

# On Speech and Silence, Truth and Lies



When all other means of communication fail, try words.

—*Ashleigh Brilliant*, mid-1970s

\*\*\*

He who knows does not speak; he who speaks does not know.

—*Lǎozi*, ~ fourth century BC

Wise men talk because they have something to say; fools, because they have to say something.

—*Plato*, first century AD

Saying what we think gives us a wider conversational range than saying what we know.

—*Cullen Hightower*<sup>1</sup>

Just imagine the silence in the world, if people talked only what they knew.

—*Karel Čapek*, 1936

\*\*\*

Word is a shadow of a deed.

—*Democritus*<sup>2</sup>

For if your meaning's threatened with stagnation,  
Then words come in, to save the situation.<sup>3</sup>

—*Johann Wolfgang von Goethe*, 1808

---

<sup>1</sup>As quoted, without a date, in many sources, starting not later than 1998.

<sup>2</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several reliable sources, including Kathleen Freeman's collection published in 1948.

<sup>3</sup>Translation by Philip Wayne. This verse (from Part 1 of *Faust*) is frequently paraphrased shorter: "When ideas fail, words come in handy".

Don't *say* things. What you *are* stands over you a while, and thunders so that I cannot hear what you say to the contrary.

—*Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1876

Speech is conveniently located midway between thought and action, where it often substitutes for both.

—*John Holmes*, 1927

I like business because it rewards deeds and not words.

—*William Feather*, 1927

It is a common delusion that you make things better by talking about them.

—*Rose Macaulay*, 1926

I know of only one bird, the parrot, that talks; and it can't fly very high.

—*Wilbur Wright*, 1908<sup>4</sup>

\*\*\*

Long talk makes short days.

—*French proverb*

But far more numerous was the herd of such,  
Who think too little and who talk too much.

—*John Dryden*, 1681

The secret of being a bore is to tell everything.

—*Voltaire*, 1738

A healthy male adult bore consumes each year one and a half times his own weight in other people's patience.

—*John Updike*, 1965

Talk low, talk slow, and don't talk too much.

—*John Wayne*<sup>5</sup>

Make sure you have finished speaking before your audience has finished listening.

—*Dorothy Sarnoff*, 1970

The secret of a good sermon is to have a good beginning and a good ending, then having the two as close together as possible.

—*George Burns*<sup>6</sup>

---

<sup>4</sup>The aviation pioneer has reportedly made this statement at a banquet, declining an invitation to give a talk. This was apparently a paraphrase of an earlier maxim by Sakya Pandita, but I like it much more than the original.

<sup>5</sup>As quoted, without a date, in many sources, including J. Bartlett's collection.

<sup>6</sup>Possibly based on a more succinct German proverb (sometimes attributed to Martin Luther), "The fewer the words, the better the prayer".

For the wise, one word is enough.

—*European proverb*<sup>7</sup>

\*\*\*

For the wise, silence is an answer.

—*Euripides*<sup>8</sup>

Silence is a friend who will never betray.

—*Confucius*, fifth century BC

Speech is silver, silence is gold.

—*European proverb*

Drawing on my fine command of the English language, I said nothing.

—*Robert Benchley*<sup>9</sup>

One of the lessons of history is that nothing is often a good thing to do, and always a clever thing to say.

—*Will Durant*, 1958

Blessed is the man who, having nothing to say, abstains from giving us wordy evidence of the fact.

—*George Eliot*, 1879

The fool who is silent passes for the wise.

—*European proverb*

Better to remain silent and be thought a fool than to speak out and remove all doubt.

—*Anonymous*<sup>10</sup>

Look wise, say nothing, and grunt. Speech was given to conceal thought.

—*William Osler*<sup>11</sup>

Well-timed silence has more eloquence than speech.

—*Martin Farquhar Tupper*, 1849

Silence is the most perfect expression of scorn.

—*George Bernard Shaw*, 1921

Silence is the virtue of a fool.

—*Francis Bacon*, 1605

---

<sup>7</sup>May be traced back to the Latin “*Verbum Sat Sapienti*”.

<sup>8</sup>As quoted, without a date, in several reputable collections, including *Wikiquotes*.

<sup>9</sup>As quoted, without a date, by C. E. Sylvester in 2005.

<sup>10</sup>Frequently misattributed to either Samuel Johnson, or Abraham Lincoln, or Mark Twain.

<sup>11</sup>As quoted, without a date, by William Bennett Bean in 1950. The second sentence paraphrases an earlier (circa 1763) line by Voltaire.

Speech is civilization itself. The word, even the most contradictory word, preserves contact - it is silence which isolates.

—*Thomas Mann*, 1924

\*\*\*

Human beings [...] are very much at a mercy of the particular language which has become the medium of expression for their society.

—*Edward Sapir*, 1929

Language is the source of misunderstandings.

—*Antoine de Saint-Exupéry*, 1943

The great thing about human language is that it prevents us from sticking to the matter at hand.

—*Lewis Thomas*, 1974

Never express yourself more clearly than you are able to think.

—*Niels Bohr*, 1922

When in doubt, mumble.<sup>12</sup>

—*James H. Boren*, 1970

The difference between the almost right word and the right word is really a large matter - 'tis the difference between the lightning bug and the lightning.

—*Mark Twain*, 1888

Broadly speaking, the short words are the best, and the old words, when short, best of all.

—*Winston Churchill*, 1949

When there is a gap between one's real and one's declared aims, one turns as it were instinctively to long words and exhausted idioms, like a cuttlefish spurting out ink.

—*George Orwell*, 1950<sup>13</sup>

Grasp the subject, the words will follow.

—*Cato*, second century BC

It is feeling and force of imagination that makes us eloquent.

—*Quintilian*, ~95 AD

We believe a scientist because he can substantiate his remarks, not because he is eloquent and forcible in his enunciation. In fact, we distrust him when he seems to be influencing us by his manner

—*I. A. Richards*, 1926

\*\*\*

<sup>12</sup>This is the title of J. Boren's nice little book—a good companion to *Parkinson's Law* and *The Peter Principle* in their description of bureaucracy.

<sup>13</sup>This is, actually, just a more succinct paraphrase of a much earlier (circa 1691) line by John Ray.

A spoken word is not a sparrow. Once it flies out, you can't catch it.

—*European proverb*

My method [...] is to take the utmost trouble to find the right thing to say, and then to say it with the utmost levity.

—*George Bernard Shaw, 1896*

No word is ill spoken that is not ill taken.

—*European proverb*

He who says what he likes, must hear what he does not like.

—*European proverb*

Always be ready to speak your mind and a base man will avoid you.<sup>14</sup>

—*William Blake, 1793*

\*\*\*

The truth shall make you free.

—*The Bible (John 8:32)*

The truth that makes men free is for the most part the truth which men prefer not to hear.

—*Herbert Agar, 1945*

The truth? The truth, Lazarus, is perhaps something so unbearable, so terrible, something so deadly, that simple people could not live with it!

—*Miguel de Unamuno, 1913*

As a rule people are afraid of truth. Each truth we discover in nature or social life destroys the crutches on which we need to lean.

—*Ernst Toller, 1944*

There are few nudities so objectionable as the naked truth.

—*Agnes Repplier, 1891*

The first reaction to truth is hatred.

—*Tertullian, ~97 AD*

As scarce as truth is, the supply has always been in excess of the demand.

—*Josh Billings, 1865*

In a time of deceit, telling the truth is a revolutionary act.

—*Anonymous*<sup>15</sup>

Speak the truth, but leave immediately after.

—*Slovenian proverb*

---

<sup>14</sup>I can testify that this old recipe still works fine.

<sup>15</sup>Frequently misattributed to George Orwell.

There are only two ways of telling the complete truth - anonymously and posthumously.

—*Thomas Sowell*, 2013

The truth does not change according to our ability to stomach it emotionally.

—*Flannery O'Connor*, 1979

Two is not equal to three, not even for the largest value of two.

—*Anonymous*<sup>16</sup>

He who has no good memory should never take upon him the trade of lying.

—*Michel de Montaigne*, 1595

Deceivers are the most dangerous members of society. They trifle with the best affections of our nature, and violate the most sacred obligations.

—*George Crabbe*, 1816

O, what a tangled web we weave,  
When first we practice to deceive!

—*Walter Scott*, 1808

By a lie, a man throws away and, if it were, annihilates his dignity as a man.

—*Immanuel Kant*, 1790

He who does not bellow the truth when he knows the truth, makes himself the accomplice of liars and forgers.

—*Charles Péguy*, 1899

Show me a liar, and I'll show you a thief.

—*European proverb*

To be believable, a lie should be patched with truth.

—*Danish proverb*

A lie which is half a truth is ever the blackest of lies.

—*Alfred Tennyson*, 1864

The only vice that cannot be forgiven is hypocrisy.

—*William Hazlitt*, 1823

Hypocrisy is a revolting, psychopathic state.

—*Anton Chekhov*, 1888

Hypocrisy is the vice of vices [...] Only the hypocrite is really rotten to the core.

—*Hannah Arendt*, 1963

\*\*\*

---

<sup>16</sup>The so-called *Gabel's Law*, based on a somewhat different joke by Arvin Gabel.

Part of the inhumanity of the computer is that, once it is competently programmed and working smoothly, it is completely honest.

—*Isaac Asimov*, 1983

There are truths that are not for all men, not for all times.

—*Voltaire*, 1764

It's a basic truth of the human condition that everybody lies. The only variable is about what.

—*David Shore*, 2004

Everybody lies, but it doesn't matter because nobody listens.

—*Anonymous*<sup>17</sup>

One of the best ways to keep a great secret is to shout it.

—*Edwin H. Land*, 1960

Nobody really listens to anyone else, and if you try it for a while you'll see why.

—*Mignon McLaughlin*, 1981

Most conversations are simply monologues delivered in the presence of witnesses.

—*Margaret Millar*, 2012

The opposite of talking isn't listening. The opposite of talking is waiting.<sup>18</sup>

—*Fran Lebowitz*, 1981

---

<sup>17</sup>I have seen this remark attributed to some Nick Diamos, but could not find a reliable confirmation of this authorship.

<sup>18</sup>This is essentially a paraphrase of a much earlier saying by Francois de La Rochefoucauld, but I like it more than the original.