

The Social and Cultural Construction of Silence

Robert N. St. Clair

University of Louisville

Introduction

One of the earliest investigations in the study of silence came from Keith Basso (1970; 1990). He noticed that silence was used in a different way in Western Apache, an Athabaskan language spoken in the Southwestern United States. For example, it occurred when strangers met each other. It also was found to exist when couples initiate courtships or when one returns to a community after a long absence. Silence is also found to be a form of respect. One expresses bereavement of a lost one in silence. One must respond to verbal discipline with silence. Silence is, after all, an expression of respect.

What is interesting about silence is that it is socially constructed. In some cultures, silence is seen as an accepted behavior while in others it is interpreted as a symbol of distress. In addition to these divergent patterns, there are a range of different uses of silence; some are cultural and others are social. The focus of this essay is on the cultural uses of silence in Japanese and in English. It argues that communication is narrowly defined and needs to be expanded to include the study of silence, body language, gesture, and the study of face.

Being Silent in the United States

Americans living in the United States share a wide range of cultural assumption with those of their European ancestors. One of them is the belief that rhetoric is an intrinsic part of self expression.¹ What this means, in essence, is that one shows himself verbally to others rather than through non-verbal means (Kennedy, 1977). Although 70% of communication is non-verbal, most Americans think of communication as essentially a verbal activity (Knapp 1978; Langer, 1942). Hence, Americans² are uncomfortable with long periods of silence (Mehrabian, 1981). Within the media industries, for example, merchants buy time for advertising and the metaphor of "time is money" becomes a central

concern. Dead time (long periods of silence) in radio and television is seen as critical problem of miscommunication. Periods of silence are avoided among individuals engaged in conversations with others. Silence is seen, in this context, as a moment of awkwardness.

There are numerous moments and situations when silence is demanded during social interaction. These are contexts in which group behavior demands silence from individuals who participate in rituals or in public forms of interaction. For example, one does not converse with others during moments of public prayer. One does not speak when observing moments of silence in honor of a fallen hero or during the observation of a sacred event. On Memorial Day, for example, there is usually a public event in which those who have fallen in past wars are remembered in silence and prayer. Events need not be sacred in order for them to command silence. During golf, when a player addresses the ball, one must remain silent so as not to distract the player at the tee. There are many events in which coordinated audience participation is intercalated with silence. When one goes to a performance of an orchestra, to watch Ballet or Opera, silence is interpreted as a sign of interest and wonder. It is considered rude to talk during such performances. In the cinema, however, a different phenomenon is taking place. Meyrowitz (1985) has noted that it is now common place for people to talk during the presentation of movies in a public theater. Why does this occur? He believes that it is due to the influence of television. One watches television at home and in the process interacts with others by talking during performances, shouting at the set, moving around from one locale to another during the performance, etc. When one goes to a public place such as the theater, this behavior is brought into play. One acts in public the way in which one acts at home. There is no sense of place. Watching television at home is a private event; watching a movie at a theater is a public event. If one has no sense of place, this breach of silence occurs. If one has no contextualization of self, this improper action occurs. If one has no sense of allocentric behavior, one behaves egocentrically.³

There is a kind of silence that is more profound than observing the presentation of self in public. There is a silence that is so deep that most Americans are unaware of their participation in this form of verbal control. In Europe, for example, most citizens are aware of the fact that they exist within a class structure. Surely, the British are aware of this. So are the French and the Germans. However, Americans are oblivious to the fact that only 4% of the population in their country owns 84% of all of the wealth. They are unaware of the fact that there are only two classes: the super rich and everyone else. They are unaware of the middle class because they believe that they can become a part of the super rich (Mills, 1959) and they remain unaware that this group belongs to a network in which they go to the same schools, inter-marry, belong to the same board of directors of the top 500 companies, etc (Spring, 1976; Violas,

1978). This kind of silence is known to political scientists. They call it agenda control. Whatever is put on the public agenda is brought into public consciousness. Whatever is not placed on the agenda remains hidden. Since it remains hidden, it becomes part of the culture of silence in America.⁴

Being Silent in Japan

Many aspects of what constitutes silence in the United States are social. Such is not the case with Japan where silence has been institutionalized and where social behaviors have become cultural. This fact alone does not explain the differences in the use of silence across these two cultures. In Japan, for example, one is very aware of non-verbal communication as a social event. It is very important to care about (*kiwo tsukau*) and to understand (*sassuru*) others. There is a greater concern with the needs of others. Hence, what is interpreted as non-communication in the United States is correctly seen as communication in Japanese society. In the United States, what is spoken is placed in the foreground and what is not said remains in the background, in the realm of non-verbal behavior. What this means, in essence, is that the study of body language (the use of the hands, body posture, gesture, facial expressions, and the uses of silence are all treated as an unarticulated whole. By way of contrast, the use of body language, face, posture, and silence are all seen as aspects of human communication. The significance of non-verbal communication may even underscore some of the uses of the language of silence in Japan.

Silence is used as a form of passive resistance and is used to express dissatisfaction (Seltman, 1991: Chapter Four). This use of silence is best seen as a social skill. Often it is important to keep one's opinion silent rather than to confront a group with one's own will. One must confer to the will of the group and to those who are in charge. This ability to sublimate strong emotional reactions with polite silence is important for harmony within the group.

When someone is caught off guard and is unable to participate in direct confrontation with others, one may express surprise silence (Seltman, 1991). This can range from placing the hand on the chest and looking wide-eyed with the jaws wide open or point to the nose and asking *boku?*. This gesture may involve scratching the back of the head to express bafflement and modesty, a less offensive gesture. A woman may respond to this same situation by remaining silent with her hands gently resting on her lap.

Silence can also be used to express disagreement. This takes the form of body language such as grimacing, frowning, squinting of the eyes, wrinkling of the nose, or pouting. It is not enough to merely study silence in these cases, but to also note what else is expressed through body language.

Another form of silence can be used to express defiance where prolonged eye contact conveys a message of acknowledgement. If a person's respect for another is challenged, one may respond by looking away rather than

by responding with a long hard unflinching stare, an act that is beyond acceptable behavior.

Concluding Remarks

Roy Miller (1982) considers the appropriate use of silence to be one of the most difficult aspects of learning the Japanese language. This essay is not intended to elucidate the uses of silence in Japanese, but to note that silence is socially and culturally constructed in some interesting ways. Among the Western Apache, a highly social culture, silence is defined as a natural expression of self. It is misunderstood by Americans because they define silence in rhetorical terms. This same misunderstanding has led to certain predictable problems in studying silence in Japan. Many scholars have expressed in detail the importance of this social non-verbal communication (Barnlund, 1989; Sakamoto and Naotsuka, 1982; Hall and Hall, 1987). As a matter of fact, there is a large body of literature on non-verbal communication systems among different cultures (Hall, 1966; Morris, 1977; Knapp, 1978). The problem appears to one of how communication is defined. In Western cultures, communication is defined rhetorically. It is characteristically associated with human speech. In Asia, communication is not limited to verbal discourse and includes non-verbal expression systems. It is not limited to individual expression and necessarily involves social expressions of self (Odin, 1996). If communication theory is to serve a larger international framework, it needs to go beyond its culturally bound dependence on rhetorical precepts..

Notes

1. The tradition of rhetoric was originally used in Greece as a means of arguing for or against issues that were to be voted on in a public forum. The stoics soon became involved in the teaching of rhetoric. They were concerned with how to introduce an issue, how to organize one's presentation of ideas, how to argue logically, how to summarize and conclude a point, etc. In contemporary thought, this system still exists in American law schools where students prepare using traditional rhetoric before presenting their ideas in moot court. Outside of this tradition of jurisprudence, debate has been given over to communication departments, rhetoric in the form of the analysis of political speech has also been relegated to communication departments, and so has the articulation and enunciation of words. English departments use rhetoric to teach students how to write essays, a print culture phenomenon. All of these practices are predicated on the belief that language is the most significant instrument of self expression. Rhetoric is now a part of western cultural thought.
2. Americans refer to the inhabitants of the United States. There is a lack of terms in English to distinguish North Americans (Latin America, Canada, and

the U.S) from inhabitants of the United States. This lexical problem would not exist if this essay were written in Spanish or Portuguese.

3. Egocentric behavior occurs naturally in human beings during the first year of life. As soon as a child discovers the difference between "I" and "me," he learns the he exists among others and that he must see himself as part of a group. This understanding of the social self is called allocentric behavior. The term means that others (allo) constitute the center of public behavior. American culture favors egocentric behavior for commercial reasons. It is how merchandise is marketed to increase sales (Ewen, 1977).

4. This kind of silence is cultural rather than social. For an example of the social use of silence one must turn to West Germany and how it treats the subject of the holocaust (Schlant, 1999). An American equivalent to social silence can be found in public opinion poles where individuals decide not to divulge their true feelings for social reasons (Noelle-Neumann, 1984; 1991).

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