

THE SILENT CONQUERORS

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Imagine you're chatting at the dinner table with your family, and then aliens take over the world.

Stay with me here. These aliens are, on a whole, docile — as docile as conquerors can be. They seek not to harm or to subjugate but to, as they say, spread the wealth. In their extraterrestrial minds, the universe is polluted with *noise*. Too many civilizations have yet to discover what these aliens have, that you don't actually need to speak. These aliens did not evolve with mouths or tongues or vocal cords and believe anyone can live in a civilization like this. So the earth, for the first time since its conception, goes silent.

In short, imagine human beings suddenly lose the ability to speak. How would we communicate?



Sure, we can always read and write, but the practical thing to do would be to learn a visual language: ASL, BSL, or the equivalent of this in your country. Deaf-mute people live a nonverbal life, as do many with certain subsets of autism and other neurological disorders, so it's hardly unheard of to move around without saying a word. Verbal speakers can probably get by without the ability to vocalize, though it would be decidedly unpleasant having had the privilege our whole lives.

So is verbal communication "normal"? If there are plenty of other options, and plenty of people who exclusively make use of these options, there's no reason for us to believe that we actually live in a civilization

rooted in voice and sound. But whether it's foundational or just a feature, you probably still don't want to lose it. After all, voicing a thought is quick and efficient. It is a privilege we would miss if aliens came to steal the screams from our throats.



Perhaps that is why we value voice so much — because it is *easy*. It only needs a working tongue and a working ear. That might be an uncharitable view of human civilization, but it, no pun intended, speaks to how we tend to value any sort of communication, even non-verbal, when it's easiest to digest. Plain-spoken language, short speeches, "get to the point," 2x speed, etc. We crave absolution

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Do we fear the loss of voice because the alternative of learning a whole non-verbal language is just too difficult? Do we want to avoid the miscommunication and expected formalities that come with written communication? Or is it something even deeper (it always is) — that we've come to define too much of our lives and relationships by the noise we create?



Many of us can't quite extract our voice from the way we engage with the world. We characterize the people we know by their mannerisms — their tone of voice and the cadence of their speech. We whisper to be surreptitious, we wail to be theatrical. We say things and mean something entirely different. We lie, we hurl cruelties that we can soothe in another breath. Spoken words are just articulated observations and feelings, often the most *immediate* form while still filtered through our inhibitions.

Additionally, the most "well-spoken" people are seen as the most intelligent. The ability to put thoughts to words quickly and eloquently is highly coveted among not only academics and scholars but also friends and acquaintances. We seek out people who command a room with their voices, who *sound* like they know what they're saying.

It's understandable that we value spoken language so much, but I aim to deconstruct the logic we as a collective use

to justify this value. In fact, much of the eloquence and emotionality we covet in the spoken word actually comes from the nonverbal. It may be the poise and stature of an articulate speaker that makes them trustworthy. It may be the expression that gives an utterance meaning.

Indeed, speaking is "easy," but more than that, it's tied to social norms. And social norms seem impossible to disrupt. Even if the disruption is hardly as drastic as an alien invasion, we resist changes to our language and the way we interact with others. We see "grammatical errors" among new communities and think them mistakes, when vernacular languages like AAVE have long-standing histories. Many consider certain forms of English, like British English, as the purest form of the language, when there's really no such thing.

Vernaculars have sprouted ever since humanity could say words — and even before that, one congregation of

cavemen probably thought of a grunting noise as something different than another congregation. And soon, languages will form new equivalents of these grunting sounds, and new words and new meanings, and this essay will have to be orated in a different dialect of English for someone to make sense of it. To be honest, I have no idea what Generation Alpha is saying sometimes, and I want very badly to call them ridiculous and incoherent. Sometimes I want to silence them entirely, and this comes from some deeper fear of not *understanding* something I feel I should know like the back of my hand.

This linguistic normativity is, at best, narrow and myopic and, at worst, exclusionary of "norms" of other cultures, places in the world, and time periods. The way we speak now is simply that, a blip in the history of the universe. Yesterday, we spoke in the old way, and tomorrow, we will invent something entirely new. So let the aliens take over!

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Okay, maybe not. Changes to our language don't happen overnight, and more than that, they're hardly ever registered as actual changes. We can't actually imagine an upending of our systems of communication like that. But consider the alien invasion as an exaggerated and expedited version of an existing process. Are you ready to change the way you speak? Because you will.

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These drawings depict the word "silence" in different languages -- ASL, morse code, and the radially symmetric language from the movie Arrival -- evoking the colorless emptiness of a quiet world.

