

An Exploratory Study of the Role of Silence in Business Communication

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Abstract

This paper is concerned with the forms and functions of silence in business communication. The empirical data come from three personal interviews conducted with Hungarian business professionals working in different fields of business. The first interview is conducted with an expert in pharmaceutical business, the second one is with a senior manager in the telecommunications industry, and the third one is done with a marketing manager. In the research audio recordings were made in Hungarian, which were then transcribed and translated into English. For the data analysis Laningen's (1988) three step phenomenological method has been used. The advantage of qualitative personal interviews is that it provides much flexibility both in the conduct of data collection and subsequent analysis. The results make us realise how complex and ambiguous, yet finely-tuned the use of silence in business communication can be.

1. Introduction

In recent years, researchers have suggested that silence is not simply an absence of noise but constitutes a part of communication as important as speech (e.g. Jaworski, 1993, 1997; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). Silence at a macro level may involve a total withdrawal of speech at a communicative event; for example, the unanimous silence of the participants in religious events (e.g. Maltz, 1985), or it can also include silence of individuals while others are talking, for instance in a classroom (e.g. Jaworski & Sachdev 1998) or in court (e.g. Eades, 2000). Similarly, in everyday and business conversations, some participants remain silent for a certain period of time while others engage in conversation (Nakane, 1984). Sacks et al. (1974) list different types of silences, which can occur within a single turn, called a "pause", and a "gap", which occurs at a transition relevance place (TRP) where speaker change is relevant (p. 715). According to Blimes (1997), another form of silence is the so-called 'hidden' silence, which remains 'untold' in discourse, and is often associated with power. Focusing on the wide range of functions of silence, Saville-Troike (1985) argues that in communicative situations silences, which "structure communication" and "regulate social relationships" (e.g. hesitations and pauses) have to be differentiated from silences "which carry meaning", (e.g. gestures), (p. 4-6). The functions of silence investigated in existing literature can be grouped into *cognitive* (Chafe, 1985) – focusing on pauses and hesitations – *discursive* (Jaworski, 1993) – marking boundaries of discourse – , and finally, *social* and *affective* (Jaworski, 2000) – examining the impressions it makes on the participants in social encounters. This paper complements previous research on silence by discussing the forms, as well as cognitive, social and emotive functions of silence found in business settings.

2. Methodology

In this research, the main aim was to gain in-depth understanding of how business people use silence in their work. The three interviewees, one woman (a pharmaceutical expert) and two men (a telecommunications manager and a marketing manager), are my company language course students, who agreed to participate in the research. The audio recorded interviews with the participants, guided by an interview schedule, formed the basis for my data collection and subsequent analyses.

In interpreting and analyzing the interview data, Lanigan's (1988) three-step phenomenological method was used, which consists of the following steps: (1) *description* (the actual interviews transcribed verbatim); (2) *reduction* (the identification of important participants' statements); and (3) *interpretation* (thematizing participants' statements). The reliability and validity of the research rest on adhering to the analytical rigor of the phenomenological method.

2. 1. Data reduction: thematic categories

Research participants were asked to remember any situations how, when, with whom and for what purpose they used silence in their communications at work. The themes that have emerged from the interviews are the following: (1) forms of silence and (2) functions of silence.

2. 1. 1. Forms of silence

One of the prominent themes that emerged from the data analysis was *hidden silence*, which did not have a recognisable 'form' itself, but could be noticed by the other participants. In the situation mentioned below, the telecommunications manager agrees that the person who did not speak, seemingly conveyed far more power than the one who did.

"I remember a business round table meeting a years ago when a British businessman was in attendance. During the meeting everyone around the table was putting in their opinion except for this man who was extraordinarily quiet. Throughout the whole meeting I could see him across the table and he was certainly interested in what was going on. I am sure that this guy was silent because most of what was going on was irrelevant to him so he ignored it. Instead, he was calculating the value of the people sitting around the table from what they said, no doubt making a mental note about who was talking sense and who was not". (Extract from interview 2)

As we can see, there is quite an enormous power in silence. Also, this example reveals that silence has two opposite valuations, one negative, a failure of language, and one positive, a chance for personal exploration. A similar example was described by the marketing manager where in his case, he only sat back and refused to say anything during a meeting because he had the feeling that there was nothing new under the sun:

"...what I can now see is that 90 % of what comes out of people's mouth is not very original, or even helpful, or even worth listening to. Most of what they say is gossip, the stolen opinions of others, things they have picked up in life, bias, judgement, something they have read about somewhere, a whole load of substantiated stuff. I occasionally do not feel like joining the conversation". (Extract from interview 3)

From the above two examples, it is evident how similarly these participants used silence when they opted for keeping back from conversation.

2. 2. 1. Functions of silence

Another major theme that arose from the data analysis is related to the many ways that participants used silence to earn cognitive processing or to form impressions. For instance, silence was used to complement or delay talk, thus preventing one from saying things that might cause irreparable damage to the relationship. Such comments always trigger an emotional response from the other party.

2. 2. 2. Cognitive function

The pharmaceutical expert in the following example used pauses to have the function of earning cognitive processing time in communication:

"As you know I am working as a Hungarian representative of a German Pharmaceutical company and every six months I have to make presentations at the German headquarters about our company's performance. In my presentations I use silence pretty often when I make a very important point, (e.g. If we do not change this practice in 2012, our company will be in trouble), I stop, pause and let the audience understand what I have just said. Then I start talking again. I am allowing my information to sink in with my audience. Otherwise, my audience would not catch that I have said something important." (Extract from interview 1)

She noted that without pauses listeners might have difficulty in keeping up with ongoing talk and interpreting it correctly. Thus, 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. Pauses can also affect the formation of impressions, for instance, when somebody tells a joke and would like to hear the reactions to that. The marketing manager remembered one such case:

"I remember once after I said something very funny at a meeting, I stopped talking for a moment, I let the audience enjoy the humour that I shared with them. Then to my surprise, nothing happened, there was no response, therefore I continued my speech; it was not the end of the world." (Extract from interview 3)

He gave the example of a long gap, when it became a more extensive silence, which could be interpreted or intended as a silent response. To a certain extent it made a negative impression both on the listeners and the speaker. This may suggest that the length of pauses, as well as overall tempo of speech, are all associated with personal traits such as extroverted or introverted.

2. 2. 3. Social function

Not surprisingly, silence can also contribute to the creation, maintenance and reduction of social distance in encounters. In both situations quoted below, there is a common goal, namely, with the use of silence to avoid hurting the other person.

"...I have the feeling that sometimes it is better to keep my mouth shut, especially when I am angry because after the heated moment has passed, I cannot take back the negative things that has been said. I usually come back to the conflict issue when I am in a better frame of mind." (Extract from interview 2)

In terms of how the pharmaceutical expert used silence in a social situation with a male business partner, Martha narrated an incident when she felt rather uncomfortable. She noted that:

"I use silence as tactis at times. If, for example, someone asks too much of me, I can use silence. Once an Arabic businessman was too much inquisitive with me and I felt rather uncomfortable. When he noticed my hesitation he stopped pursuing the matter knowing that I was unhappy with it. I think it is a bit of a sly way to rejectings but sometimes for me it becomes a powerful weapon without hurting people." (Extract from interview 1)

According to the interviewees' comments, when an utterance comes as an unpleasant surprise and the immediate response would be nasty, then they keep silent.

2. 2. 4. Emotive function

At the center of the emotive function stands the speaker, who tends to produce an impression of a certain emotion. He wants his feelings to be acknowledged as a way of empathizing with him, or demonstrating an understanding of what he has said. Below is an example for this, from the marketing manager:

"... Silence is also golden if I ask my audience a rhetorical question, for instance, Wouldn't it be good if every Hungarian could live up to their true potential? What I want my audience to do is basically internally to agree with me. Some of them will even nod back at me. So the best thing I can do in a presentation is to pause just for a moment." (Extract from interview 3)

Emotions play a crucial role in all communication. The situation below describes how a salesperson might find common ground with a potential customer by learning about his customer as a person, what he does, what they likes, and what he does not like.

"I have been working in marketing for nearly 15 years now. Earlier when I asked a sales question, and the customer did not answer straightaway, I jumped in and talked him out of the sale. These days if I ask a sales question, I always ask a multiple choice question, e.g. „would you prefer the red or the green, sir?" and then shut up. As I see it now, this gives the customer a choice to choose from, which he appreciates a lot, and as a result, I tend to be more successful in my job. In other words, I came to realize that silence is often as important if not more so than sound." (Extract from interview 3)

As can be seen, silence does not simply function as a background to speech but taking an active role in social interaction. It can provide guidance and information free from the confines of our limited conscious mind.

3. Findings

From the above discussion, it is clear that the balance between talking, listening and internally processing information varies from person to person. This balance may relate to several factors, including the participant's basic personality type, the nature of the conversation or how he/she is feeling. Some people talk much more than they listen, some people prefer to speak less, listen more, and some appear to have a pretty even balance of both. Therefore, the objectives for the conversation will affect the participants' listening. The telecommunications manager, for instance, was focusing very much on understanding what was going on in the people's minds. He was gathering facts, filling in gaps, working to get a fuller picture of the people participating in the events. The marketing manager was not not spending large amounts of energy giving his own thoughts and views, not telling stories of recent events, and not offering advice and ideas.

In further examining the second major theme, the functions of silence, we could see that pauses and hesitations have the function of earning cognitive processing time in communication. In retelling a story showed that the lower the codability of items in the story, the longer the pauses. It has been found that without pauses listeners may have great difficulty in keeping up with ongoing talk and interpreting it correctly.

Thirdly, in exploring the social function of silence, a typical feature that has emerged was that participants in order to avoid conflicts, kept silent and exhibited politeness towards the other party. The telecommunications manager has confessed that silence in certain cases can help him overcome his anger, which prevents him from hurting other people.

Lastly, in examining the emotive function of silence, it has been revealed that questions may do many positive things in a conversation, such as create empathy or explore different perspectives. According to the marketing manager, multiple choice questions encourage more information than closed ones. They also encourage participation and involvement in the conversation, and allow us to explore someone else's thoughts and ideas. Powerful questions have many potential benefits, for example, they can help someone feel more powerful and constructive about a situation and can create options. Powerful questions are phrased in such a way that they provoke an answer. By listening to the customer, the marketing manager could build rapport more easily based on mutual respect with his customer. In everyday life we tend to buy products and services from people we 'like', and we have a related tendency to like people who we believe are 'like' us.

All in all, we can conclude that good listeners make fewer mistakes, upset fewer people, and generally operate using better quality information. Good listeners also make a contribution to the person speaking, who then feels more encouraged to share his thoughts and ideas, viewed as someone who has valid opinions. Surprisingly, when we do most of the talking, we diminish our ability to draw information from other people.

4. Conclusion

This paper examined how business people used silence in their work-related situations. Through the analyses of the participants' discourses, the following themes have been identified and discussed: forms of silence and functions of silence. The results indicate that the meaning of silence is varied. It can be interpreted as a silent response, the possibility that the speaker has the intention to speak but is taking time, as well as the manifestation of power, impressions, attitudes or emotions. The findings of this study not only contribute to prior research on silence in particular but also deepen our understanding of business communication in general. Furthermore, the fact that one of the parties in communication can create such a situation, which requires the other person to utilize silence, shows that human relationships are highly interdependent on other human beings.

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