

Speech and silence in the system of human communication

Abstract

This paper aims to show the increasing importance in contemporary studies of language of the use of silence as an element of human communication both from a qualitative and a quantitative point of view. It is more and more considered as an integral part of the cultural system of a speech community, of the structure of their conversations, and of the conversational behaviour and strategy of an interactant.

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ملخص

يتمثل هدف هذا البحث في إبراز الأهمية المتزايدة للصمت ضمن الدراسات المعاصرة لاستعمال اللغة من خلال السياق الاجتماعي باعتبار عنصرا للاتصال البشري سواء من وجهة النظر الكمية والنوعية وبمناخه جزءا لا يتجزأ أي كل متكامل أكثر فأكثر من النظام الثقافي للمجموعة اللغوية لاسيما من ناحية تركيبية (بنية) محادثات الأفراد أو من ناحية سلوكها التحادثي وكذا الإستراتيجية التي يتبعها عنصرا متفاعلا من خلال عملية التحادث والتخاطب مع بقية المجتمع.

In their attempts to study the complex and diverse phenomenon of language, researchers have often felt the need to associate with it other major subjects like philosophy, psychology, sociology, etc... In this short paper, we shall suggest to relate language with... silence, since – as will be explained below – the absence of silence is as important as its presence in a conversational interaction – cf. Evelin Hatch, 1992: 309-. Today, with more and more emphasis in the study of language on its cultural dimension – the ethnography of speaking –, the term "silence" appears more and more in important contemporary studies of language, i.e. discourse analysis in general, and conversational analysis in particular. As for the status of the addressee in relation with the speaker¹, silence in relation with speech is no more considered as something empty of meaning or unworthy studying. Its relation with speech, in the study of language use, is gaining ground, though not much work about it has been done yet. What is obviously missing today in the literature of sociolinguistics in its wider sense is a typology for

characterising societies as to the qualitative and quantitative importance of speaking. Qualitative refers to societies where the skill of speaking – eloquence, loquacity – can be highly valued and encouraged from childhood ², where the verbally most skillful boy is likely to be the leader of the peer group. While quantitative refers to another norm : the one about how much talk is required or preferred in a community's structure or scale of speaking, whose very end- bottom end – is of course silence itself.

In this paper, the problem we are stating is about the status of silence in relation with language or speech. Are they independent from one another, are they opposites, complementary, included one into the other, or anything else. Tentative answers are going to derive from the study of the relationship between silence and culture first, and then between silence and conversation in a second step, both in Algeria and in other countries. In a third step, suggestion will be made for placing silence within the system of human communication. In the conclusion, attention will be paid to the problems of world communication when the cultural aspect of silence in human interaction is neglected.

1/ Silence and culture:

a) In the world:

The status of silence in human communication, its norms, how is it evaluated, can vary a lot from one cultural community to another. Silence can be intolerable, as it can be accepted or necessary to one degree or another, from one speech community – situation – to another. The first case concerns for example societies where phatic communion ³ is a strong principle governing people's behaviour – as for example the British people – or societies which are naturally talkative – as for example Mediterranean people or Arabs-.

In case of phatic communion, Peter Trudgill – 1995: 111 – is reporting that "in a conversation between two English speakers who are close friends, a silence of longer than about four seconds is not allowed ". it means that people become embarrassed if nothing is said after that time, and would feel obliged to say something, even if it is only a remark about the weather.⁴ If such attitude towards silence is probably shared to a bigger or lesser degree by other societies, it does not imply at all that phatic communion is a universal cultural feature of language use. Other societies can have other, opposite norms and values about the use of silence in social interaction. Peter Trudgill–1995: 116- is reporting that "among Athabaskan ⁵ groups, speech is avoided if there is doubt about social relationships and about how one should behave. And quite lengthy silences as with the Apache and Navajo- who are also Athabaskans-are readily tolerated ". Eskimos are also well – known examples of people who would stay with you for an hour with no more than half a dozen exchanges, the rest of the time being spent in silence.

Differences in how the evaluation of silence affects people's behaviour can also exist within the same culture but from one group – age, gender – to another. For example, French children are encouraged to be silent when visitors are present at dinner, while Russian children are encouraged to talk. The young Anang are trained in the arts of speech, while for the Wolof, speech, especially in quantity, is dangerous and demeaning. As far as gender is concerned, D.A. Coulthard – 1977: 49 – is reporting

that "among the Arucanian there are different expectations of men and women, men being encouraged to talk on all occasions, women to be silent – a new wife is not permitted to speak for several months –".

b) In Algeria:

As to the Algerian culture, a major speaking rule is to avoid silence, even at the expense of other rules like avoiding unconsidered talk, or maintaining each other's face⁶. Such attitude can be explained as for the British people and other communities by the principle of phatic communion- necessity to socialise -, but here a second explanation which is more typical is the talkative character of the Algerians as both Arabs and Mediterraneans. Verbosity is highly valued for itself⁷, but also for evaluating the speaker who is then held in high regard ; while taciturnity stands for the unknown, and can even have the connotation of risk, danger, hostility, as expressed by the following proverb:

9uuz Çla waad *bahbaar*; u maa d9uuz&§ Çla waad sakuuti
" cross- safely – a troubled water, but do not cross a silent river."

As often happens in many societies, a proverb may have its contrasting counterpart. In the Algerian society, silence may be valued, but not at the expense of verbosity, and for opposite reasons as compared with the latter: silence is not valued for itself , and the taciturn individual is not held in high esteem. Rather, though silence keeps having socially a negative connotation, it is advocated as a personal strategy or wisdom: the less you talk, the less you reveal or commit yourself , and the less "errors" you make. In a word, it is safer for you not to talk much. This piece of advice is represented in the following proverbs:

lakaan l&klaam *fadda*, &ssukaat &dhab
.....
"if speech is silver, silence is gold"

Or:
&lfum &lma&luuq maa &dduxlu d&bbaana
.....
"no fly can penetrate a mouth which is shut".

The status and function of silence in conversation is going to be further explained in the following section.

2/ Silence and conversation:

a) In the world:

Depending on social conventions, silence has a more acceptable role in some cultures than in others. For example, M. Mc Carthy- 1991- is reporting that longer silences seem to be tolerated among the Finns, while a tendency observable among the Japanese is the agonisingly long "thinking time" before a response is delivered. Similarly, M. Saville – Troike – in Sandra Lee Mc Kay & Nancy H.Hornberger ed, 1996: 366-, when studying differences in interaction patterns between native and target language communities, notices that "members of some American Indian speech – communities wait several minutes in silence before taking a turn in conversation or responding to a question". Such long silences are of course going to be felt as embarrassing by for example native English interlocutors because they expect short time frames for responses or conversational turn – taking. Parties' treatment of silence in conversation is contingent on its placement. Harvey Sacks and al. – 1974 / 715 –

distinguish intra-turn silence or "pause" – which is not at a transition place, and which is not to be talked in by others – from silence after a possible completion point or "gap", from extended silence at transition places or "lapses".

Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson also noticed the meaningful and orderly character of silence within a conversation. They classified it into the following types: brief gaps – or inter-turn silences – allowing a new turn at talk; longer gaps where the same speaker resumes talking because no addressee has taken the floor; intra –turn pauses not to be talked in by others, where only the same speaker can continue; and finally extended intentional silences or lapses at transition places where somebody's right to take a turn at talk is not fulfilled, whatever the reason or personal attitude.

In conversation, pause or silence surprisingly may take more time- or as much time – as the speech itself. Depending on cultural norms, the individual pauses may be brief but may also be frequent. In studies of spontaneous speech, Frieda Goldman – Eisler-1968:18- found "a wide variation from 16% to 62% of utterance time spent in silence. Most of the group, however, paused between 40% and 50% of their total speaking time".

b) In Algeria:

In Algeria, the pausing time in conversation is even shorter because, as explained earlier, the first principle in Algerian conversations is to keep the talk going even at the expense of other – smaller- speaking rules as avoiding unconsidered talk – as for example creating a big controversy about a detail just to anticipate and avoid breakdowns in conversation-, disagreeing just for the sake of polemic and hence keep the talk going, avoiding repetition – as for example asking about one another's health again and again every time there is a longer embarrassing silence or a breakdown in the conversation -, or maintaining each other's face.

Such personal attitudes and strategies for avoiding silence of course may involve some risk: they may for example turn counter – productive when becoming offending to the addressee, who may then relinquish to take a turn in conversation or just withdraw from it. A high verbal skill and psychological abilities are required for achieving such a balance and such a primordial aim in conversation, and for gaining the cooperativeness ⁸ and interest of the participants. In general, and as explained earlier, the Algerians are gifted for that since they are "naturally" talkative and skillful speakers.

From the above mentioned techniques for avoiding silence, we understand that pausing is rare in Algerian conversations. Silence, though often absent from Algerian face – to face interaction, is a determining factor in the "deep" structure of Algerian conversations and in the conversational behaviour of participants. The latter are often so eager to avoid it that simultaneous talk ⁹ is the rule rather than an exception in many Algerian conversations, especially in naturally occurring casual verbal exchanges. It follows that whenever silence occurs, it is often meant by the speaker, and interpreted appropriately by the hearer. A widespread interpretation of silence is summarised in the following saying:

&s sukaat 9alaam&t &rridaa

.....
"Silence stands for agreement" ¹⁰

3/ Silence in the system of human communication:

Whether present in or absent from conversation, we understand from the above examples that silence has a major role and function in both the structure of conversation – turn – taking, simultaneous talks, thinking time before answering-, and conversational strategy and intention of the speaker – for example, the different techniques for keeping the talk going and hence avoid silence -. Silence then is an integral part of conversation, of speech itself, as pointed out by Frieda Goldman – Eisler-1968: 18-: " Silence, i.e pausing, is as much part of speech as vocal utterance ".

Speech and silence are so much interwoven that they exist together in what is referred to as silent speech or inner speech, a form of communication very much used in some cultural communities as the Algerian one. One of its main uses is in the domain of religion in the daily prayers or in the uttering of stereotyped religious expressions which regulate and correspond to individual or social events like sneezing, yawning, wedding –c.f the foot-note of the above example-.

The system of human communication is traditionally divided into verbal communication – words, clauses, sentences-, and the non – verbal one – prosody, paralinguistics, kinesics, proxemics. The suggestion here is to include silence – its use and its non- use qualitatively and quantitatively, its significance – into the system of human communication, and explore for example what can be universal and what is definitely culture- specific. In a first step, such a classification will at least help avoid misunderstandings, clashes of norms, miscommunication in inter- cultural verbal exchange.

Another possible area of study is suggested by Saville – Troike's – 1985- classification of silence into its institutionally determined variety – libraries, funerals, taboos, lower versus higher class..., the group – determined silence – debates , differential allocation of time to children-, and finally the individually determined silence – whose origin can be social, linguistic or psychological -. Suggestion is made for evaluating the complexities of such taxonomy and for testing the universal characteristics of the human communication system.

D.A – Coulthard – 1997 : 49 – reports the story of an American ethnographer staying with in –laws in Denmark and being joined by an American friend who, despite warnings , insisted on talking with American intensity until " at 9 o'clock my in-laws retired to bed; they just couldn't stand it any more ". A similar situation would be much more acceptable in an Algerian context. What would be unusual in Algeria is a foreigner's prolonged or repeated silence, which could only be interpreted as implying agreement, and hence potential trouble to him....

Notes

1. Conversation is nowadays defined as a minimally two party activity including for example the addressee's back channel behaviour made of items like "uh", "mmh" , "yes" , "right" , ... , whose function is to signal the hearer's availability and attendance to the message, i.e. his cooperativeness- c.f.Grice , 1975: 45 – and to establish coordination in conversation.

2. We can mention as examples the Athenians, the Anang of Nigeria, the Iroquois of America , the Negro children of the U.S- c.f Labov, 1969-.

3. Bronislaw Malinowsky's – 1923: 315 – analyses of the communicative behaviour of the Trobriand Islanders introduced the importance of phatic communion –i.e. talking

for the sake of talking and avoiding silence, the social function of words as a mode of action – to linguists.

4. English speakers also avoid silence because they want to establish social relations.

5. Athabaskan is referring to a group of North American Indian languages.

6. Brown and Levinson -1987: 67 – define "face" as consisting of the freedom to act unimpeded- negative face- and the satisfaction of having one's values approved of – positive face-.

7. A striking example is that even illiterate Algerians – and Arabs in general – enjoy listening to Classical Arabic, a form of Arabic which is only learnt at school. Maybe a subconscious reason for that is because Classical Arabic is the "language" of the Coran.

8. Grice – 1975: 45 – maintains that the overriding principle in conversation is one he calls the Cooperative Principle : "make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged".

9. In Algerian everyday conversations, turn –shift is usually preceded with a transition period – a few seconds – of simultaneous talk, where the first speaker gradually relinquishes his turn upon the insistence of the second speaker for taking the floor.

10. A typical corresponding situation is when the silent speaker is a young woman asked by her male near relatives whether she agrees to marry someone. Prolonged silence, accompanied with a stable low head position, definitely means "yes".

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