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Present but Useless: Why Power and Culture Create Structural Silence in the Cockpit

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ABSTRACT

Aviation accident reports often involve human error but overlook the power and cultural factors that control cockpit communication. This study introduced the concept of structural silence. This is a systemic problem in which speech is held back or, more dangerously, spoken in a way that is functionally useless. This helps explain why pilots, even in deadly emergencies, fail to challenge captains. Using cockpit voice recorder (CVR) transcripts from major crashes, this study analysed how the two forces work together. The first is Foucault's disciplinary power, which we analyse in its two distinct forms: the direct hierarchical power of a present superior and the panoptic power of unseen surveillance. The second is Hall's high- and low-context cultural model, which directly sets the social cost of speaking. The findings show that this disciplinary fear is often amplified by high-context cultural rules, leading to softened warnings that fail. The analysis also shows that a captain's direct hierarchical power alone can create silence, even in a low-context culture. This suggests that silence is not a personal failure but a systemic product of power. The study concludes that crew resource management (CRM) training must be culturally aware and must train captains in safety listening, not just training copilots to speak up.

Keywords: Structural Silence; Cockpit Communication; Aviation Safety; Disciplinary Power; Cross-cultural Communication; Panopticism; Crew Resource Management (CRM)

INTRODUCTION

In the final approach of Korean Air Flight 801 in 1997, the cockpit voice recorder (CVR) captured an ominous quietness hidden under politeness and hierarchy. As the plane flew down toward Guam, the first officer and flight engineer noticed problems with the altitude and navigation. However, their warnings remained soft, indirect, and respectful of the captain (National Transportation Safety Board, 2000). The captain's authority, which was a deep part of their cultural rules of respect, was not challenged. In this small space, language became a tool for control and a sign of power. The cockpit was a place where everyone watched. Here, self-monitoring, respect for authority, and official rules were combined to silence critical speech when it was most needed.

Today, these communication failures are no longer seen as rule breaking or personal mistakes. Scholars have increasingly understood these as systemic issues created by hierarchy, organizational control, and the limits of what speech can achieve (Linde, 1988; Kale et al., 2021). Research on aviation safety and language has shown how cockpit talk is shaped—and often changes in a bad way—by power relationships in the organization (Merritt, 2000; Pratama & Caponecchia, 2025). From this perspective, silence is not just nothing; it is a result of limits in the system. What appears to be a failure to speak might truly be the system's failure to speak.

To examine past personal and technical reasons for communication failure, this article introduces the idea of structural silence. This is defined as the systematic holding back or twisting of speech within an organization. Structural silence appears in two ways: either speech is completely kept back or it is spoken but made useless by

institutional power. This is a situation in which language is spoken but loses its ability to perform an important job. To analyse this, we use Foucault's (1977, 2008) disciplinary power, separating it into two forms. The first is direct hierarchical power: the control exerted by a present superior, such as a captain, whose rank can immediately judge and punish speech. The second, and more hidden, is panopticism, the feeling of always being watched by unseen regulators or the CVR, which forces pilots to self-monitor to avoid future consequences. The cockpit, then, is a small panopticon–a place that does not stop language but changes its rules and changes the power of what is said.

Using Hall's high- and low-context cultural models, these communication problems have deeper cultural meaning. In high-context cultures, meaning is often found in relationships, shared knowledge, and small signals rather than in clear spoken words (Hall, 1978; Kittler et al., 2011). Speakers from these cultures tend to adjust their words to maintain harmony and avoid social risk (Ward et al., 2016). In the cockpit, this style can create a contradiction: warnings may be spoken, but their power is weakened. Failure does not involve language skills but involves a mismatch of contexts (Tajima, 2004). Respect and indirectness, which are valued in other places, become dangerous when the time is short. Hesitation is a cultural way of managing risk, but it accidentally silences the very speech it is trying to deliver safely.

Recent studies based on evidence also show that communication silence is very common in high-pressure jobs, often blocking important information. In aviation, safety concerns often exist but are made ineffective by deep-seated power imbalances (Noort et al., 2021). However, communication problems rarely arise because of a lack of confidence. Instead, they come from structural barriers found in professional ranks and group norms (Chan & Li, 2022). Data from over a thousand aviation incidents show that almost 20% of fatal accidents involve crew resource management (CRM) failures tied to communication hesitancy (Shappell et al., 2017). Ironically, the tools designed to help talk—checklists, rules, and official roles—can become tools of silence if people follow them too strictly or with too much respect for authority.

Structural silence, therefore, is not a rare problem but rather a normal condition of the system. It grows best exactly where organizational rules are strongest and where language is thought to work most clearly. In these places, speech is not removed but shaped and controlled to follow the rules and expectations of being watched (Krivonos, 2007). The result is not crews who are silent but crews who are controlled in their speech. Their words are technically correct but robbed of their real power. The cockpit, as seen in this way, is not just a technical workspace. It is a speech environment where people feel watched and where every word is adjusted because pilots know that they are always being watched and judged.

Therefore, the importance of structural silence extends beyond the cockpit. It works in many professional and organizational areas, quietly copying power imbalances and limiting people's ability to speak freely. Explanations that look only at psychology or skills may hide the organizational structures that decide in advance who is speaking, when, and how effective their speech is (Cushing, 1994). Thus, structural silence is not just a communication weakness. It is a powerful tool for analysis to show how language can be made present but powerless, understandable, and unimportant (Foucault, 1977, 2008). By rethinking communication failure as a result of the system, not just a personal mistake, this article helps us critically rethink the links between speech, power, and safety in high-risk organizations.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communication Failure in Aviation: From Human Error to Systemic Phenomenon

Early research on aviation safety mostly explained accidents as the result of human error or machine failure. This view places blame on individual pilots' decision-making or lack of skill (Dismukes et al., 2017). This matched a simple model of risk management that attempted to find error sources and fix them with new machines or new rules (Helmreich & Foushee, 2010). However, accidents continue to occur even with better technology and pilot training. This shows the problems with this "individual-focused" way of thinking. Communication problems, often small, indirect, and held back by social rules, are seen as repeated causes (Chatzi et al., 2019). This led to a change in people's thoughts about and management of flight safety.

The late 1980s was a time of large changes in crew resource management (CRM). CRM saw flight safety in a new way, as a problem of teamwork, communication, and shared decision-making, not just in terms of technical skills (Helmreich & Foushee, 2010). CRM focuses on speaking confidently, giving feedback, and watching one another (Mearns et al., 2001; Espevik et al., 2017). However, the use of CRM has resulted in deeper organizational and cultural problems. Even when official rules pushed pilots to "speak up," they often remained quiet or gave them to the person in charge. This occurs most frequently in high-pressure situations or when there are clear ranks (Shappell et al., 2017).

Recent studies have shown that communication failure in aviation is not merely a matter of insufficient training or personality differences (Dos Santos et al., 2014; Alharasees et al., 2023; Chan et al., 2025). This was caused by power differences and company rules built into the system. These factors control when and how people can speak. The idea of a safe voice illustrates this problem (Noort et al., 2021). However, this focus on speaking is only half the problem. Research from Noort et al. (2021) also helped this study to offer a key matching concept: safety listening, which is whether the person in power has the ability and willingness to receive, understand, and respect safety challenges from subordinates. While safety voices are officially supported, they are often held back by unspoken power differences and professional ranks (Foucault, 1977, 2008). More importantly, even if a safety voice is expressed, it becomes meaningless if there is no safety listener, which also leads to structural failure. Holding back the speech, therefore, is not just shy. It is a normal pattern of behavior in the organization, and this pattern of behavior is caused by the double failure of both speaking up and listening down.

This understanding of the entire system reveals the cockpit in a new way. It is a small example of communication in the whole organization, where power, rules, and culture come together. Therefore, communication failure is considered to be a problem with the system. This is the result of different levels of rank, rule-based thinking, and cultural beliefs (Gao et al., 1998; Krivonos, 2007; Dos Santos et al., 2014; Hutchby, 2014; Alharasees et al., 2023). These things control speech long before anyone speaks. From this perspective, aviation safety depends more than just on technical systems or mental skills. It depends on the organization's ability to keep communication open, equal, and aware of the situation, even under the pressure of control.

Silence as Structure: Institutional and Discursive Power in Communication

The starting point for understanding silence as a structural problem is Foucault. He wrote about disciplinary power and panopticism: This is the idea that always feeling visible or watched changes how people act and speak (Foucault, 1977, 2008). Foucault also demonstrated that power does not stop speech. It also works by producing certain kinds of "correct" or "acceptable" speech. This system of "power/knowledge" determines what is considered true or valid. This means that speech that follows the rules is accepted, whereas speech that breaks the rules, even if it is an important warning, is ignored or seen as unprofessional or invalid (Liberstein, 2025).

Research on communication in companies uses these ideas in the workplace. It sees silence as an organizational issue caused by rules, rewards, and group habits and not just by a person's choice to be quiet (Crane et al., 2008). Early studies have shown that organizational silence is maintained by managers, fears about careers, and the feeling that speaking up is useless (Morrison & Milliken, 2000; Pinder & Harlos, 2001). This shows that keeping quiet is a group behavior shaped by the company. Recent studies agree that employee silence is shaped by pressure to change, a lack of psychological safety, and a company's ability to manage risk (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Kim & Wang, 2024).

In high-pressure fields, such as aviation, these company factors are associated with professional habits and power imbalances. "Safety voice" (speaking up about safety) might be spoken in words, but it is made powerless by bosses not listening and by too much respect for authority (Noort et al., 2021). Looking at this through Foucault's ideas makes the process clearer: speech is not just missing; it is controlled (Howell, 2025). Words are spoken, but they are made powerless by the feeling of being watched by the rules of one's job and fear of punishment (Foucault, 1977, 2008). This entire process, which includes both keeping quiet and making spoken words useless, is what this article calls structural silence.

However, it is not enough to classify these power-induced communication failures simply as organizational silence or a lack of safety voice. The existing concept of organizational silence focuses mainly on employees actively withholding critical information because of fear or a feeling of futility (Morrison & Milliken, 2000). In contrast, research on safety voice centers assesses an employee's willingness to speak up about safety concerns (Noort et al., 2021).

The concept of structural silence introduced in this study adds a more critical and hidden dimension: speech that is present but useless. The core argument of this paper is that the most dangerous product of combining disciplinary power and cultural norms is not just preventing people from speaking but also systematically making the speech that is spoken functionally useless. In this context, warnings are expressed in a way that is tamed by power, such as in the form of questions or hints. Although speech is formally present in CVR recordings, it has been stripped of its power to act as a warning. This present but useless speech is a unique contribution and analytical focus of structural silence.

High- and Low-Context Communication: Culture, Deference, and Risk

Hall's important difference between high- and low-context cultures is still the key to understanding how communication styles are formed by cultural rules. In high-context cultures, meaning is found in relationships, shared knowledge, and clues from the situation rather than in clear, direct words. In contrast, low-context cultures use direct, clear, and self-explaining speech (Hall, 1978; Kittler et al., 2011). This idea has deeply affected cross-

cultural communication research. However, how it is used has changed because of the criticism that it is too simple or stereotyped. Recent research has reconsidered this context. It is not seen as a permanent part of a country but rather as a changing way of talking—it is flexible, depends on the situation, and is guided by organizational rules (Pratama & Caponecchia, 2025).

In high-context places, holding back speech often protects one's social feelings. Respect for authority, politeness, and saving "face" (avoiding embarrassment) are seen as the most important ways to keep the group peaceful and avoid conflict (Gao et al., 1998; Chen et al., 2025). Hall's framework, therefore, is not only about clarity; it is fundamentally about managing social risk. A high-context style is often used to navigate steep power gradients or to perceive institutional rules. This is particularly true in groups with clear ranks or when people are judged. Speakers are expected to show respect by using softer words, nice words for bad things, or silence (McDaniel 2000). They believe that others guess the real meaning. However, these methods, which are good for maintaining smooth relationships, can cause problems in dangerous, fast-moving situations, where being clear and fast is very important. The high-context preference for indirect speech may thus accidentally create confusion, hesitation, or a slow response when the need to speak quickly conflicts with social harmony (Ward et al., 2016; Chen et al., 2025).

Aviation is a clear example of how cultural communication styles connect with doing a job in which safety is key. Studies on cockpit communication in East Asian and Latin American airlines have shown many times that pilots raised in high-context cultures with strong ranks are less likely to challenge a boss or give direct warnings, even when safety is at risk (Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Merritt, 2000). Respectful ways of speaking, such as using "maybe" or "perhaps," indirect phrases, or statements that are not 100% direct—may show that they know about the danger but fail to have the needed power. What looks like polite speech is a cultural way of handling risk that holds back voices that disagree (Ryabova, 2015).

When Foucault's ideas about disciplinary power are examined, high-context communication is similar to structural silence. Both involve people taking social control over their speech. In such situations, silence is not simply a lack of words. It is a way of obeying that is approved by the culture and the organization; it is language that is controlled to create peace instead of conflict.

ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH

Research Orientation and Theoretical Framework

This study aimed to introduce and develop a conceptual framework of structural silence to examine how power, culture, and institutional norms work together to shape communication in the cockpit. Instead of seeing silence as a personal weakness or lack of speech, this view understands it as a result of institutional power and a sign of culturally learned ways of talking. This study proposes a new analytical tool and demonstrates its explanatory power, arguing that silence is actively produced and maintained through interconnected systems of control.

This framework was built on two interconnected theoretical foundations. Foucault 's (1977, 2008) theory of disciplinary power provides a twofold perspective. It includes direct hierarchical power, where a visible superior can immediately judge and punish, and panopticism, the unseen surveillance that causes crew members to self-monitor and self-discipline to avoid future consequences. This study argues that structural silence is created by these two forms of power working together in a cockpit. Second, Hall's high- and low-context communication theories (Hall, 1978; Kittler et al., 2011) help explain cultural differences in politeness, respect, and ambiguity.

These two theories support one another. When Foucault's idea of self-discipline was combined with Hall's high-context cultural norms, its power was strengthened. In these cultures, respecting authority and maintaining group harmony are extremely important. This cultural preference for indirect speech perfectly fits with Foucault's power structure. This combination makes it even more difficult for crew members to speak directly or to challenge a superior.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is twofold: First, to formally introduce and define the concept of structural silence and use it as an analytical lens. Second, it shows its analytical usefulness through a theoretical reinterpretation of key aviation accidents. This study's design brings together Foucault's ideas on disciplinary power and Hall's views on cultural communication, applying this integrated framework to the fields of aviation safety, organizational communication, and cross-cultural linguistics.

Case Selection and Analysis Framework

This study used an illustrative case study method to demonstrate the framework's explanatory power. It is based on a theoretical review of official accident investigation reports and the cockpit voice record (CVR) transcripts documented in those reports.

Cases were selected on the basis of the following criteria: 1) the official report clearly listed communication failure as a contributing factor to the accident; 2) there was sufficient publicly available CVR data in the final report to analyse key conversations; and 3) the flight crews represented a range of cultural and organizational backgrounds (see Table 1).

Table 1: Research Cases

Case Name and Years	**Main Reasons**	**Theoretical Basis**
Tenerife Airport Disaster (1977)	Collision, power, visibility	Foucault's disciplinary power
Avianca Flight 052 (1990)	Fuel, culture, language	Hall's cultural framework
Northwest Airlink 5719 (1993)	Ice, power, communication	Foucault's disciplinary power
Korean Air Flight 801 (1997)	Visibility, culture, descent	Both
Asiana Air Flight 214 (2013)	Pilot, culture, airspeed	Both
Lamix 2933 (2016)	Fuel, error, approach	Foucault's disciplinary power

Importantly, official reports are themselves products of the organization—what Foucault calls the regimes of truth. Each document is not a factual record. It is also a retelling of the error and who was to blame, shaped by the power of the rule makers (Foucault, 1977, 2008). Thus, this study looks at these texts in two ways: as sources of evidence and as things to study on their own. It asks how organizations use stories to control and explain communication failure. However, a major limitation of this study is that it must rely on data (CVR transcripts) that have already been filtered and framed by the institutional power (the investigative bodies) it seeks to analyse. The fragmentation of CVR data in the final reports may itself be a product of this power, shaping a specific narrative.

It is essential to define this study's analytical method, which is not a new, original qualitative analysis (such as discourse analysis or conversation analysis). Instead, this method provides a theoretical interpretation. It takes established facts and key conversations from official reports and re-examines them through the proposed structural silence framework.

Therefore, the data analysis (Section 4) did not aim to code the original data. Instead, it aims to argue how this framework provides a deeper and more systemic explanation for communication failures that have already been documented. For example, the analysis focuses on the hesitation or indirect warnings already identified by agencies, such as the NTSB, and shows how they can be more accurately understood as present but useless speech—the product of disciplinary power and cultural pressures working together.

All the data are from documents that are open to the public. This ensured that the study was ethical and open. Personal names are kept private when the words are used. This study focuses on patterns in the system rather than on blaming any single person.

CASE ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

The analytical framework of this study suggests that, in common explanations of aviation accidents, human error often hides deeper, system-wide problems. This section re-examines these key cases via the concept of structural silence. It argues that communication failure does not come from the personal failure of a crew member (like "shyness") but is a product of Foucault's disciplinary pressure and Hall's cultural contexts working together. This analysis is organized around the two forms of structural silence defined in the introduction: (1) suppressed silence, where speech is completely held back, and (2) present but useless silence, where speech is spoken but stripped of its function.

Suppressed Silence: The Direct Result of Disciplinary Power

The first form of structural silence, suppressed silence, is the most direct outcome of Foucault's hierarchical power. In this form, a subordinate is so afraid of punishment or humiliation from a superior that they stop speaking up entirely. Northwest Airlink 5719 (1993) is a perfect example. This flight involved a US crew, which normally works in a low-context setting where direct speech is expected. This case allows us to isolate the Foucault variable from Hall's cultural values. This clearly shows that direct hierarchical power alone is strong enough to create deadly structural silence (National Transportation Safety Board, 1994). The CVR transcript is critical because it shows that this disciplining process occurs in real time long before the final crash. The fatal silence during landing was not a sudden event; it was produced by the captain before the plane took off.

Table 2: The Communication Between Pilots from Northwest Airlink 5719	
(Before takeoff, the pilots are setting up their plane for taking off.)	
Captain	"Why isn't the exterior Pre-flight done?"
First Officer	"I was ... ..."

Captain	"You didn't check the damn exterior lights!"
First Officer	"Uh, I was gonna check the lights from inside the cockpit."
Captain	"That's now how you do it, you have to go outside and see it, with your own stupid eyes."
Captain	"Does Northwest even screen you guys anymore? You know what? Screw it. I'll do it myself."
First Officer	"You know, I ... ..."
(The plane is about to landing.)	
Captain	"Did you click the airport lights?"
Captain	"Did you click it?"
First Officer	"Uh, I, um ... ..."
Captain	"Click it seven times."
First Officer	"Uh, I got it now."
(Sound of impact.)	

In this pre-flight exchange, the captain acts not as a teammate but as a watcher and punisher. As Foucault (1977, 2008) argued, this is how direct hierarchical power works: it sets rules and enforces them by punishing rule breaking. The captain uses humiliating language ("*damn*," "*stupid eyes*") and attacks the first officer's basic competence ("*Does Northwest even screen you guys anymore?*"). The first officer's response ("*I was...*"; "*You know, I...*") was broken and interrupted. He quickly internalizes the fact that speaking up will only lead to more punishments. The captain actively uses direct hierarchical power to create space for pure fear. This is not panopticism; it is the raw, immediate power of a superior who can and punishes on the spot.

When the captain asks about the lights, the first officer's response ("*Uh, I, um...*") is not the normal check of a professional; it is the hesitation of a subordinate, who is afraid to act. He has stopped being an active partner in monitoring the flight, a core part of CRM (Helmreich & Foushee, 2010; Helmreich & Merritt, 1998). He has been disciplined as a passive receiver of order. This case is vital because it proves that this silence was not caused by high-context politeness (Hall, 1978) but by a raw fear of punishment. The captain's direct hierarchical power alone is sufficient to produce silence. As Noort et al. (2021) argued, the first officer's safety voice was completely suppressed, not by culture but by pure institutional discipline.

This case illustrates the first form of structural silence: suppression. The analysis of Northwest Airlink 5719 shows that the direct hierarchical form of Foucault's disciplinary power, when used aggressively by a superior, is strong enough on its own to create fatal silence. The captain's humiliation for the first officer produced a state of paralysis, effectively removing a crew member from his duties long before the critical landing phase. This proves that structural silence is not just a cultural issue but also a fundamental problem of power.

Present but Useless Silence: The Mixture of Power and Culture

The second and more hidden form of structural silence is speech, which is present but useless. This is the core of this study's theoretical contribution. This form of silence is often created by the combined pressure of Foucault's disciplinary power (both direct and panoptic) and Hall's cultural context. Tenerife (1977), Avianca 052 (1990), and the Korean Air 801 (1997) are key examples.

The Tenerife disaster is often blamed for the KLM captain's poor decision and bad weather. However, from a structural silence point of view, real tragedy is found in cockpit voice recorder (CVR) data: a challenge that was "disciplined" and ultimately useless. As Foucault (1977, 2008) argued, disciplinary power works not only by forbidding speech but also by producing speech that fits the rules. The KLM captain was a highly respected flight instructor; in the cockpit, he was both the commander and the symbol of an "all-seeing" (panoptic) watchfulness. He represented both direct and panoptic powers. His presence itself was a form of discipline, and any challenge to his authority was like breaking major rule. The CVR data show that when the captain pushes the throttles without takeoff clearance, the first officer speaks up (National Transportation Safety Board, 1978). This was not complete silence but the second form of structural silence, where language is present but has no real effect.

Table 3: The Communication Between Pilots from KLM 4805 (English Version)

(KLM 4805 is going to take off.)	
First Officer	"Wacht even, we hebben geen takeoff clearance." (Wait a minute, we don't have takeoff clearance.)
Captain	"Ik weet dat, ga je gang, vraag maar. " (I know that, go ahead, ask.)
(First Officer radios the tower, but the message overlaps with a Pan Am transmission, creating a "squeal".)	
Flight Engineer	(hearing the Pan Am): "Is hij er niet af dan?" (Is he [the Pan Am] not off [the runway] then?)
Captain	(with complete authority): "Jawel!" (Yes, he is!)

In this exchange, the First Officer's initial challenge ("*Wait a minute*") was direct. However, after the captain dismissed it ("*I know that*"), the crew's resistance changed (National Transportation Safety Board, 1978). The most critical moment came from the Flight Engineer, who had reason to believe that Pan Am was still on the runway. The form of his speech was most important. He did not shout, "*Stop!*" or state as a fact, "*The Pan Am is still on the runway!*" Instead, he presented life-saving information as a hesitant question. This is a clear act of self-discipline (Foucault, 1977, 2008). The question form is a classic way to soften a challenge to a superior, showing deep respect for the power structure over the immediate physical danger. By asking a question, the Flight Engineer functionally handed control of the truth back to the captain, allowing the captain to reject the warning with a single, powerful "*Yes!*" This is a perfect example of structural silence: the warning was spoken, but the disciplinary structure and fear of rule breaking (Krivonos, 2007; Liberstein, 2025) robbed the words of their power. Speech was present but functionally useless.

If the Tenerife tragedy came mainly from Foucault-style power, the Avianca 052 disaster perfectly shows what happens when the strategy of high-context communication (Hall, 1978; Kittler et al., 2011) is activated by Foucault's panoptic fear (Foucault, 1977, 2008). The Avianca crew (from Colombia, a high-context culture) failed to effectively communicate the extreme urgency of their low-fuel situation to the controllers at the JFK (a low-context setting). As Helmreich and Merritt (1998), Merritt (2000), and Tajima (2004) noted, this type of high-context style tends to use indirect, softened language to protect face and group harmony. The CVR data show that the Avianca first officer used the word "*priority*" many times, but he always avoided the magic word that has mandatory power in the low-context US air traffic control system: "*emergency*" (National Transportation Safety Board, 1991).

Table 4: The Communication Between Pilots and ATC from Avianca 052 (English Version)	
(The First officer is going to tell New York ATC emergency.)	
First Officer	Well, I think we need priority, we are passing out of fuel.
New York ATC	Avianca 052, roger, how long can you hold and what is your alternative?
First Officer	Okay, standby a minute.
(After about an hour waiting and flying, the plane is about running out of fuel.)	
Captain	(to First Officer): "Did you tell them we're in an emergency?"
First Officer	"I told them priority."
Captain	(to First Officer): "Tell him we are in emergency!"
First Officer	(to ATC): "That's right, we're running out of fuel... we need... we need priority."

The captain used the word "*emergency*" inside the cockpit, but the First Officer systematically twisted it into "*priority*" when speaking to the tower (the outside authority) (National Transportation Safety Board, 1991). This was not just an English language problem; it was a deep case of structural silence. First, following Hall's theory, declaring an "*emergency*" is an extreme, harmony-breaking, low-context act. The crew's choice to avoid this word is consistent with communication strategies often found in high-context settings, which avoid being too direct (Ward et al., 2016). Foucault's disciplinary power created intense social risk. This risk activates a high-context communication strategy that prioritizes social harmony over direct clarity. Second, this communication preference was strengthened by Foucault's panoptic power. Declaring an "*emergency*" on the CVR was also a formal admission of the crew's major failure in fuel planning—an act of rule-breaking that would be recorded, reviewed, and possibly punished (Krivonos, 2007). Therefore, the first officer was caught in a structural trap: situational communication norms (Hall, 1978) pushed him to be indirect, whereas disciplinary fear (Foucault, 1977, 2008) made him afraid of consequences. The word he finally chose was formally present but functionally useless.

The Korean Air Flight 801, which the Introduction used as a key example, shows a tragic result when these two forces work together. The crew worked in a cockpit environment where a strong institutional hierarchy (Foucault, 1977, 2008) was strengthened by communication norms connected to a high-context culture (Hall, 1978; Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Merritt, 2000). This situational need for harmony was combined with the ever-present Foucault-style discipline of the cockpit, where the CVR was recorded and the captain's authority was final. As the plane was flying too low during its approach to Guam, junior crew members noticed the danger. However, their speech was distorted by these combined pressures. They did not challenge the captain; they offered softened or indirect hints (National Transportation Safety Board, 2000).

Table 5: The Communication Between Pilots from Korean Air Flight 801 (English Version)	
(The plane is going to landing.)	
First Officer	"Not in sight?"
(The crew set up the plane for landing.)	
First Officer	"Let's make a missed approach."
Flight Engineer	"Not in sight."

First Officer	"Not in sight, missed approach."
Captain	"Go around."
(Sound of auto-pilot disconnect warning and GPWS warning.)	
(Sound of impact.)	

This transcript, fully noted in the official report (National Transportation Safety Board, 2000), is a powerful example of structural silence. The crew's words were present but functionally useless. The first officer's comment on rain instead of altitude is a classic case of using an indirect, high-context communication strategy (Tajima, 2004). The crew members were so deeply disciplined by the combined power of direct institutional rules and activated cultural norms that they could not produce the only speech that mattered: a direct, low-context command such as "*Stop! We are too low!*" Their language was disciplined and softened until it lost its power.

Together, these three foundational cases demonstrate the second, more hidden form of structural silence: present but useless. In Tenerife, we see how hierarchy tames a warning into a powerless question. In Avianca 052 and Korean Air 801, we see how disciplinary fear is amplified by high-context communication strategies. This combination creates a structural trap in which pilots speak in hints ("*priority*") or indirect observations ("*Not in sight?*"). In all three accidents, critical warnings were formally presented on the CVR, but the system of power and culture had already stripped them of their function, making them tragically useless.

Modern Forms of Structural Silence: Automation and Business Pressures

One might hope that modern technology and new CRM training would have fixed the problems seen in the 20th century (Helmreich & Foushee, 2010). However, the cases of Asiana Airlines 214 (2013) and LaMia Flight 2933 (2016) show that structural silence has not disappeared. Instead, it has been adapted. The old pressures of hierarchy and culture now mix with new pressures such as automation and business models.

The crash of Asiana 214 in San Francisco is a powerful example. A high-tech, automated B777 plane crashed during good weather. The key problem is a mix of automation confusion and a specific power dynamic. This setup created a perfect trap, combining both forms of power: the instructor (PM) was a direct hierarchical superior (like the northwest captain) but also a panoptic evaluator (grading the PF's performance for the record) (Foucault, 1977, 2008). Captain-in-training was monitored, graded, and judged. The CVR shows that the pilots were confused about whether the autothrottle was maintaining the plane speed. However, the captain-in-training did not speak up clearly.

Table 6: The Communication Between Pilots from Asiana 214 (English Version)	
(The plane is descending too fast and is now below the correct glideslope.)	
Captain (PF)	"It's low."
First Officer ((PM)	"Yeah."
(Electronic voice: One hundred.)	
Captain ((PF)	"Speed."
First Officer (PM)	"Speed."
(Sound similar to stick shaker lasting for approximately 2.24 seconds.)	
Captain ((PF)	"Oh, go around. (With GPWS warning.)"
First Officer (PM)	"Go around. (With GPWS warning.)"
(Sound of impact.)	

This transcript is a devastating example of structural silencing. The key exchange is "*Speed.*" This is not communication; it is a shared observation of a fatal problem with no action (National Transportation Safety Board, 2014). This is the very definition of speech that is present but is functionally useless. This is where Foucault's and Hall's theories are combined.

From a Foucault-style perspective, the captain (PF) is disciplined by dual power (Crane et al., 2008). His job is to perform, and admitting "*I am confused*" or "*I've lost control of the speed*" would fail his assessment from A320 to B777, a rule-breaking act with serious career consequences. He is afraid of being judged (Foucault, 1977, 2008). From a Hall-style view, the first officer (PM) is bound by Korean high-context rules. Like Korean Air 801, taking control of the trainee is a direct, low-context, face-losing act for both parties (Gao et al., 1998; Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Merritt, 2000). He waits, hoping for the trainee to self-correct. This resulted in deadly paralysis. Both pilots see the problem (they both say "*Speed*"), but they are structurally trapped. The go-around call only comes after the stick shaker, which is far too late.

The LaMia 2933 crash (which killed the Chapecoense football team) was a terrifying repeat of the Avianca 052 disaster discussed in Section 4.2. This case demonstrates how business pressure can become a new form of disciplinary power. The pilot was also part of the owner of the small airline. The flight was planned with almost

no additional fuel. For many minutes, the pilot knew that he was in a critical low-fuel state. However, like the Avianca crew, he never declared ATC an emergency.

Table 7: The Communication Between Pilots and ATC from LaMia 2933 (English Version)	
(The First Officer contacts Rionegro ATC)	
First Officer	"LaMia 2933, request priority for approach, we have a fuel problem."
Rionegro ATC	"Understand, you're requesting priority for landing, also with a fuel problem, right?"
First Officer	"Affirmative."
Rionegro ATC	"Maintain present heading and stand by to continue your descend."
(A few minutes later, after low fuel warning sounded)	
First Officer	"We have a fuel emergency, That is why I'm asking you at once for final approach. Requesting immediate descend."
Rionegro ATC	"LaMia 2933 make a right turn now to begin your descend, you have traffic one mile below."
Rionegro ATC	"LaMia turn right to begin your descend."
First Officer	"Negative, we're already starting to descend and heading for the runway."
(All engines stop running.)	
First Officer	"2933, total electrical failure, without fuel!"
Rionegro ATC	"Runway is cleared, firefighters alerted."
(A few minutes later, the plane crashed.)	

This transcript was a perfect match for the Avianca 052 case. The First Officer avoids the low-context, high-power word "*emergency*" (Unidad Administrativa Especial de Aeronáutica Civil, 2018). Instead, he used a high-context hint: request priority and fuel problems (Hall, 1978; Ward et al., 2016). The low-context ATC controller hears these words and confirms them ("*you're requesting priority... with a fuel problem, right?*") but does not understand the implied meaning of "*we are about to crash.*" Consequently, the ATC tells them to "*Stand by*" and puts them in a queue.

This is when Foucault's concept of panopticism is critical. Why did the pilot hesitate? The Foucault-style panopticon here was not just the CVR; it was the entire regulatory system. To declare that a fuel emergency was to admit on a permanent record that his company was breaking the rules. This rule-breaking act triggered an official audit that could destroy his business (Krivonos, 2007), which is a perfect example of panoptic self-discipline (Foucault, 1977, 2008). The crew only declared a fuel emergency after the internal alarm sound, which was too late. The pilot was trapped: he could not declare an emergency, and his cultural norms pushed him toward indirect speech, and the resulting speech was twisted—it was present but functionally useless.

Taken together, these two modern cases show that structural silence has adapted to new technologies and pressures. Asiana 214 reveals how the disciplinary fear of being judged—in this case, by an instructor (PM)—works with high-context cultural rules to create fatal paralysis, even in an automated cockpit. LaMia 2933 shows how this same disciplinary fear can come from business or regulatory rules, which then combine with the same high-context communication patterns that were seen decades earlier. In both situations, the crew's words were formally present, but they failed to achieve an urgent safety function because of these deep systemic constraints.

CONCLUSION: FROM HUMAN ERROR TO STRUCTURAL SILENCE

For decades, the aviation industry has focused on human error as the primary cause of accidents (Dismukes et al., 2017). This suggests that better training and rules can help fix individuals. However, as this study has shown, the same fatal communication patterns were repeated from Tenerife in 1977 to Asia in 2013. This suggests that the problem is often not a person but a system. This paper introduced the concept of structural silence, a systemic problem in which speech is either held back or made useless by the pressures of the organization (Morrison & Milliken, 2000).

To explain this, we use two main ideas. The first is Foucault's panopticism, which we identified in two distinct forms: the direct hierarchical power of superiors who can punish immediately and the panoptic power of unseen surveillance, which causes self-disciplining to avoid future consequences (Foucault, 1977, 2008). The fear of being judged by captains, instructors, or CVRs causes pilots to discipline themselves and to hold back (Krivonos, 2007). Second, Hall's cultural model shows how this fear, particularly the fear of direct confrontation with a superior, is amplified (Hall, 1978). In high-context cultures, the social cost of challenging a superior is high (Gao et al., 1998; Helmreich & Merritt, 1998; Merritt, 2000), leading to softened speech or hints (Ward et al., 2016). When this indirect speech meets a low-context system, it fails (Tajima, 2004). Structural silence is the result of speech being present, but it has no power.

Our analysis of key accidents demonstrates this framework. In Northwest 5719, we saw Foucault's direct hierarchical power at work, as a captain's authority alone was enough to discipline a junior crew member into suppressed silence (National Transportation Safety Board, 1994). In cases such as Avianca 052 and LaMia 2933, the panoptic fear of the CVR and regulatory system twisted speech into present but useless hints such as "*priority*" (National Transportation Safety Board, 1991) or "*fuel* problems" (Unidad Administrativa Especial de Aeronáutica Civil, 2018). In the most complex cases, such as Tenerife and Asiana 214, these two forms of power combined, an instructor captain who was both a direct authority and a panoptic evaluator, to create deadly paralysis, resulting in weak questions ("*Is he not off* then") or shared actionless observations ("*Speed*") (National Transportation Safety Board, 1978, 1994). In all these cases, the crew members were trapped: the cost of speaking directly was higher than the risk of silence.

This finding indicates that we must rethink our solutions. Crew resource management (CRM) is often taught as a simple skill of speaking up (Espevik et al., 2017). However, this study demonstrates that this is a power problem. We must stop focusing only on the speaker and begin training captains in safety listening (Noort et al., 2021). Furthermore, training must be culturally aware (Pratama & Caponecchia, 2025). However, we must also recognize that such training is a mitigation strategy within the existing power structure and not a fundamental solution. As Foucault's theory suggests, training can simply become a more refined form of discipline. A one-size-fits-all CRM program that ignores the deep realities of cultural power and disciplinary fear always fails.

This study has two key limitations. First, and most importantly, this framework was built by analysing only fatal failures. This selection bias means that while the theory explains why systems fail, it cannot explain why they overwhelmingly succeed. Future research must analyse near misses or successful interventions to understand how crews overcome structural silence, whether through specific linguistic strategies or active safety listening by captains. Without this, we cannot determine whether structural silence is the norm or a rare breakdown under extreme pressure. Second, this study was limited to official reports, which are themselves a form of institutional story (Foucault, 1977, 2008). This creates a paradox in that the analysis must use data filtered by the institutions being critiqued. Future research should interview pilots about their experience with this disciplinary pressure and apply this framework to other high-risk fields, such as medicine or business (Lotfi Dehkharghani et al., 2023; Kim & Wang, 2024).

In the end, we must move past blaming fatal words and begin to see these accidents as products of fatal systems (Cushing, 1994). Although training in safety listening is a necessary first step, it must be clear that it does not dismantle the structure itself. Turning to structural silence would require questioning the core structures that create the steep power gradient and the panoptic gaze, such as crew-pairing policies, anonymous real-time reporting channels, and the punitive nature of CVRs. Therefore, while safety listening is necessary, we must recognize that as long as the disciplinary gaze and rigid hierarchy remain at the core of the cockpit, the seeds of structural silence will always be present.

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