

## Abstract

Throughout the *Essais*, **Montaigne** dwells on the mechanics of **communication**, considering the role of intention and inference in interpretation. His approach to communication as an interaction between minds resonates with the account of utterance interpretation offered by **relevance theory** in the field of pragmatics. Relevance theory elucidates communicative and cognitive patterns in the *Essais*, here demonstrated by examining Montaigne's portrayals of exchanges in **diplomacy** and **jurisprudence** and the account he offers of his own **authorial communication**, with reference to **underspecification**, the notion that utterances provide only sparse evidence of the speaker's intended meaning.

### **'Il guigne seulement du doigt par où nous irons' : Underspecification in Montaigne's *Essais***

On corrompt l'office du commander, quand on y obeit par discretion, non par subjection. Et Publius Crassus, celuy que les Romains estimerent cinq fois heureux, lors qu'il estoit en Asie consul, ayant mandé à un ingenieur Grec de luy faire mener le plus grand des deux mas de navire qu'il avoit veu à Athenes, pour quelque engin de batterie, qu'il en vouloit faire, cetuy cy, sous titre de sa science, se donna loy de choisir autrement, et mena le plus petit, et, selon la raison de son art, le plus commode. Crassus, ayant patiemment ouy ses raisons, luy fait tres-bien donner le fouet: estimant l'interest de la discipline plus que l'interest de l'ouvrage. (I.17, 74)<sup>1</sup>

The story of Crassus and the engineer in 'Un traict de quelques ambassadeurs', chapter I.17 of Montaigne's *Essais*, is a cautionary tale about the exercise of judgement and the distribution of prerogatives in a hierarchical relationship. Montaigne borrows the account from

---

<sup>1</sup> Michel de Montaigne, *Les Essais*, ed. by Pierre Villey and V.L. Saulnier (Paris: Presses Universitaires de France, 2013). All references to the *Essais* are from the Villey-Saulnier edition and are cited in the main text using the chapter and page number convention.

Aulus Gellius's *Noctes Atticae*, closely paraphrasing the original.<sup>2</sup> Read on its own, the story suggests that subordinates are obliged to strictly observe the instructions of their superiors; by acting according to his own judgement, the engineer has overstepped his purview and suffers the consequences.

However, Montaigne nuances this message when he circles back to the Crassus story in the final sentence of I.17. He poses a rhetorical question absent from Gellius's account: 'Crassus, *escrivant à un homme du mestier, et luy donnant advis de l'usage auquel il destinoit ce mas, sembloit-il pas entrer en conference de sa deliberation et le convier à interposer son decret?*' (I.17, 74). Montaigne suggests that the engineer did not deliberately flout the consul's authority, but rather made a rational attempt to fulfill his orders. In his letter, Crassus simply could have commanded the engineer to procure the larger of the two masts without explaining its intended purpose. By providing additional information beyond the bare facts of the order, including 'l'usage auquel il destinoit ce mas', the consul tacitly invited the engineer to offer his expertise, encouraging collaboration rather than unquestioning obedience.

Relevance theory, a cognitively inflected approach to pragmatics proposed by Deirdre Wilson and Dan Sperber in the wake of Paul Grice's work in the field, offers a means to further

---

<sup>2</sup> For Gellius's original version in Latin, see *Noctium Atticarum lib. XIX* (Paris: Michaelis Vascosani, 1536), reproduced by Cambridge Digital Library <<https://cudl.lib.cam.ac.uk/view/PR-MONTAIGNE-00001-00003-00003-00001/51>>. John C. Rolfe provides a translation in 'Aulus Gellius, Attic Nights, Book I. XIII' (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), reproduced by Perseus Digital Library <<http://www.perseus.tufts.edu/hopper/text?doc=Perseus:text:2007.01.0072:book=1:chapter=13&highlight=crassus>>.

explain the reasoning behind the rhetorical question.<sup>3</sup> The Crassus story as Montaigne reads it provides an instance of what relevance theory calls *underspecification*. Integral to Wilson and Sperber's account of communication, this is the idea that all communicative acts, verbal or otherwise, are underdetermined with respect to the communicator's intended meaning. In making an utterance, for example, a speaker merely provides evidence of his or her meaning rather than fully encoding it in the semantic structure of the words. As a natural corollary to this underspecification, the addressee must *enrich* the encoded content of the communicative act to arrive at an interpretation of it, engaging in an inferential process to glean the intended meaning. This involves combining the evidence the utterance provides of the speaker's meaning with contextual information, including the circumstances of the utterance as well as the hearer's prior knowledge, beliefs, and experience.<sup>4</sup>

This inferential process is guided by the hearer's expectation that the utterance is relevant — where 'relevant' refers to a property of inputs to cognitive processes. In the context of communication, utterances and other ostensive communicative acts are the 'inputs' to the addressee's 'cognitive processes'.<sup>5</sup> A given input is relevant if,

---

3 For a full account of relevance theory, see Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson, *Meaning and Relevance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). An account of Gricean pragmatics can be found in *Studies in the Way of Words* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1989). I use 'pragmatic' throughout the article to refer to pragmatic language philosophy, the subset of linguistics that considers intentional communicative acts and the role of context in determining meaning.

4 *Meaning and Relevance*, p. ix.

5 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

[...] when added to an individual's existing assumptions, it produces a worthwhile cognitive effect: say, by answering a question, settling a doubt, correcting a mistake, suggesting a hypothesis or a plan of action, or combining with existing assumptions to yield a 'contextual implication' (derivable from new information and existing assumptions together, but from neither alone). A single piece of new information may achieve several such cognitive effects.<sup>6</sup>

In inferring the meaning of an utterance, the hearer will choose the interpretation that is the most salient, or that requires the least processing effort to produce cognitive effects. Robyn Carston provides a summary of how underspecification and inference operate in practice:

[...] speakers want to convey certain thoughts to their addressees; addressees do not have, and cannot be given, direct access to those thoughts; speakers do what they can to provide sufficient evidence (linguistic, contextual), on the basis of which addressees, using their pragmatic interpretive capacities, all going well, can infer those thoughts, or thoughts similar enough to them that the ongoing interaction may proceed without disruption.<sup>7</sup>

Some degree of approximation is inevitable in this process, but it generally works well enough to make comprehension possible.

---

<sup>6</sup> Terence Cave and Deirdre Wilson, 'Introduction' in *Reading Beyond the Code: Literature and Relevance Theory*, ed. by Terence Cave and Deirdre Wilson (Oxford: OUP, 2018), pp. 1-20 (p. 5).

<sup>7</sup> Robyn Carston, 'Legal Texts and Canons of Construction: A View from Current Pragmatic Theory', in *Law and Language: Current Legal Issues*, ed. by Michael Freeman and Fiona Smith (Oxford: OUP, 2013), pp. 8-33 (p. 24).

Crassus does not explicitly call for the engineer to exercise his judgement [‘interposer son decret’] in selecting a mast, but Montaigne suggests that the invitation is implicit in the letter. It is what relevance theory calls an *implicature*, a proposition tacitly conveyed by the utterance, or one that surpasses the utterance’s linguistically encoded meaning. Utterances are often open to a variety of interpretations; due to their underspecification, they can convey an array of possible implicatures that are more or less salient to the hearer. A given implicature is ‘stronger’ or ‘weaker’ depending on how many alternative implicated conclusions the hearer could reach.<sup>8</sup> In the chapter’s closing question, Montaigne underscores the fact that the consul knowingly addressed a specialist, ‘un homme du mestier’, with information pertinent to the execution of his task. The implication that the engineer was free to act as he did is therefore fairly strong. So, in arriving at an interpretation of the missive based on the evidence it provided of Crassus’s intentions and his own technical understanding of battering rams, the engineer concluded reasonably that he was welcome to deviate from the precise letter of the command to better satisfy its objective. His reading falls within the array of implicatures the note makes available.

Montaigne himself makes use of both strong and weak implication to convey this point. His use of a rhetorical negative question [‘sembloit-il pas’] implicates strongly his belief that the letter offered an implicit invitation, given that the negative framing of the question presumes an

---

<sup>8</sup> It should be noted, Cave and Wilson write, that ‘the “strong”-“weak” opposition implies no judgment of the value of the utterance in question, or of its communicative power’. A poet may wish to conjure a host of images with a single metaphor: ‘the power of [a] “poetic effect” [...] is often likely to be in inverse proportion to the strength of the implications, precisely because of the imaginative reach [...] of the “array”’. See the ‘Introduction’ in *Reading Beyond the Code*, p.

affirmative response.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, the choice to conclude the chapter with an interrogative rather than a statement adds a subtler layer of implication to reinforce the idea that the engineer acted appropriately. The question offers room for disagreement and might therefore seem to temper the judgment in the engineer's favor. However, the very presence of the question implicates weakly that collaborative thinking is more productive than unilateral orders or assertions. Montaigne leaves the chapter open-ended, inviting his readers to enter 'en conference' with his own 'deliberation'. In so doing, he further endorses the engineer's intervention. As Marcel Tetel writes, 'la dernière phrase de l'essai établit la validité de la conférence'.<sup>10</sup>

In this article, I will argue that Montaigne's commentary on the Crassus story is emblematic of his greater preoccupation in the *Essais* with the pragmatic and cognitive dimensions of communication. By weighing Crassus's implied intentions and the inferential process likely undertaken by the engineer in divining them, Montaigne illustrates that communication is first and foremost an interaction between minds, a shared cognitive dance. Throughout the *Essais*, he explores how this dance plays out in a number of settings, observing how it informs and is informed by relationships between people, states, and institutions. An

---

<sup>9</sup> Typically, 'a rhetorical question has the illocutionary force of an assertion of the opposite polarity from what is apparently asked. That is, a rhetorical positive question has the illocutionary force of a negative assertion, and a rhetorical negative question has the illocutionary force of a positive assertion.' See Chung-hye Han, 'Interpreting Interrogatives as Rhetorical Questions', *Lingua* 112.3 (2002), 201-29 (p. 202) <[https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-3841\(01\)00044-4](https://doi.org/10.1016/S0024-3841(01)00044-4)>

<sup>10</sup> Marcel Tetel, *Présences Italiennes dans les Essais de Montaigne* (Paris: H. Champion, 1992), p. 22.

analysis that employs relevance theory to consider Montaigne's interest in the mechanics of human interchange reveals patterns in his thinking that traverse the various communicative domains he discusses— patterns that would otherwise remain hidden. One such pattern, of which the Crassus story offers an example, is a tendency to dwell on the inherent underspecification of communicative acts and the necessity of enrichment for their interpretation. I will first trace this pattern across Montaigne's portrayals of exchanges in diplomacy and jurisprudence, settings where authority is shared or delegated. I will then turn to Montaigne's portrayal of his own act of authorial communication and its reception by readers. Beyond reflecting the essayist's professional experience, these apparently disparate domains share an important feature: in each setting, communication is frequently characterized by a significant degree of delay between the communicative act—that is, the issuing of instructions for a given embassy, the enacting of legislation, or the publication of the *Essais*—and its interpretation, which may occur at a later time. In each case, I shall argue, Montaigne is attentive to how delay bears on the interpretive process.

My theoretical approach extends an existing relationship between linguistics and the study of the *Essais*. However, while this relationship has typically been predicated on post-Saussurean approaches to literary criticism, the linguistic model adopted here is that of pragmatics. Through its use of relevance theory, this study offers a framework for analysis that enables a departure from debates over the status of specifically textual meaning in the *Essais*. Such debates, which preoccupied *montaignistes* in the latter half of the twentieth century, were an outgrowth of poststructuralist criticism and its resistance to the notion that texts possess univocal meanings waiting to be unearthed by astute readers.<sup>11</sup> In Montaigne studies, the

---

<sup>11</sup> John O'Brien provides a summary of the univocal v. plurivocal meaning debate in early modern French studies in his introduction to *Distant Voices Still Heard: Contemporary Readings*

poststructuralist emphasis on the instability of the linguistic sign and the plurality of textual meaning overlapped with a longstanding conception of the Renaissance as the inauguration of modern subjectivity, with Montaigne as the exemplar of a burgeoning self-reflective agency.<sup>12</sup> With the advent of poststructuralist critique, Warren Boutcher explains, '[w]hat had been a truthful, evolving, self-conscious portrait in the full possession of its author and his lived life became a self-reflexive, self-deconstructing text'.<sup>13</sup> Discussions of communication in the *Essais* therefore were framed primarily in terms of the text's role in the formation, preservation, or dissolution of the authorial self.

This set of preoccupations is apparent in Richard Regosin's 1977 *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's Essais as the Book of the Self*, as the title suggests. A short passage illustrates the point:

[a]s writer and seeker of the self [Montaigne] confronts the airiness of language, its instability and ambiguity; as artist he attempts to fashion the medium to his

---

*of French Renaissance Literature*, ed. by John O'Brien and Malcolm Quainton (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2000), pp. 1-52 (pp. 15-23).

<sup>12</sup> Here I adopt Warren Boutcher's description of a twentieth-century conception of the *Essais* as a demonstration of the 'self-reflective agency of the unsystematic critical mind'. See 'The *Essais* Framed for Modern Intellectual Life' in *The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe*, 2 vols (Oxford: OUP, 2017), II, pp. 372-99 (p. 378).

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 395. In the article 'Recent Trends in Montaigne Scholarship: A Post-Structuralist Perspective', *Renaissance Quarterly* 37.1 (1984), 34-53, Richard Regosin summarizes and critiques several readings of the *Essais* that seek to disrupt the notion of a univocal linguistic meaning derived from a transparent authorial presence, including works by Terence Cave, Jules Brody, Lawrence Kritzman, Michel Beaujour, and Antoine Compagnon.

advantage. How the book of the self becomes the source of the self remains his prime concern and ours.<sup>14</sup>

This concern is valuable, but it is not Montaigne's only concern with respect to communication, nor is it my primary concern in this study. Rather than focusing on Montaigne's anxiety regarding his capacity to enshrine a self in the text, or the transparency of what Philippe Desan and others have called 'le moi montaignien', this article considers how the essayist portrays communication as cognitive interplay, in his own act of authorial communication but also in settings where communication influences the world beyond the author and his audience.<sup>15</sup> It effects a fundamental shift away from the notion that the text itself is the locus of meaning in Montaigne's book, focusing instead on how meaning takes shape in a communicative transaction between multiple participants. Relevance theory, I will show, brings to light communicative dynamics in the *Essais* that, although apparently intuitive, have been obscured by a heavy emphasis on textuality and the potential precarity of the authorial subject amidst 'the airiness of language'.

There is limited but strong precedent for reading the *Essais* with reference to relevance theory. Kirsti Sellevold makes extensive use of it in '*J'ayme ces mots...': expressions linguistiques de doute dans les Essais de Montaigne*, a study of how Montaigne uses modalizing

---

14 Richard L. Regosin, *The Matter of My Book: Montaigne's Essais as the Book of the Self* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1977), p. 123. The tendency to pit a self-present textual 'moi' against the possibility of its dissolution also is well illustrated by Cave's analysis of the *Essais* in Book II, Chapter 4 of *The Cornucopian Text*, pp. 271-321, and Thomas Greene's counter-reading in 'Dangerous Parleys—*Essais* I.5 and 6', *Yale French Studies*, 64 (1983), 3-23.

15 See, for example, Philippe Desan, 'Montaigne et le 'moi gelé': "Le profit de l'un est dommage de l'autre" (I,22)', *Romance Notes* 30 (1989) 93-100 (p. 93).

expressions to embed Pyrrhonic doubt in the *Essais* at the lexical level.<sup>16</sup> Marie-Luce Demonet combines Gricean pragmatics and relevance theory in her analysis of ‘De l’art de conferer’ (III.8), devoting particular attention to modality and Montaigne’s distinction between ‘maniere’ and ‘matiere’ in conversation.<sup>17</sup> In “‘À propos, ou hors de propos, il n’importe’”: Relevance Theory and Montaigne’, Neil Kenny discusses Montaigne’s authorial strategy in relation to both the traditional definition of relevance as relatedness to a given topic and the technical definition offered by relevance theory.<sup>18</sup> Using ‘Consideration sur Cicéron’ (I.40) as a case study, Kenny contends that Montaigne prioritized the latter form of relevance over the former in later editions of the chapter. Beyond merely translating Montaigne’s discussion of communication into relevance theory’s terminology, these works demonstrate that Montaigne’s own understanding of the way human interchange operates resonates with relevance theory’s account of communication. Similarly, the primary aim of this article is not to provide a technical re-description of the *Essais* using the vocabulary of relevance theory, but rather to adjust the frame of reference for considering how Montaigne *conceives* of communication along pragmatic lines. I will build from these studies, and particularly that of Kenny, by demonstrating that

---

16 Kirsti Sellevold, *J’ayme ces mots...*: (Paris: Champion, 2004).

17 Marie-Luce Demonet, ‘Art de conférer, art de raisonner (III,8)’, in *Montaigne, les derniers Essais: Actes de la journée d’étude Montaigne, Samedi 30 Novembre 1985*, ed. by François Charpentier and Simone Perrier, *Cahiers Textuel*, no. 2 (1986), pp. 19–29.

18 Neil Kenny, “‘À propos, ou hors de propos, il n’importe’”: Relevance Theory and Montaigne’, in *Lucidity: Essays in Honour of Alison Finch*, ed. by Ian James and Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Modern Humanities Research Association and Routledge, 2016), pp. 20–32.

Montaigne's attention to underspecification is a through-line that extends across his discussion of the apparently heterogenous domains of diplomacy, jurisprudence, and authorial communication.

### **Underspecification and Diplomacy in I.17**

Montaigne's treatment of the Crassus narrative, beyond demonstrating his awareness of the role of underspecification and enrichment in communication in general, offers insight into how this awareness shapes his understanding of sovereign-ambassador communication in diplomacy. The story takes its place within a chapter that considers the circumscription of the ambassadorial role; Montaigne uses the superior-subordinate dynamic between the consul and the engineer as an analogy for the communicative dynamics between sovereigns and their ambassadors.

Throughout I.17, Montaigne sketches a portrait of the ambassador as a proxy sovereign abroad, empowered to influence political reality. Of course, this empowerment is temporary, derived from the situational authority ambassadors possess in the context of negotiation. As diplomatic treatises from Montaigne's era frequently note, the privileges of the ambassador exist largely within the bookends of a given mission.<sup>19</sup> Timothy Hampton explains,

The ambassador is marked by a complicated combination of authority and contingency. He has been endowed with a certain power by those who have sent

---

<sup>19</sup> See, for example, Timothy Hampton's commentary on Alberico Gentili's 1585 diplomatic treatise, *De legationibus libri tres*: for Gentili, '[t]he mission is thus a legally structured action that channels the ambassador's activities; it both protects and limits him within its confines.' Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy: Literature and Diplomacy in Early Modern Europe* (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 2009), p. 142.

him [...]. Yet at the same time the ambassador is the figure who has been sent to act outside the geographical confines of official power.<sup>20</sup>

It is this very distance from official power that often necessitates a slippage of the ambassador's role from representative of the sovereign, bound to echo the sovereign's wishes, to de facto acting sovereign vested with the authority to exercise his own judgement in the absence of clear directives. While 'Un traict de quelques ambassadeurs' initially appears to expound a philosophy of ambassadorial function that advocates strict obedience to instructions, the post- 1588 addition of the Crassus story reorients the problem of how prerogatives should be distributed between the sovereign and his representatives.

Montaigne revisited I.17 repeatedly over the various editions of the *Essais*. In the 1580 version, or A-text of the chapter, he shares an anecdote from the memoirs of Guillaume Du Bellay concerning the bishop of Mâcon and Seigneur du Velly, ambassadors of François I who, in reporting back to their king, downplayed inflammatory language directed at him by Emperor Charles V.<sup>21</sup> Montaigne concludes the first version of the chapter by condemning this use of personal discretion. Such action on the part of ambassadors, he claims, is a breach of their mandate. The C-text additions made after 1588 extend the chapter, incorporating the Crassus story and suggesting that ambassadors should be granted the freedom to exercise their judgement. So, while the A-text censures ambassadors who do not adhere closely to instructions,

---

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>21</sup> For the full account, see *Les mémoires de Messire Martin du Bellay, Seigneur de Langey* (Jacques Chovet, 1594), pp. 214-24. The story comes from Guillaume du Bellay's unfinished *Ogdoades*, published in tandem with the memoirs of Guillaume's brother Martin. Hampton describes the episode as 'a test case for Renaissance writers on diplomacy' (*Fictions of Embassy*, pp. 49-50).

and who fail to relay precise accounts of their negotiations back to their sovereigns, in later additions Montaigne grants ambassadors greater agency in negotiation. Daniel Ménager attributes the change to a wider shift in opinion regarding ambassadorial practice that trickled down to Montaigne. In a discussing of the C-text, he writes, ‘épousant l’évolution de son temps, Montaigne accorde maintenant aux ambassadeurs une certaine liberté [...][, s]ans rien retrancher de sa critique des deux ambassadeurs de François Ier’.<sup>22</sup>

Beyond potentially reflecting a broader trend in diplomatic theory, the post-1588 additions that conclude the chapter place greater emphasis on how the mechanics of communication necessarily shape the way ambassadors interpret instructions. This resonates with Kenny’s observation with respect to ‘Consideration sur Cicéron’, mentioned earlier, that the C-text is more ‘meta-cognitive’ than the A- and B- texts in considering the roles of intention and inference in interpretation. While Kenny writes specifically about Montaigne’s authorial practice and the way it is portrayed in I.40— a subject to which I will return later in this analysis—, an increased attention to the cognitive dimensions of communication similarly characterises the C-text commentary on the Crassus story, in which Montaigne forges a link between underspecification and the potential for delay in diplomatic exchange.<sup>23</sup>

---

<sup>22</sup> Daniel Ménager, *L’ange et l’ambassadeur: Diplomatie et théologie à la Renaissance* (Paris: Classiques Garnier, 2013), p. 195.

<sup>23</sup> For additional commentary on the chronological strata of the chapter, see Philip Knee, ‘La Critique de la politique dans Les Essais: Montaigne et Machiavel’, *Canadian Journal of Political Science / Revue Canadienne de Science Politique*, 33.4 (2000), 691-722 (p. 721); Douglas I. Thompson, *Montaigne and the Tolerance of Politics* (New York: OUP, 2018), p. 37; and Philippe Desan, *Montaigne: Une biographie politique* (Paris: Odile Jacob, 2014), p. 340.

After recounting Crassus's unfavourable reaction to the engineer's intervention, Montaigne writes, 'D'autre part, pourtant, on pourroit aussi considerer qu[']une] obeissance si contrainte n'appartient qu'aux commandements precis et prefix. Les ambassadeurs ont une charge plus libre, qui, en plusieurs parties, depend souverainement de leur disposition' (I.17, 74). The viability of strict ambassadorial obedience is not always a matter of opinion, a choice between honouring sovereign commands and privileging the ambassador's judgement. Rather, Montaigne contends, ambassadors are only capable of close adherence to instructions if those instructions apply directly to the situation at hand. This is seldom plausible in complex negotiations that take place 'outside the geographical confines' of the sovereign's power. In Montaigne's time, when the conditions of a diplomatic exchange would evolve faster than information could travel between the sovereign and ambassadors, it was not practical to consult the ruler with each new development. Montaigne illustrates the point with an example:

Les hommes d'entendement accusent encore l'usage des Roys de Perse de tailler les morceaux si courts à leurs agents et lieutenans, qu'aux moindres choses ils eussent à recourir à leur ordonnance: ce delay, en une si longue estendue de domination, ayant souvent apporté de notables dommages à leurs affaires' (I.17, 74).

Given the inevitable delays in communication and the ensuing impracticality of precise instructions, wise rulers, Montaigne implies, are obliged to issue more general directives to accommodate a range of possible circumstances.

Instructions that are not 'precis et prefixe' automatically allow for greater interpretive latitude. According to relevance theory, a given implicature will be more or less salient depending on how many other implicated conclusions are available to the hearer in interpreting

the communicative act: ‘the greater the range of alternatives, the weaker the implicatures, and the more responsibility the hearer has to take for the particular choices he makes. Much of human communication is weak in this sense’.<sup>24</sup> The more general a set of instructions, and the more applicable to evolving circumstances, the weaker the implicatures, and the greater the responsibility of ambassadors to interpret them. In other words, by avoiding highly specific directives, the sovereign grants the ambassador greater freedom to draw on his expertise and knowledge of the embassy at hand in the process of enrichment.

Beyond the underspecification that characterizes communication even when the speaker is present and the hearer can consider the evidence provided by the utterance within its original context, early modern diplomacy contends with the additional complication of delay between the articulation of instructions and their interpretation. This delay results in a shift in the context against which the sovereign’s meaning can be understood. Relevance theory holds that ‘[c]omprehension is an online process’, and our interpretations of the various components of a communicative act ‘are developed in parallel, against a background of expectations which may be revised or elaborated as the utterance unfolds’.<sup>25</sup> This process is disrupted when the act of communication does not unfold in real time. Delay divorces the utterance, and the evidence of the speaker’s meaning it provides, from contextual information that would lend it greater clarity.

Given their dependence on a particular context for applicability, narrow instructions compound this lack of clarity, and indicate that the sovereign who issued them does not understand the mechanics of communication and how they are imperilled by delay. While the will of the sovereign on the one hand and the strength of ambassadors’ judgement on the other are key factors in the discussion of ambassadorial agency, Montaigne suggests that these factors

---

<sup>24</sup> *Meaning and Relevance*, p. 16.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 14.

can only be weighed once the limitations and preconditions of communication are accounted for. A theory of diplomacy that fails to recognize and compensate for the role of underspecification and enrichment in interpretation, and the effects of delay on the interpretive process, will have no practical application.

How does this stance on ambassadorial latitude fit into the broader landscape of diplomatic theory in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries? The fact that Montaigne contemplates problems of power distribution and delegation in diplomacy is not unique in itself. ‘Un traict de quelques ambassadeurs’ is only one among a series of contemporary expositions of the subject and, in reflecting on well-known case studies like the Crassus story, it taps into a shared set of questions about what ambassadors can and should do. Commonplace in its subject matter, I.17 is also relatively standard in its view that ambassadors require the freedom to exercise their judgement and interpret instructions in accordance with the real-time vicissitudes of diplomatic exchange. Montaigne grants ambassadors more latitude than do several of his contemporaries, but his stance is by no means off the spectrum they span. Ménager highlights the common ground between treatments of ambassadorial freedom from Montaigne’s time:

Tous les auteurs de la Renaissance admettent l’idée que les princes de leur temps ont le choix entre [...] deux types de mandat [...]. Le mandat libre peut donner à l’ambassadeur une indépendance dangereuse, tandis que le mandat contraignant l’oblige à demander sans cesse l’aval de son prince dans les négociations qu’il mène, ce qui est une gêne évidente.<sup>26</sup>

However, while Montaigne’s position on ambassadorial freedom is largely conventional, the reasoning behind it is less typical. The extent to which he considers the role of underspecification in shaping how ambassadors interpret instructions sets him apart from others

---

<sup>26</sup> *L’ange et l’ambassadeur*, p. 153.

in his milieu, who tend to note that delay affects communication without exploring precisely *why* this is true from a cognitive standpoint. This distinction is borne out in what follows by a cross section of treatises on diplomacy ranging in date from fifty years prior to the first publication of the *Essais* to fifty years after.

Authors Étienne Dolet and Jean Hotman represent the more conservative end of the spectrum. They lean toward limiting ambassadors' autonomy by demanding close adherence to the sovereign's instructions, but nevertheless acknowledge that delayed communication will occasionally require an ambassador to make independent decisions. Dolet insists in his 1541 *De Officio Legati* that 'instructions [...] are the basis of an ambassadorship, and in following and executing them lies the whole duty of an ambassador'.<sup>27</sup> He advises diplomats to await additional instructions from the sovereign if the original directives do not address all the matters that arise in the course of negotiation.<sup>28</sup> Dolet recognizes, however, that this is not always possible:

It often happens that an occasion is so urgent that you cannot wait for a reply.

Wherefore, if anything which you see is greatly to your king's advantage depends upon quick action, you will not regard that as a matter to be protracted, but will conclude it as promptly as possible.<sup>29</sup>

For Hotman, whose *De la charge et dignité de l'ambassadeur* appeared in 1603, direct consultation of the sovereign is also the default recommendation. He writes, '[a]ussi n'arrive-il pas souvent que l'Ambassadeur ait le temps si bref qu'ils n'en puisse donner & demander avis à

---

27 Etienne Dolet, 'On the Office of Legate, Commonly Called Ambassador', trans. by James E. Dunlop, *American Journal of International Law*, 27.1 (1933), 82–95 (p. 85).

28 *Ibid.*, p. 88.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 88-89.

son maistre: ce qui est toujours le plus seant & le plus seur'.<sup>30</sup> Still, he too 'n'en reconnaît pas moins qu'il y a des "affaires si secrets, si importants, si urgens, si precipitez qu'il est expedient de commettre tout à la prudence de l'ambassadeur"'.<sup>31</sup>

In the 1585 *De legationibus libri tres*, Alberico Gentili grants ambassadors latitude in cases where their instructions are unclear or outdated, observing that 'new plans must be formed to suit new situations'.<sup>32</sup> Nevertheless, he hedges his bets and, like Hotman, believes ambassadors should consult their sovereigns for new instructions whenever possible.<sup>33</sup> When the instructions issued are relevant and specific, Gentili argues that 'ambassadors should not be allowed to diverge even a finger's breadth from them'.<sup>34</sup>

Montaigne's position in the C-text of I.17 aligns more with the views of Juan Antonio de Vera, whose 1620 treatise is the latest of the group, and Francesco Guicciardini, whose works Montaigne knew.<sup>35</sup> All three authors question the merit of issuing narrow instructions, recognizing that such instructions seldom suit the realities ambassadors confront abroad. In *El Embajador*, translated into French as *Le parfait ambassadeur* in the 1640s, De Vera argues that in issuing instructions for a negotiation, sovereigns must grant 'une pleine liberté à celui qui en a

---

30 Jean Hotman, *De la charge et dignité de l'ambassadeur* (Paris: Jérémie Perier, 1604), p. 43.

31 *L'ange et l'ambassadeur*, p. 154.

32 Alberico Gentili, *De Legationibus Libri Tres*, trans. by Gordon J. Laing, 2 vols (New York: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Division of International Law, 1924), ii, p. 185.

33 *Ibid.*

34 *Ibid.*, p. 176.

35 John Lyons, 'Montaigne and History' in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. by Philippe Desan (New York: OUP, 2015), pp. 216-31 (p. 220).

la charge, d'en disposer selon qu'il verra le plus à propos'.<sup>36</sup> Of the authors discussed here, he goes the furthest in undermining the sanctity of instructions, giving advice for how ambassadors can avoid executing precise orders that they consider ill-advised by feigning not to understand them.<sup>37</sup>

Guicciardini is less brazen, but also grants diplomats significant autonomy in his 1530 *Ricordi*, a compilation of political and moral maxims. Intention plays an important role in his discussion of how best to instruct ambassadors. After noting that 'it is hardly possible to give such exact instructions to one's ambassadors that they are prepared in every detail', Guicciardini suggests that the best way to solve this problem is for the prince to make his intentions known to the ambassador, who then can act in accordance with those intentions even when the particular instructions fail him.<sup>38</sup> Ménager explains, 'L'ambassadeur compétent [...] saura [...] prendre quelques distances par rapport à une instruction devenue inadaptée parce que, peu avant son départ [...] son prince lui aura dit et redit ce qu'il attend de lui'.<sup>39</sup> By giving ambassadors a full sense of his intentions for a mission rather than, or in addition to, a highly detailed set of instructions, the prince simultaneously limits the ambassadors' range of action— circumscribing

---

36 Juan Antonio de Vera y Figueroa, *Le parfait ambassadeur*, trans. by Le Sieur Lancelot (Paris: s.n., 1642), p. 25; Hampton, *Fictions of Embassy*, pp. 71-72.

37 *Ibid.*, p. 207.

38 Francesco Guicciardini, 'Ricordi', in *Selected Writings*, ed. Cecil Grayson, trans. by Margaret Grayson (Oxford: OUP; Scholarly Editions Online, 2012), pp. 4-5.

<<https://www.oxfordscholarlyeditions.com/view/10.1093/actrade/9780199607679.book.1/actrade-9780199607679-work-1>> [accessed 19 July 2022]

39 *L'ange et l'ambassadeur*, p. 120.

it within the framework of the prince's goals— and broadens the ambassadors' latitude by enabling them to judge for themselves how best to achieve those goals. Guicciardini hints at the notion that the intentions conveyed by the prince may surpass the encoded content of his instructions, but does not elaborate on this theme to the same extent as Montaigne.

It is the essayist's very attention to the minutiae of communication in the conclusion of I.17 that distinguishes his treatment of ambassadorial prerogatives from the broader corpus of Renaissance diplomatic theory. While authors like Guicciardini and Dolet invoke the sovereign's intentions, Montaigne probes the communicative mechanisms that make it possible in the first instance to infer an intention. Beyond accounting for the effects of delay and distance, Montaigne raises questions about how the fundamental underspecification of all communication bears on the interpretation of instructions and the diplomatic process more generally. His heightened awareness of communicative mechanics becomes particularly evident through comparison of his treatment of the Crassus story to those of Hotman and De Vera, who also incorporate it into their treatises. Hotman succinctly summarizes the account from Gellius, without naming Crassus explicitly:

En un pouvoir limité l'on n'est pas toujours receu à dire : J'ai mieux fait qu'il ne m'avoit esté commandé : car c'est vouloir estre plus sage que son maistre & son conseil [...]. Exemple en celuy lequel ayant receu commandement de faire amener un grand mast de navire, en choisit un moindre qu'il disoit estre plus propre ; & disoit vray : neanmoins en fut repris & chastié.<sup>40</sup>

Hotman does not analyse Crassus's act of communication, nor does he examine the interpretive process that led to the engineer's intervention. Instead, he merely laments the presumption of the engineer. De Vera, although typically more permissive than his contemporaries, remains

---

<sup>40</sup> *De la charge et dignité de l'ambassadeur*, pp. 42-43.

similarly orthodox in his retelling of the episode, paraphrasing the original without delving into the contents of Crassus's letter.<sup>41</sup> While Hotman and De Vera treat the story as a parable of the pitfalls of contravening orders, for Montaigne it becomes a means of demonstrating that the interpretation of instructions requires context-based inference on the part of the recipient, and that the most salient interpretation of an utterance for a given interpreter may surpass its encoded content.

### **Underspecification and the Law in the *Essais***

Thus far we have seen that Montaigne's understanding of the necessary distribution of prerogatives between sovereigns and their ambassadors is fundamentally informed by his awareness of underspecification as a communicative phenomenon. This awareness also plays a determining role in his understanding of jurisprudence, specifically in regard to the communication that unfolds between legislators and magistrates in the interpretation and application of the law.

This communicative circuit begins with the propagation of a law or edict—that is, the communicative act or 'utterance'—where the original legislator or legislative body plays the role of the communicator, or 'speaker'. At some point in the future, the 'hearer', in this case typically a magistrate, then interprets the law in accordance with the circumstances of the case at hand. This interaction is analogous to that which Montaigne explores in the context of diplomacy, where the 'speaker' is the sovereign, the 'utterance' is the set of instructions for the embassy, and the 'hearer' is the ambassador, who must interpret the instructions to fulfil his mission abroad.

---

41 For De Vera's version of the story, see *Le parfait ambassadeur*, pp. 221-22.

Despite the fact that the original act of uttering and the process of interpreting rarely take place concomitantly in these forms of diplomatic and legal communication, the ‘hearer’ nevertheless engages in the same process of enrichment he would undertake to comprehend an utterance in a live exchange, using inference to arrive at an understanding of the speaker’s meaning. According to relevance theory, underspecification and enrichment are defining features of all communication. The comprehension heuristic ‘applies not only to acts of everyday conversational exchange, but also to utterances that have been set adrift in time and therefore require a continuing process of contextual resuscitation at any number of levels.’<sup>42</sup> In theory, the cognitive process used when interpreting a centuries-old legal text is analogous to that which a listener deploys in the context of a conversation in real time.<sup>43</sup> Even so, a significant delay between the act of uttering and that of interpreting can lead to complications, in the legal as well as the diplomatic context. Due to the lack of live cues to guide interpretation as well as the shifting context between the original legislative act and its reception downstream, the knowledge and assumptions a magistrate draws on to enrich the content of a given portion of the legal code

---

<sup>42</sup> ‘Introduction’, in *Reading Beyond the Code*, p. 13.

<sup>43</sup> There is a precedent for considering legal interpretation in relation to pragmatic language philosophy. In a discussion of Renaissance jurisprudence, Ian Maclean links efforts to codify acceptable interpretive practices in the law to the maxims of Gricean pragmatics. See Maclean, *Interpretation and Meaning in the Renaissance: The Case of Law* (Cambridge: CUP, 1992), p. 140. Robyn Carston observes that ‘the interpretive canons/ heuristics called upon by official interpreters of legal texts [...] are very closely related to the principles/ heuristics formulated by theorists of pragmatics for communication and interpretation quite generally’. Carston, ‘Legal Texts and Canons of Construction’, p. 18.

may differ significantly from those that would have informed interpretations at the time of its drafting.

In the case of sixteenth-century jurisprudence, interpretation was particularly vexed. The meaning of the law was rendered especially underdetermined, beyond the ordinary underspecification that characterizes all utterances, by the fraught history of the *Corpus Juris Civilis*. The *Corpus*, a codification of Roman law compiled by Tribonian at the behest of Emperor Justinian, served as the primary object of legal interpretation in France and most of the Continent in Montaigne's time. It goes without saying that a legal code designed in the sixth century did not always align neatly with the conditions of society a millennium later.<sup>44</sup> The interpretive challenges posed by this temporal gap were exacerbated by Justinian's destruction of the various legal writings that constituted the source material of the *Corpus*. These texts, 'according to the Emperor himself, had swamped the law itself and needed to be drastically culled and made coherent. [...] [T]he *Corpus* [...] was designed to be self-sufficient.'<sup>45</sup> The textual sources of the *Corpus* could not be drawn upon to provide insight into the temporal context from which it emerged, a roadblock to humanist efforts to gain a better sense of its original meaning. Beyond preventing jurists from consulting the legal texts that formed the basis of the *Corpus*, Justinian explicitly prohibited interpretation. The legal code, he believed, was transparent, its meaning self-evident.<sup>46</sup>

---

44 Ian Maclean, 'Legal Fictions and Fictional Entities in Renaissance Jurisprudence', *The Journal of Legal History*, 20.3 (1999), 1–24 (p. 2)  
<<https://doi.org/10.1080/01440362008539595>>.

45 *Interpretation and Meaning*, p. 50.

46 *Ibid.*, p. 51.

Montaigne is highly sceptical of this dismissal of interpretation. Pointing to the disconnect between the law and the world it seeks to regulate, he mocks the fantasy of a legal code thorough enough to obviate the need for enrichment: ‘Pourtant l'opinion de celui-là ne me plaist guiere, qui pensoit par la multitude des loix brider l'autorité des juges, en *leur taillant leurs morceaux*: il ne sentoit point qu'il y a autant de liberté et d'estendue à l'interpretation des loix qu'à leur façon’ [my emphasis] (III.13, 1065-1066).<sup>47</sup> Just as an utterance never fully encodes the meaning of the speaker and must be combined with contextual information in order to become comprehensible, the law requires interpretation by jurists and magistrates in order to become applicable in a given case. No matter how specific the legal code, it cannot account for all potential circumstances: ‘autant d’actions, autant faut-il de jugemens particuliers’ (II.1,

---

<sup>47</sup> Maclean asserts that the ‘celui-là’ in this passage refers to Justinian: ‘the text to which reference is apparently made here is the opening section (written in the form of letters by Justinian) to Codex I.17 *De veteri iure enucleando*. In these letters, the emperor first instructs Tribonian in the “almost impossible” (*magis impossibile*) task of sifting through all extant legal material, eliminating antinomiae and similar laws, and establishing the *Digest* and *Codex* as complete and authoritative works’. See ‘The Place of Interpretation: Montaigne and Humanist Jurists on Words, Intention and Meaning’ in *Neo-Latin and the Vernacular in Renaissance France*, ed. by Grahame Castor and Terence Cave (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1984), pp. 252-72 (p. 255). However, the editors of the Pléiade edition of the *Essais* contend that the passage ‘s’agit sans doute de Charles VII que J. Bodin rend responsable de la multiplication des lois françaises.’ See *Les Essais*, ed. by Jean Balsamo, Catherine Magnien-Simonin, and Michel Magnien (Paris: Gallimard, 2007), endnote 7, p. 1111. Montaigne’s criticism may be relevant in the cases of both Charles VII and Justinian, but I will discuss it in relation to the latter.

334).<sup>48</sup> Justinian's restrictive codification, far from creating a more streamlined judicial process, increased confusion and made it more difficult for judges to exercise sound judgement.

Montaigne's use of the expression 'tailler leurs morceaux' echoes the discussion in I.17, mentioned earlier, of the misguided tendency of the 'Roys de Perse de tailler les morceaux si courts à leurs agents et lieutenans, qu'aux moindres choses ils eussent à recourir à leur ordonnance' [my emphasis] (I.17, 74). Rulers, Montaigne suggests, must reconcile themselves to the inevitable underspecificity of their official communications, both legislative and diplomatic.

Montaigne's criticism of efforts to prevent interpretation 'par la multitude des loix' points to the irony of the fact that the Emperor, by attempting to create a 'self-sufficient' text, rendered enrichment all the more indispensable. Even prior to its interpretation by magistrates, the *Corpus* was filtered through the interpretive sieve of the medieval glosses, which accumulated from the eleventh century through the fourteenth: 'by the mid-fifteenth century,' Ian Maclean writes, 'the text of the *Corpus Juris Civilis* was quite literally encased in a thick accretion of explanatory legal material which was far more extensive than the text itself'.<sup>49</sup> The presence of this commentary demonstrates that the Roman civil code required extensive enrichment for practical application. Even humanist jurists critical of the glossators' methodology acknowledge that the *Corpus* would be alien and even incoherent without the glosses to bridge the gap between Justinian's reign and their present. André Tournon explains,

Bartole, Balde et leurs disciples avaient pourvu le Digeste et le Code des compléments indispensables pour les adapter, quitte à les altérer à dessein, aux

---

48 This echoes the point relevance theory makes about linguistic codes more generally; without enrichment through inference, the encoded content of an utterance, even if detailed, inevitably falls short of capturing the speaker's intended meaning.

49 *Interpretation and Meaning*, p. 14.

besoins politiques et économiques de la société de leur temps. Dépouillée de cet appareil, la compilation des juristes impériaux perdait son efficacité pratique, sans y gagner toujours en cohérence rationnelle, ni en clarté.<sup>50</sup>

The glosses serve as an aid to jurists in determining the applicability of the law in a given scenario.

Despite this, Montaigne, like many of his humanist contemporaries, holds the glosses in contempt, refuting their efficacy. At first glance, this attitude may seem paradoxical given his defense of interpretation in the face of prohibitions like Justinian's. The work of the glossators and postglossators would seem consistent with the exigency of enriching the law. For Montaigne, however, the glosses are themselves an interpretive obstacle rather than a facilitator of judgement on the part of magistrates. He writes,

Nous doubtions sur Ulpian, redoutons encore sur Bartolus et Baldus. Il falloit effacer la trace de cette diversité innumerable d'opinions, non point s'en parer et en entester la posterité. Je ne sçay qu'en dire, mais il se sent par experience que tant d'interprétations dissipent la verité et la rompent. [...] . Nous ouvrons la matiere et l'espandons en la destrempant; d'un subject nous en faisons mille [...].  
(III.13, 1067)

The glosses seek to dictate interpretive norms, placing their readings of the *Corpus* at par with the authoritative status of the laws themselves and furnishing yet more material for jurists to wade through; each interpretation in a gloss is itself a new utterance that requires yet further interpretation. Just as Justinian's strict codification generated confusion for Renaissance jurisprudence, 'les assauts de respect des glossateurs ont en fait rendu la lettre du Corpus

---

<sup>50</sup> André Tournon, *Montaigne: la glose et l'essai* (Lyon: Presses universitaires de Lyon, 1983), p. 167.

illisible. [...] [I]ls ont encore obscurci l'esprit des textes'.<sup>51</sup> 'Nos procez', Montaigne observes, 'ne naissent que du debat de l'interpretation des loix' (II.12, 257).

Montaigne's critique is not a dismissal of legal interpretation *tout court*, but rather of efforts to pre-process the law on behalf of its trained practitioners by chasing the unattainable ideal of a legislative code that transcends underspecification and the need for interpretation. Such efforts, Montaigne argues, do not make interpretation unnecessary. Instead they render it more difficult:

Qui ne diroit que les glosses augmentent les doubttes et l'ignorance, puis qu'il ne se voit aucun livre, soit humain, soit divin, auquel le monde s'embesongne, duquel l'interpretation face tarir la difficulté? Le centiesme commentaire le renvoie à son suivant, plus espineux et plus scabreux que le premier ne l'avoit trouvé. (III.13, 1067)

The compulsion to expand and subdivide the law to bring it closer to the diversity of real circumstances merely mires jurists, plaintiffs, and defendants in unproductive debates over conflicting interpretations. Montaigne was not alone in this criticism. Jurists like Guillaume Budé, François Hotman, Étienne Pasquier, and Jean Bodin also expressed distaste for the commentaries.<sup>52</sup> Montaigne, however, was perhaps the most emphatic in his insistence on paring down the law rather than adding yet more interpretive guidance, whether humanist or scholastic in approach. Bénédicte Boudou explains, '[d]ans le combat mené contre la glose, Montaigne—et

---

51 Bénédicte Boudou, 'Montaigne et l'herméneutique juridique', *Bibliothèque d'Humanisme et Renaissance*, 47.3 (1985), 569–93 (p. 576).

52 Géralde Nakam, *Les Essais de Montaigne, miroir et procès de leur temps: Témoignage historique et création littéraire* (Paris: Nizet, 1984), p. 137.

sa position est originale en cela—cherche à éviter le piège qui consisterait à “ajouter de nouvelles gloses”.<sup>53</sup>

If, according to Montaigne, the Roman legal code is obscure and difficult to apply to contemporary society, if the glosses only complicate interpretation further, and if a new, updated gloss is undesirable, what solution remains? According to Valérie Dionne, Montaigne supported reform movements, championed by figures like Budé and Hotman, that involved de-emphasizing Roman law and leaning more on regional custom. Such changes would ‘give rise to a Gallic system of justice that would ensure the freedom of regional *Parlements* with regard to Roman law, and also take into account the frequency with which regional customs arose in the context of Roman law.’<sup>54</sup> This stance is consistent with the idea that magistrates should be granted the necessary freedom to make ‘jugemens particuliers’. In order for them to do so, Montaigne contends, laws must be written in broader terms; ‘les plus desirables, ce sont les plus rares, plus simples et generales; et encore crois-je qu’il vaudroit mieux n’en avoir point du tout que de les avoir en tel nombre que nous avons’ (III.13, 1066). The best course is to embrace the inevitable underspecificity of the law and eschew any effort to legislate for all situations. Just as general instructions for ambassadors prove more practical in diplomatic contexts than highly specific ones, general laws that allow magistrates to exercise their judgement are more practical than those that attempt to account for all possible cases. In other words, Montaigne advocates for a greater emphasis on equity.<sup>55</sup> The passage of laws conceived more broadly shifts agency from

---

53 Montaigne et l’herméneutique Juridique’, pp. 579-80.

54 Valérie M. Dionne, ‘Montaigne on Justice and Law’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Montaigne*, ed. by Philippe Desan (New York: OUP, 2015), pp. 471-93 (p. 480).

55 Equity featured prominently in French jurisprudence in Montaigne’s time. According to Géralde Nakam, ‘les Parlements en effet, à la différence des tribunaux subalternes, pouvaient

the legislator to the magistrate, who must use his knowledge of the case to interpret and apply the law to present circumstances rather than relying on the dubious guidance of the glossators.<sup>56</sup>

Once again, Montaigne's stance on the distribution of authority—in this case, between lawmakers and magistrates—is informed by a pragmatic understanding of interpretation that hinges on the paired concepts of underspecification and enrichment.

---

rendre leurs arrêts “en équité”, sans s'estimer liés par la loi écrite ou les coutumes.’ (*Les Essais de Montaigne, miroir et procès de leur temps*, pp. 187-88). For additional discussion of Montaigne's interest in equity, see Boudou, ‘Montaigne et l'hermeneutique juridique,’ p. 588, and Dionne, ‘Montaigne on Justice and Law’, p. 474. For a discussion of a particular legal decision in which Montaigne himself arrived at a judgement based on equity during his tenure at the parlement of Bordeaux, see Katherine Almquist, ‘Judicial Authority in Montaigne's Parliamentary *Arrêt* of April 8, 1566’, *Montaigne Studies* 10 (1998), 213-28.

<sup>56</sup> This resonates with relevance theory's account, discussed earlier in relation to diplomatic communication, of how agency shifts between communicator and addressee depending on the specificity of the utterance. The vaguer a given communicative act, the greater the responsibility the listener must take on to arrive at an interpretation. Kathryn Banks elaborates: ‘Where authors offer “vaguely” communicated impressions, readers [...] take a large degree of responsibility in constructing their interpretations, so that the responsibility is shared (to different degrees) between author and reader. [...] [T]here is an array of possible readings which an author could, in theory, recognize as fulfilling her intention, without her having intended them in the sense of having represented them to herself in the forms in which readers might verbalize them.’ The same holds true for legislators as authors of the law and magistrates as its readers. See Banks, “‘Look Again”, “Listen, Listen”, “Keep Looking”: Emergent Properties and Sensorimotor

## **Exploiting Underspecification: The *Essais* as Communicative Act**

This engagement with underspecification extends to a third domain: the communicative axis between Montaigne and his readers. Having established the pragmatic thread that runs through his discussion of communication in diplomacy and the law, we can productively revisit the question of authorial communication and the *Essais* as an object of interpretation. This analysis will skirt traditional questions concerning the transparency of the self in the text and Montaigne's anxiety regarding its reception, focusing instead on the essayist's strategy of deliberately enhancing underspecification in his writing.

In the diplomatic and legal contexts, Montaigne portrays underspecification in communication less as a weakness to be rectified than a fact to be recognized—and, in some contexts, a virtue to be actively exploited. Awareness of the reality of communicative mechanics enables sovereigns and lawmakers to optimize their communicative acts for maximum efficacy. This may involve providing leaner instructions for ambassadors and drafting legislation with broader strokes to facilitate judgements rooted in equity. Analogously, Montaigne's awareness of underspecification enables him to harness it in the writing process and, in so doing, steer the reader's interpretive engagement with the text.

Several passages in the *Essais* suggest that the underspecification characteristic of all communicative acts can be strategically deployed by an author to enhance the text's function as a collaborative nexus between writer and reader. In 'De l'institution des enfans', Montaigne cites Plutarch as an exemplar of this strategy:

---

Imagining in Mary Oliver's Poetry', in *Reading Beyond the Code*, pp. 129-46 (p. 132).

Il y a dans Plutarque beaucoup de discours estandus, tres-dignes d'estre sceus, [...] mais il y en a mille qu'il n'a que touché simplement: il guigne seulement du doigt par où nous irons, s'il nous plaist, et se contente quelquefois de ne donner qu'une attainte dans le plus vif d'un propos. Il les faut arracher de là et mettre en place marchande. (I.26, 156)

Plutarch deliberately compounds the underspecification of language by alluding to ideas rather than fully articulating them. He establishes a cooperative enterprise with his readers, encouraging their participation by touching on concepts that they can explore further and enrich in new contexts, exercising their judgement in the process.<sup>57</sup> Instead of providing a map for interpretation, Plutarch gestures toward a general direction, and leaves it to the reader to find a more precise path.

Montaigne portrays himself as a practitioner of the Plutarchian strategy. In a passage from 'Considération sur Cicéron' (I.40), he explains how he has turned underspecification to account in his own text:

Si suis je trompé, si guere d'autres donnent plus à prendre en la matiere, et, comment que ce soit, mal ou bien, si nul escrivain l'a semée ny guere plus

---

<sup>57</sup> Montaigne's pedagogical method as articulated in 'De l'institution des enfans' appears to be predicated on the notion of enrichment. Teachers should make concepts available to students to test and develop for themselves, as opposed to demanding rote regurgitation of encoded content. The former process is educational because it allows the student to exercise his judgement: 'Les abeilles pillotent deçà delà les fleurs, mais elles en font apres le miel, qui est tout leur [...]: ainsi les pieces empruntées d'autrui, il les transformera et confondera, pour en faire un ouvrage tout sien: à sçavoir son jugement' (I.26, 152). Enrichment and the cultivation of judgement go hand-in-hand, in both reading and education more broadly.

materielle ny au moins plus drue en son papier. Pour en ranger davantage, je n'en entasse que les testes. [...] Et combien y ay-je espandu d'histoires qui ne disent mot, lesquelles qui voudra esplucher un peu ingenieusement, en produira infinis Essais. Ny elles, ny mes allegations ne servent pas toujours simplement d'exemple, d'autorité ou d'ornement. [...] Elles portent souvent, hors de mon propos, la semence d'une matiere plus riche et plus hardie, et sonnent à gauche un ton plus delicat, et pour moy qui n'en veux exprimer d'avantage, et pour ceux qui rencontreront mon air (I.40, 251).

Montaigne is deliberately laconic in his integration of anecdotes and quotations into the text, providing minimal commentary and implicating only weakly what he intends the reader to make of them. Neil Kenny already has undertaken a relevance theory-based reading of the passage, explaining that it '[...] makes explicit that such underspecification—"weak" communication in the terminology of relevance theory—is an invitation to readers to “take from” this matter or material (“à prendre”), to make their own inferences’.<sup>58</sup> Montaigne’s strategy of weak implication allows for a creative process of enrichment on the part of readers, one which may lead them to glean meanings from his text that extend beyond the topic under discussion, ‘hors de [son] propos’. This is not to suggest in the poststructuralist vein that interpretation is entirely unbounded, unanchored by a guiding intentionality on the part of the author. Instead, Montaigne’s description of readers who ‘rencontreront [s]on air’ resonates with relevance theory’s notion that intention can operate loosely, as a nebulous drift, and need not function

---

58 “À propos, ou hors de propos”, p. 28. For additional commentary on this passage, see Terence Cave, 'Problems of Reading in the *Essais*', in *Montaigne: Essays in Memory of Richard Sayce*, ed. by I.D. McFarlane and Ian Maclean (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1982), pp. 133-66 (p. 161).

‘narrowly as the communication of a specific determinate meaning’.<sup>59</sup> The phrase in I.40 evokes a general attunement to Montaigne’s way of thinking, rather than a capacity to infer precise propositions from the text.<sup>60</sup> As Raphael Lyne explains in a discussion of the historical contingency of interpretation,

a writer could intend readers to encounter a range of implications from which they will extract diverse and unpredictable combinations. [...] This suggests a dispersal and multiplication of possible intentions, offering an unpredictable combination of things to be inferred from a range of foreseen and unforeseen effects.<sup>61</sup>

The passage in I.40 therefore demonstrates a pragmatic awareness that purposefully heightening underspecification in the writing process can foster generative interactions between author and reader across time. Montaigne’s deliberate underspecification signals his intention to make a capacious array of interpretative possibilities available to readers, giving them the latitude to expand upon his ideas in contexts different from those in which his text was conceived. This reflects Lyne’s description of how weak implication conveys ‘intentions in a more open-ended way, [giving] readers room to manoeuvre in making their own literary interconnections’ in an

---

59 Kathryn Banks, “‘Look Again”, p. 131.

60 For a discussion of the concept of attunement, see Terence Cave, ‘Questions of Time: Simultaneity, Attunement’ in *Live Artefacts: Literature in a Cognitive Environment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2022), pp. 126-45.

61 Raphael Lyne, ‘Relevance Across History’, *Reading Beyond the Code*, pp. 35-51 (p. 44).

Kenny makes a similar point: ‘the intentions that relevance theory posits as being fundamental to communication are often of this kind: pointers in a certain direction, with much of the itinerary left unspecified’ ( “‘À propos, ou hors de propos””, p. 27).

interpretive process that is ‘not limitless but [...] not destined for narrow convergence.’<sup>62</sup> For proof of the efficacy of Montaigne’s authorial strategy for producing ‘infinis Essais’ in practice, one need only consider the profusion of responses Montaigne’s text continues to provoke.<sup>63</sup>

These brief readings of the passages from ‘De l’institution des enfans’ and ‘Considération sur Cicéron’ are far from exhaustive. In addressing these portions of the *Essais*, I have sought to indicate that Montaigne’s focus on underspecification marks a point of intersection between his discussions of communication in diplomacy, jurisprudence, and authorship— all settings, he shows, where the typical lack of live, face-to-face communication makes accounting for underspecification all the more crucial. Across the three domains, he displays the same concern for the cognitive mechanics of human interchange, and the ways skilful communicators can harness those mechanics, whether in service of a literary project or in exchanges where prerogatives are distributed between figures of authority in the state. This continuity is consistent with the notion, key to the viability of relevance theory’s use in literary criticism, that ‘[...] many modes of expression considered distinctively literary are variants of everyday uses of language, and [...] any theory of language and communication must apply to those variants too.’<sup>64</sup> It goes without saying that the communicative spheres discussed here are accompanied by distinct norms, priorities, and potential repercussions. At the most fundamental level, however,

---

62 Lyne, ‘Relevance Across History’, p. 51.

63 See Warren Boutcher’s *The School of Montaigne in Early Modern Europe*, volume II, which discusses the reception of the *Essais* across Europe during Montaigne’s own time, in the seventeenth century, and in relation to modern humanities studies.

64 Wilson and Cave, ‘Introduction’, *Reading Beyond the Code*, p. 2.

the distinctions between them are permeable; the same processes of conveying and inferring intentions are at work in each case. Considering communication in the *Essais* in terms of underspecification therefore illuminates threads that extend across Montaigne's treatment of apparently disparate spheres, pointing to a habitus of thinking that resonates with the concerns of relevance theory and pragmatics.

Author Information

The Queen's College, University of Oxford

Marina Perkins

Marina Perkins, Flat 4, 60 St Stephen's Gardens, London W2 5NJ

Marina.Perkins@queens.ox.ac.uk