

## **EXPLORING SILENCE IN SPECIFIC COMMUNITIES<sup>1</sup>**

**Abstract:** *This research is part of a more complex study which aims to consider silence in its practical dimension, such as conduct, aesthetic or strategical turn. Our goal is to explore the role of silence in intercultural communication since linguistics has shown growing interest lately (cf. Jaworski & Stephens 1998) emphasizing that silence is not simply an absence of noise but constitutes a part of communication as important as speech (e.g. Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985; Blimes 1994; Jaworski 1997). Our study starts with an overview of the forms and functions of silence. Next, literature on silence from intercultural perspectives will be discussed.*

**Keywords:** *silence, intercultural communication, communities, functions, forms*

### **EXPLORER LE SILENCE DANS DES COMMUNAUTÉS SPÉCIFIQUES**

**Résumé :** *Cette recherche fait partie d'une étude plus complexe qui se propose d'envisager le silence dans sa dimension pratique, comme une conduite, une prise esthétique ou stratégique. Notre objectif est d'explorer le rôle du silence dans la communication interculturelle puisque la linguistique a montré un intérêt croissant ces derniers temps (cf. Jaworski & Stephens 1998) soulignant que le silence n'est pas simplement une absence de bruit mais constitue une partie de la communication aussi importante que la parole (e.g. Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985 ; Blimes 1994 ; Jaworski 1997). Notre étude commence par un aperçu des formes et des fonctions du silence. Ensuite, la littérature sur le silence d'un point de vue interculturel sera discutée.*

**Mots clefs :** *silence, communication interculturelle, communautés, fonctions, formes*

### **1. Introduction**

This article is part of a more complex study undertaken in the sociolinguistic field, regarding the symbolism and the power of silence in various fields. Ubiquitous and universal, silence encompasses a multitude of facets, which make it different from speech or language. Polymorphic and varied, the silence rises above the words and, although it signals an absence, an important deprivation, it is by no means a vacuum, but on the contrary a bouquet of meanings that it reaches through speakers, speeches and circumstances.

Silence plays a considerable part: it is the breathing of the tongue, between each sentence, it gives rhythm, puts an end to it and thus makes the speech audible and easy to understand. The role of silence is fundamental, because in order to learn to speak, one must first learn to be silent, to listen, and to wait for his/her turn at the right time.

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Silence remains a special tool, but in order to understand it correctly and to be able to use it, we must also study the local culture.

## 2. Methodology

There are different types of research: exploratory, descriptive, correlational and explanatory. According to Sampieri (2014), **descriptive research** is defined as attempts to explore and explain while providing additional information about a topic. Therefore, the design of the present research is of a descriptive nature. This is where information is collected instead of making guesses or elaborate models to predict the future - the 'what' and 'how,' rather than the 'why.

The study aims to explore important aspects related to silence, but also seeks to expose the symbolism and the different facets of silence in intercultural communication.

## 3. Forms and functions of silence

Some silences are noticeable, but others are seemingly insignificant to us. For instance, it is commonly known that silence is used to show a certain respect for a socio-political position or status. When teachers, ecclesiastics, judges, doctors, lawyers, and other holders of authority enter a room, there is a characteristic silence in the field that speaks for itself. In schools, in hospitals, in public institutions or even buildings one can easily find imposed moral norms of silence reinforcing a kind of authority. The religious rites of many Christian orders invite continuously to silence. Obviously, there are various forms of silence, complex and ambiguous ones, according to culture or fields of activity.

In his research entitled *Silence in intercultural communication*, Nakane (2007:7) establishes a list of the forms of silence, summarizing them from micro units to macro units: a) intra-turn pauses, b) inter-turn (switching) pauses / gaps, c) turn-constituting silences with illocutionary force, d) temporary silence of individuals who do not hold the floor in interaction, e) an individual's total withdrawal of speech in a speech event, f) silence of a group of participants as a constituent of social / religious events, g) discourse suppressed by a dominant force at various levels of social organization.

When it comes to its usage, researchers have found a wide range of functions. Saville-Troike (1985:4-6) speaks about silences which "structure communication" and "regulate social relationships" and silences "which carry meaning". The first category is referred to the customary use of silence in certain social contexts in different communities (e.g. Agyekum 2002; Basso 1972; Nwoye 1985). The author describes the second category, the silence "which carries meaning" in communicative situations as silence which is either meaningful but without propositional content, or "silent communicative acts which are entirely dependent on adjacent vocalizations for interpretation, and which carry their own illocutionary force" (Saville-Troike 1985:6).

After investigating all the functions in existing literature, Nakane (2007:8) groups them under four headings: **cognitive** (pauses and hesitations, e.g. retelling a story), **discursive** (marking boundaries of discourse -junctures and meaning or grammatical units in speech, e.g. tones followed by pauses), **social** (length of pauses, politeness strategy,

overall tempo of speech can be associated with personal traits such as extroverted or introverted, long pauses were associated with the formation of a negative impression of the speaker, means of social control, maintaining role relationships and negotiating power e.g. in the Akan community, the king uses silence to mark his “power, authority, rank and status” (Agyekum 2002: 42) etc.) and **affective** (managing emotions - Avoidance of talk with a person who is extremely angry).

#### **4. Silence in different communities**

Over time, several studies have been conducted in different communities with the aim to analyze two essential components: speech and silence. Silence, in this case, is not an absence of speech but rather a cultural indicator of the indigenous people, a central code and a way of presenting oneself in the contemporary world.

Basso (1972:72), for instance, studied speech and silence in Athapaskan, in the central-eastern part of Arizona, and concluded that people did not speak when they used to meet strangers or to meet students getting back from boarding schools. It is common to remain silent when courting/dating for a reasonable amount of time while displaying fondness in ways such as staying close to each other and holding hands. The common feature in these situations was that the relations between the speakers were ambiguous and uncertain. Basso’s analysis explains the silence of the Apache parents after their children returned from boarding school:

„You just can't tell about those children after they've been with White men for a long time. They get their minds turned around sometimes they forget where they come from and get ashamed when they come home because their parents and relatives are poor. They forget how to act with these Apaches and get mad easy. They walk around all night and get into fights. They don't stay at home. At school, some of them learn to want to be White men, so they come back and try to act that way. But we are still Apaches! So, we don't know them anymore, and it is like we never knew them. It is hard to talk to them when they are like that” (Basso 1970:310).

Basso points out that it was not a common practice in that community to get to know strangers and that these ones were supposed to start a discussion, but it was not appropriate to hasten this. Other cultures certainly have different attitudes in these circumstances - formal presentations, and foreigners are involved in small discussions to get to know each other. Obviously, such cultural differences can lead to misunderstandings (as evidenced by the Athapaskan community, which is seen by others as lacking in warmth).

In their study, Mesthrie et al. (2000: 88) point out several other studies regarding silence in certain communities, such as Native American, Inuit, and Finnish groups, as there was not much social interaction in traditional communities. In contrast, the Igbo Indians of Nigeria, who consider the art of speech (especially the highly elaborate forms of greeting) or the people of New York, are studied by Tannen (1985:74), who concludes that they dominate any conversation and their style of speech comes from an effort to avoid silence, filling the conversational space with any subject just for the sake of conversation, without being upset if what they say is ignored.

In an interesting study of Nordic culture, Novikova (2015) identifies another dimension of silence, namely that of cultural frontier, its subjects emphasizing the importance of “communicating in silence”. The author notes several types of silence suggested by the painter G.S. Rajshev:

“The people has a culture of silence: not to say unnecessary and superfluous words, but rather to listen and often position themselves not by words, but by behavior and attitude. With some we feel tense, with others not ... the culture of trust is not established by words, but by silence; to remain silent with the person is possible in this case. But meeting someone else can cause psychological imbalances. If you don't say anything, you need to reflect. There is an aggressive silence. It's an official tactic, not accidental. With this silence, they seem to concretize the space. The person in front of them begins to hesitate. It is a way of acting on the applicant. Such people, I will reject them immediately” (*Notes de terrain*, 2001, Hanty-Mansijsk).

There are different types of silence. There are things you are not allowed to talk about: the word can destroy both the sacred object and the connection it has with it. These are rules that mainly affect the sacred realm. Sacred legends are taboo. These are said only in certain cases, by one person to another in whom he has full confidence, who, at the same time, has specific instructions on what to do with the information received (Pesikova 2000: 133).

In every culture, silence is a code. Novikova (2015) points out that there are things we are not allowed to talk to women or that we are not allowed to talk in certain situations, for example before hunting or in the evening. There are also even stricter rules on behavior in the forest, where you should not disturb the peace - calm of spirits. Silence also plays an important role in the daily lives of native people: there are a multitude of rules, especially regarding the main dimensions of life. For example, it is not possible to talk about children until they are one year old, because these children are still on the border between the world of people and the world of spirits. There is no need to talk about the results of hunting or fishing (because, according to hunters' representations, animals can listen). There is a rule that we should not talk about future successes. Thus, silence, in a known internal space, is regulated by rules that depend not only on the space itself, but also on the moment - the prohibitions are particularly numerous in the evening.

In some camps, people are in no hurry to say everything they know or see. Sometimes someone who comes home with his reindeer says two or three words and everyone in the house knows what path he took, where he spent the night, what he saw on the road. Pesikova (2000) calls this feature of their culture "closed opening." In the perception of representatives of other cultures, the silence or lack of communication of the natives is often perceived as a defect.

Nordic cultures, as well as Asians, "listen" rather than "speak", pursuing calm and order in a conversation. As such, silence involves thinking or thinking of a serious / prestigious answer to a question. In Africa, silence is seen as a way to enjoy one's company; it means you're comfortable enough to be with each other without having to fill up for a moment.

In Asian cultures and in some Latin and Arab countries, silence can appear as a sign of respect. Or silence could be the inability to formulate a response in a foreign language quickly. In Europe, in countries such as Italy, Spain, etc. it is perfectly acceptable

for someone to interrupt the person speaking. Silence at a meeting would be uncomfortable and strange. Silence in answer to a question indicates ignorance of the answer. It should be remembered that the differences between the ways of speaking in different groups emphasize the fact that not all speakers interact in the same way and that these differences are based on a cultural component.

Nowadays silence is changing its role. Although we live in a noisy century, background noise is present everywhere, from shops to elevators, to bells, alarms, telephones, etc. we find an intolerance to noise. For example, it is no longer acceptable for the neighbor on the train to speak, to make noise, when in the past it was even polite to address the neighbor first. Children in the 21st century are more afraid of silence. Generations ago, to be silent could be to dream. Today, there is silence when we "sit on the phone." Specialists say that all young people, in general, identify silence with boredom, with stopping the rhythm.

Undoubtedly, each era has a specific way of conceiving silence. In past centuries, silence was a wealth, a means to deepen the Self, to meditate, to revitalize. The silence of the seventeenth century was intended for prayer, listening to God. Also, in the middle of the 16th century, at the royal courts, speech was a risk, silence was more cautious or even beneficial. The king, like anyone who has power, must be silent, because the great ones do not speak badly. If it is important to know how to speak, it is even more important to know how to be silent.

This *hesychastic silence* has always played the most significant role. It is about the dialogue of love with the Divinity, from a Christian point of view. Silence is an important component of intratrinitarian dialogue; with the Person of the Word one can dialogue in a hesychastic way, through silence (the prayer of the heart) where the words are felt / lived without being uttered.

In *Genesis* we learn that God created the world in 7 days and, especially, that in the beginning it was the Word but the Word was God. The silence of the seventh day corresponds to a period of rest, contemplation, silence, finding the moment.

Each moment of silence seems to give Time a complete density as well as a timeless scope. The moment of silence during a commemoration ceremony seems long, and we generally perceive it as a relief when it ends. The religious man must know when and how to speak. For as a Greek philosopher pointed out, "why does man have two ears and one mouth? To be able to listen more and talk less".

At the same time, there is talk of silencing the silences, in the form of a silence at the end of time. Not to mention the silence of death, for death is silence, just as silence after a war is peace. Today, with the frenzy of the city, and the media, nature seems to be the last anchor of silence.

## 5. Conclusions

Any documentation source should constitute a reliable guide and preceptor. Through this analysis we wanted to offer the reader a useful and efficient tool upon the concept of silence since it has various interpretations and many different uses contingent on the situation's context. It is such a multi-faceted and ambiguous phenomenon, and research into the phenomenon of silence requires multiple perspectives and approaches to reach a reliable

interpretation and understanding. For instance, pauses play a crucial role in achieving successful communication in that they allow not only the speaker time to organise his/her thoughts but also the listener time to understand what the speaker is saying. And the way silence is shaping different communities remain under silence for many speakers since silence may never normally come to attention in our everyday life.

All these different facets and functions of silence have given me valuable insights into human interaction and intercultural communication, and the ultimate goal of this research is to share those insights with the readers.

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