no sense at all in such a situation and many others seem to fall in between. Thus, it seems entirely unsurprising to suggest that a group of chanting protestors are "asserting," "demanding," or "insisting." To the contrary, it seems to make no sense to suggest that a group of people speaking in unison are "describing," "convincing," or "reminding." "Taunting" seems to naturally describe the chanting of bullies, but I fail to see how a group might "warn," "criticize" or "approve" through chant. That failure may speak more of my limited imagination than of the versatile purposes to which chant can be turned. Theories of speech acts have been developed with conversational exchanges in mind, in which two or more parties are present, speakers are distinct from listeners and conventional assumptions about intentions obtain. Attending to situations of joint speech alerts us to the manner in which such verbs harbor presuppositions about the cognitive makeup of both speakers and listeners. In the absence of a distinguished and cognitively distinct listener, for example, "description" seems rather pointless. "Assertion" or "demanding," however, do not seem to raise any such problem.

Some illocutionary acts would be just plain odd in a joint speech context. "Requesting" seems unlikely, even though "demanding" is fine. The urgency of a demand might need expression even if the party of whom the demand is made is not present or responsive. A request is less urgent and implies a dialogical relationship that expects a response. In conversation this is clearly unremarkable, but it fails to apply to most joint speaking situations. "Lying" might appear to be impossible in chant form, as the use of such a label seems to assume something like hidden secret knowledge of one party and the passing of misleading messages. One could arrange for a group to chant something they know is false ("The Earth is flat!") but it would look like comedy, rather than a lie. When speakers and listeners are no longer distinguished, who is to be deceived? Would the illocutionary act of apologizing be possible? It is certainly not

conventional, but one could imagine a group of concerned citizens who disagreed strongly with the activities of their elected representatives and wished to express a collective rejection of acts done in their name. Indeed, an apology is a speech act that seems to carry substantially more force when uttered in person, compared to a written form. Here there is an interesting tension between speaking in the flesh and being spoken for by a representative.

When joint speech is used as a frame to interrogate human communicative behaviors, many of the assumptions that underlie linguistic analysis and the theory of speech acts in particular, are found to have implicit presuppositions about the distinct roles of speakers and listeners. Consideration of joint speech might encourage us to renew our interrogation of the voice, of the act of uttering and of the manner in which the illocutionary force of uttering depends upon the constitution and intentions of participants. It might, in short, suggest to us that uttering *does* more than we have hitherto acknowledged.

5 Is there such a thing as "religious speech"?

A radical portrayal of a specific register or mode of speech is provided by Bruno Latour in his book *Rejoicing: Or the Torments of Religious Speech* (2013). Far from being a theoretical proposal, the entire book is a sustained and passionate lament of the absence of the means to speak or write religiously. Underlying the entire text is Latour's desire to give voice to his own sense of religious belonging, but in so doing, he identifies another manner in which the act of uttering works that might help us to understand what it is that joint speech does and why collective uttering needs to be understood as something other than the process of producing words that refer or that convey messages.

The kind of speech Latour circles around is that which has "the capacity to assemble a people" (60). Such words, by being uttered, then can be understood to "produce those who say them at the same time as those who hear them, *gathering them together into a newly convened people* united by the same message *finally made real*" (49, emphasis in the original). He is sensitive to the need to repeatedly utter the words, thereby renewing the force of the words on each iteration. Renewal is a recurring theme, as each utterance is "always the first time" (48), "obliging the old [word] to refer to the present, [and putting] a stamp on it that will renew it for a brief moment" (77).

Latour's concern is with religion, but that word has been so problematized and abused that alternative ways of bringing forth the same concerns might be welcome. We might choose to look at the form of speaking he is pointing to and recognize it also as (often) having formal characteristics that arise wher-

ever the indubitable ground that nourishes a congregation, a tribe, a nation, or any collective unity is renewed, refreshed and made real once again, and never finally. The logic of ritual is the logic of repetition, at the fine grain of the Hail Mary or the coarse grain of the annual festival. "It is the present that's at issue, not the past" (55). The repetition of ritual even transcends the individual: pilgrimages are frequently done rarely, or once only, by an individual, but the ritual of pilgrimage may persist across generations and through centuries.

Joint speech is languaging in the service of communion, not communication. To communicate, we must already be aligned and capable of sharing an interpretation of that which is passed between us. Communion speaks rather of the ground from which uttering proceeds, bringing about a transient enacted commonality that is prior to, and necessary for, communication. As the mathematician George Spencer-Brown put it: "The more perfect the fit on the communion level, the less needs to be communicated, the more that can be crossed from one being to another in fewer actual communicated acts" (1973).

We are all aware of the economy of communication that is possible among interlocutors who share lifeworlds. A mere raised eyebrow among a long-married couple may be wonderfully effective in influencing behavior. Conversely, one might shout at an earthworm all day and communicate nothing. Latour attempts to wrest discussion of this speech that creates, that binds and that renews from the framework within which "religion" is conventionally constructed by coming at the vexed, historical and here useless concept of God, recast instead as the "indubitable framework of ordinary existence" (8) or the "guaranteed reference point of our common existence" (17). When we partake collectively in a ritual that produces us as a collective subject, there are some things that need not, that cannot, be said. This is the background from which we go forth, the unmarked frame against which distinctions can now be drawn, allowing insiders to be distinguished from outsiders and providing us with a common, if transient, orientation. The religious speech Latour wants to indicate is formally of the same kind as the means by which all sorts of collective subjects are brought forth, from football clubs to boy scouts, from angry mobs to austere monastic congregations. None of this makes sense unless we are willing to take collective subjects seriously.

6 Discussion: On collective subjects

It is not difficult to define joint speech and when that is done, we have a frame that allows the delineation of many kinds of activity that are foundational for human social order. Yet "joint speech" is barely a term of art and there are no

departments or institutes of joint speech in our universities, no endowed chairs of joint speech, much less textbooks or syllabuses devoted to the many facets of human social intercourse it brings forth. It has not been treated as a specific topic of scientific or anthropological concern. There is a good deal of expertise within specific genres, such as devotional chant, liturgical structure or even football chant lore. What is signally absent is work that explores structural features that transcend domains, that brings out the many ways in which various kinds of collective subjects are brought forth at many different timescales, that allows us to see football stadia alongside churches as sites of renewal and enacted identity.

Once defined, it is not hard to pose and pursue scientific questions related to joint speech. In Cummins (2018) I summarize research that investigates the properties of joint speech in a laboratory setting, for which I employ the term "synchronous speech," as there are many features of joint speech in the wild that do not transfer to the laboratory (passion, urgency, piety), while synchronous speech turns out to have interesting characteristics of its own. There are phonetic properties of joint speech that are of immediate interest to phoneticians (Cummins 2009, Cummins 2014). Joint speech, considered as synchronized complex sequential behavior, can be straightforwardly investigated as a distinguished form of movement that is amenable to analysis (Cummins 2013). The methods of social psychology have suggested a close link between chanting and group affiliation (Von Zimmermann and Richardson, 2016). We even reported on a neuroscientific fMRI study that found tantalizing effects on cortical activity arising from speaking in real-time reciprocal engagement with another live human that were absent or different when speaking along with a recording (Jasmin et al. 2016). In short, once the topic has been defined, joint speech can be investigated within existing scientific paradigms without problem.

The absence of scientific work seems to speak instead of a more fundamental problem: the difficulty of adequately addressing collective subjects and their concerns. For this, there is no quick solution. The cultural context in which psychological, social and linguistic scientific communities have developed has laid enormous importance on the individual human figure, considered as an autonomous subject, and the psychological sciences, in particular, have assumed responsibility for characterizing this individual as a self-contained subject animating a singular body. When we look at joint speech, this is not the subject that we see. We do not see a pre-existing subject, but an enacted one, brought into being, refreshed and renewed through performance and participation. The concerns expressed are collective, the intentionality is communal and the words uttered are not the creation of the individual who speaks. The bodies encountered at morn-

ing worship are animated differently from the bodies animated by team sports in the afternoon or around the campfire in the evening. We are multiply animated.

In his *De anima*, Aristotle insists that that which has a voice must be ensouled: "Voice is a kind of sound characteristic of what has soul in it; nothing that is without soul utters voice, it being only by a metaphor that we speak of the voice of the flute or the lyre [...]" (420b). Voices seem to have an obligatory association with an intentional subject, so that when words are uttered from the unlikeliest of places, we do not ask "How does the belly/corner/attic/doll speak," but rather, we ask "Who speaks?" In *Dumbstruck*, Steven Connor traces the history of voices issuing from unlikely places, beginning with the Delphic Oracle, and tracking the association of voices with demons, spirits and the unnatural, to their present employment in ventriloquism, which is probably the only form of children's entertainment that is also a well-established genre of horror film (Connor 2000). Much of the uncanniness of the displaced voice seems to stem from this necessary link to an intentional agent who utters.

Against this history, it seems to be incumbent upon us to recognize that collective voices issue from collective subjects, an insight that current political, social, educational and psychological orthodoxy seems to struggle to accommodate. Voters speak as individuals or by proxy through their representatives. The uneasy fabric of social organization that, since Hobbes' *Leviathan*, has sought to cleanly separate the spheres of religious and secular power, was forged in a European cauldron. In a globalized and plural society, this simple distinction attains the character of a regional equilibrium generated by contingent circumstances now several centuries old. The ongoing tussle between communitarian and libertarian ideologies leaves us in no doubt that accommodation of our plural, overlapping and enacted communal affiliations is far from settled. Attention to the manifestation of collective identities revealed in joint speaking offers an empirical index that may serve in the consensual and collective conduct of our affairs.

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