Japanese Communicative Silence Talks

Wong Ngan Ling
Faculty of Languages & Linguistics
University of Malaya

Introduction

In the competitive world of today, verbal communication seems to play a major role in determining responses in interpersonal communication situations. A high degree of specificity, explicit verbal utterances, and unambiguous verbal communication are preferable in conveying some messages, and little attention is placed on nonverbal and other contextual cues. It seems that people perceive silence rather negatively particularly in public situations. For example, people generally regard silence in public domain as ambiguity or rude (Jaworksi, 1993). Nevertheless, silence is viewed positively, for instance, to show deference or respect, to maintain harmony, especially in Japanese society In a socially constructed society like Japan where group-orientation and social interdependence are paramount, thus, communication through silence is possible and preferable (Wong, 2005) Talking seems to be denigrated as an excuse for procrastinating, and the decisive action is characterized by silence *"fugenjikkou"* (Lebra, 1986).

Generally in a conversation, Japanese people expect the person to whom they are talking to somehow know what is on their mind. After putting all the essential information across except the "decisive part" to others, waiting seems to be their duty while figuring what have been said and decided what to say/do is the interlocutor's responsibility This is where the silent moment slips in to play its role in decision making. In addition, to communicate effectively or to interpret incoming message successfully, rather than fluent self-expression, sasshi (being observant) and enryo (reserve) are the two important factors that people need to pay attention.

This paper begins by defining the various meanings of silence followed by its functions in diverse contexts. Examples of how silence is used positively in different situations
discussed by comparing to the British society At the same time, this paper will provide the intriguing world of silence as a tool of communication in

further insight into how the respondents perceived silence and to compare whether silence are culturally specific or shared universally by both cultures

The definition of the meanings and functions of silence

For this analysis, the meanings and functions of silence are differentiated. Meanings refer to the interpretations of messages, while functions refer to the goal and outcomes of interactions. The meanings of silence are divided into four categories positive, negative, eclectic and the fourth category, no silence, indicating that the respondent would not be silent in a particular communicative situation. The functions of silence in Japanese and British societies are abundant and varied.

The meanings of silence

Communication is viewed as a social constructed notion in which individuals bring their meanings and negotiate shared understanding. In a communication exchange, silence is seen as showing a restraint attitude or refraining from saying what the speaker wants to say in the presence of others. Keeping such a reserved attitude could vary from culture to culture as it may be due to one's upbringing, experiences as well as individual perceptions.

The meanings of silence are of three types, 1 Positive silence, 2 Negative silence, and 3 Eclectic silence.

Positive silence is used as a tool of communication to promote, to solidify or to maintain the existing relationship.

Negative silence is used as a tool of communication to isolate, to ignore, to disagree, which would destroy or melt away the existing good intention of the interaction.

Eclectic silence is kept when both the negative and the positive values of silence exist. Sometimes, this type of silence demonstrates not so much of the emotional expression (e.g. to hurt or to heal a relationship) but more to convey a period of thoughtfulness.

Functions of silence

The functions of silence are divided into three types 1 Positive silence 2. Negative silence and 3 Eclectic silence.

Positive functions· Face-saving, harmony maintenance, respect, approval, waiting time, politeness, persuasion, pay attention and etc.

Negative functions· Disapproval, self-assertion, rejection, disagreement, sadness, ignorance, uncomfortableness, lack of interest, anger, shock, give up, and etc.

Eclectic functions Thinking time, listening time, positive and negative, neutrality, social-cultural concept and etc.

Analysis

The analysis is based on the quantitative (questionnaire survey) and qualitative survey (interview) conducted to Japanese and British respondents in Bristol, England.

General perception of silence

The survey administered seems to show that Japanese people value silence more and talk less, because they believe actions speak louder than words. There is less emphasis on fluency and sometimes they think that there is no point talking if a problem is insoluble. Action is considered more effective than words, but once something is uttered, it stands. The trust in verbalized communication is higher than that of the British.

Many of the British say that both words and actions are needed to communicate. The reasons given include, "action needs to be backed-up by words" and "talk first act later" This suggests that the British people see words and actions as complementary rather than just putting weight on actions alone. The British respondents tend to trust the verbalized communication less than the Japanese do To them, words seem to have a superficial value and can be seen as manipulative. The British respondents view that other factors such as nonverbal communication, people's emotions (mood or feelings) and situations, are considered to reveal more truth. As a whole, the British respondents are inclined to think that greater verbal expressiveness in Britain might be due to the fact that fluent self-expression is valued more highly in their country When one is fluent in words, it

means that he or she possesses positive communicative skill, has articulated power and gives indications of intelligence.

In comparison, Japanese respondents view that fluent self-expression as less admirable. They consider fluency more negatively, for example, to show off, lack of respect of others, less trustworthy, as well as, a man with few words is perceived as a considerate, moderate person. They tend to believe that when talking, one should take the situation and context into consideration in order not to hurt someone's feelings. They do not see fluency as a communication skill that promotes openness.

Meanings conveyed by silence in public and private spheres

For the Japanese respondents, silence denotes more positive meanings e.g. harmony maintenance, deference in public sphere. The person they are talking with is the decisive factor in keeping quiet or voicing one's opinion, instead of the nature of the situation (formal or informal). Instead of viewing active talking is an indicator of a good relationship because people may have more mutual topics to share, in an established relationship, silence is a sign of understanding and comfort for the Japanese. When someone close is having a problem, remaining silent (*mimaori*, or keep a close watch in silence) appears to be another alternative for them to show concern to someone who is close to them.

When it comes to voicing opinions or showing emotions, a clear cut division relating to reserved attitude in public and a more relaxed behavior in the private sphere is apparent. Historical background and customs may be factors that cause them to be reserved in public, for example, Japanese insularity, the agriculturally based group-oriented spirit, uniformity e.g. doing the same as others (*yokonarabi*), not sticking out ostentatiously and respecting elders (Confucian influences) The respondents think that these kinds of social attitudes and requirements are further fostered and reinforced by the educational system.

Nevertheless, with the influence of other cultures, especially Western cultures, many Japanese believe that their attitudes are changing and people are becoming more expressive and outspoken, and the inevitable corollary of insufficient communication skills when in public seems to be on the rise. On the other hand, with the existence of the present social structure, a reserved attitude appears to be still valid and indirect expressions or euphemisms still to be needed. In addition, nonverbal cues such as actions, behavior, body language, gestures, and the atmosphere of a conversation ("*kūki*"), emerge as the crucial clues to maintaining quality communication.

On other aspects, some of the respondents think that the Japanese love of nature has advanced the development of using the five senses to feel and sense the beauty of nature and to observe human beings' behavior, and thus fewer words are used.

Another crucial point that can be discerned from the data is the different utility and meanings attached to the public sphere for both cultures. For the British, it appears that a public sphere is a place for participation, discussion, reflection and critical debate. Through these processes, public opinions, thoughts and decisions are determined and recognized. Thus, constructive opinions and active participation that require good communicative competence are highly valued in the process of discussion. In contrast, a public sphere for the Japanese is a place, not for debate or thought formation, but a place for decision announcement. This is to say, groundwork, or "*nemawashi*," has been done somewhere privately beforehand to discuss and achieve consensus among the people concerned in the decision-making process. The announcement of the decision in the public sphere is done merely for the purpose of formality Consequently, no debate or discussion is needed.

Another intriguing point which is worth noting from the results of the interviews is that the British younger generation is encouraged to speak out regardless of formal or informal situations. As a result, the division between public and private spheres seem to have blurred because they are not able to distinguish the difference between formal and informal situations. In contrast, in the Japanese society, the division between public and private spheres is very clear, for example, word choice for speech (e.g. appropriate honorific expressions) is determined by remembering one's position, and at the same time, considering the listeners' feelings and thoughts. However, an inclination toward indirect expression in order to get on well with people appears to be a point of convergence for both societies.

In formal situations, each group has some withdraw (hold back) at direct open disagreement in public, but within informal situations, the British group displays a significantly increasing tendency to allow open disagreement, while the Japanese would still be more careful at giving their opinions in informal situations, even among friends Open disagreement appears to be something the Japanese people generally try to avoid especially in the public sphere. They refuse to state opinions if they are with someone who is of higher status (e.g. senior or professor) It can be concluded that silence in public is very much dependent on place (public or private), person (hierarchical relationship), and the closeness of the relationship.

In the perspective of closeness, it seems to show that the stronger a relationship is, the more open and more direct people say that they will become. Both groups allow direct and open disagreement more than usual, especially when they are with family members or life partners.

However, it could be inferred that the Japanese have a stricter categorization on their definition of friends in a close relationship, which is quite different from the British groups who show a greater variety of level in friendship.

Emotional expression

More than the expression of internal feelings, emotions have been viewed as one of the essential aspects of communication and social processes. How these emotions are expressed or suppressed and used as a strategy of communication in a social context is in a large measure affected by culture.

When angry, rather than using physical reactions like shouting or swearing, the Japanese respondents are inclined to bottle up their emotions. When it comes to the expression of fear, the Japanese would rationalize the source of fear more than the British group. However, in sad situation, the Japanese would keep quiet and even suppress their joy when they are alone. But they have the tendency to share their happy emotions when someone is present.

For the Japanese, regardless of situation, to keep quiet or to express their opinions depends heavily on the character or personality of the person they are talking to. In addition, the function of harmony maintenance emerges as another effective element.

Unlike the Japanese, the influence of "the Age of Enlightenment" on British society continues to be effective; showing emotions in public is considered distasteful in particular It is said that there is more room for emotional expression in the private sphere but the tendency to hide feelings of fear and anger still exists. The belief that better educated people are less emotional appears to be valid for the British interviewees. From the viewpoint of communication, the British reserved appearance in public is more likely to be related to 1) emotional suppression and 2) social distance from others where a kind of unfriendliness or aloofness can be felt. In contrast, the Japanese appears to be deferential (e.g. respect). Silence is used with the intention of maintaining the status quo of the present relationship or to avoid saying something in public that could exacerbate the present situation. The discrepancy in meanings between both cultures

is obvious, as a tool of communication, the Japanese silence conveys a more positive connotation than the British do.

The causal factors of silence

Silent communication flourishes in Japan. This due to the Japanese belief in *kotodama* (the spirit of language) which indirectly influences them to be more careful in spoken language. Once a word is verbalized, it must be carried out. Thus, words that are not liable are to be shunned. This may explain why silence often speaks in many situations. One has to take the current situation/place, time, the relationship to the person spoken to into account when something is uttered. When they have something to say, they say it out clearly using spoken words to someone who is close to them, but will never utter something casually without giving deep thought and as a consequence silence occurs.

This has become the reason why they use spoken words as the last resort in problem solving. Thus, trust in spoken words can be equated to the valuation of silence as well. According to Yamamoto and Komuro (1981) in the book *Nihonkyō no shakai gaku* (Sociology of Japanese religion) Japanese people believe in the spirit of language which they term "*kotodama no shinkō* (the belief of the spirit of language)" (p.51). Japanese people are deprived of freedom of speech because of their belief in the inseparability of language from the character of the speaker This is based on the belief that what one utters will become reality For example, during a war, if someone says "Japan might be defeated by the enemy" (*nihon ga makeru no dewa nai ka*), the immediate response will be, "Japan was defeated because you said so"(*sM iu koto wo iu yatsu ga iru kara makerunda)* This *kotodama* possesses a kind of will power that silences the Japanese people absolutely to the extent that they avoid to say anything which connotes negative meanings , for example, "the ideology of peace" (*heiwa shugi*) is preserved by not mentioning war at all. Utterances that are presumed as being able to cause danger or spoil the status quo of a relationship or an atmosphere are not encouraged. In other words, to keep silent and not say anything about war that might cause an unpleasant consequence has become the substance of the ideology of peace (Yamamoto and Komuro 1981, pp.51-55).

This observation is in contrast to the British for whom language focuses on the information and the objective of an utterance rather than on the person and there is no attachment to *kotodama* of the language. For the

British, language is used to show facts or the direct correlation between cause and effect, logically and objectively

On the whole, the data shows that in the public sphere, the commonality to be derived from the observation of both cultures is that, to keep a reserved attitude is considered as a norm or something that is valued. To speak for the sake of speaking without taking into consideration others' status, feelings and situations is not the attitude valued in either of the two cultures. This might be due to the awareness of the social hierarchy where the Japanese have their *Tennō* (Emperor) and the British have their Queen above them, just as the Chinese proverb says, "there is always another higher mountain over a mountain." Based on this belief or awareness of "beyond oneself power exists," the Japanese and the British may not speak whatever they want freely with regard to places, persons and situations.

In the private sphere, the meanings of silence become more negative for both cultures. For the Japanese, however, the exception occurs in the case of a close relationship. When the closeness or intimacy of a relationship (particularly an opposite sex relationship) is established and the closer they are, the more mute they tend to become. To be able to appreciate and be comfortable with this type of silence, a non-Japanese should use more nonverbal communication, for example, to show appreciation by using something (actions or objects) to replace words would be more welcomed. We should be aware of the unusual silence of a person may convey signals that something has gone wrong (e.g. it could mean the person concerned is sad or frustrated).

The British recognized that the public sphere is a place where opinions are to be discussed and debated. In order to be able to participate in this public discourse, reasonable suggestions, constructive ideas, and innovative viewpoints are required and valued. If the British and their opinions possess none of those qualities, many of them would tend to keep quiet rather than say something for the sake of speaking. On the other hand, from the viewpoint of communication, the British reserved attitude in public sphere is more likely related to emotional suppression, to create social distance from others as a kind of unfriendliness or aloofness. This is why silence in a public sphere is sometimes perceived as showing fear and being uncomfortable. In this regard, it can be said that when talking to British people in the public sphere, silence should be avoided. If one possesses any constructive idea, one should voice it out confidently For the British people, the belief that better educated people are less emotional (the influence of Age of Enlightenment and social class awareness) appears to

be valid. Control of emotions in the public sphere, especially of anger and sadness, seems to be highly expected by the British society, particularly from men. However, women's emotional expression through physical action is common and more acceptable.

In the public sphere, the merging point between Japanese and British people concerning silence is that both cultures seem to have a positive perception of silence that is, it serves the purpose to maintain harmony in interpersonal communication, although the meanings attached to silence vary Japanese people feel comfortable with silence in public more than the British do.

The Japanese rarely display any physical agitation (e.g. throwing things or swearing) in front of people, and they prefer to keep silent when angry or experiencing happiness. Hence, extra care should be taken towards these two displays of emotion. To be able to think on one's feet and to possess an emotional empathetic feeling towards others are much more valued and expected by the Japanese society However, it should be remembered that sharing one's emotions in private through talking is only welcomed when one's relationship is established, otherwise, one should wait until the other party indicates a willingness to talk.

Conclusion

The findings shown in the questionnaire and the interview provide certain pointers, which may be useful to those who wish to understand the Japanese society In order to enhance better interpersonal and cross-cultural communication with the Japanese, substantial awareness of the multitude meanings and functions of silence should be observed to promote effective communication in various social contexts.

In the process of communication, Japanese silence as thus is seen as

1. *A means* for people to polish up one's communication skill without reliance upon nonverbal cues or verbal exchanges.
2. *A new venue* of meeting people to show public decency, personal courtesy.
3. *A place* for people to rearrange or reorganize one's thoughts, emotions internalize into the topic under discussion
4. *A space* for people to
    a)   sense and infer what went wrong or what happened.
    b)   infer certain situations or the ambience of air

5. *An opportunity* for people to
   a) give chance to other people to make their own decisions.
   b) discover about one's self-control, patience or tolerance.

Bibliography

Berger, Peter L. and Thomas Luckman. *The Social Construction of Reality A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge*. Harmondsworth. Penguin, 1966.

Bird, Isabella L. *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan*. Boston. Beacon Press, 1987

Bruneau, Thomas J "Communicative Silences: Forms and Functions." *Journal of Communication 23* (1973): 17-46.

Donahue, Ray T (1998). Japanese Culture and Communication. Critical Cultural Analysis. Lanham. University Press of America.

Gergen, K. J (1994) Reality and Relationships. Soundings in social construction. *Bulletin 2* pp 66-70.

Ishii, S., and T.J Bruneau. "Silence and Silences in Cross-Cultural Perspective: Japan and the United States." *Intercultural Communication. A Reader*, 5th ed. Eds. Larry A. Samovar Richard Porter. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company pp 310-15

Jaworski, Adam. (1993). *The Power of Silence. Social and Pragmatic Perspectives* London. Sage Publications.

Jensen, J Vernon (1973). "Communicative Functions of Silence." *ETC: Review of General Semantics 30/1* pp 249-257

Jones, Jeremy. (1999). "From Silence to Talk: Cross-Cultural Ideas on Students' Participation in Academic Group Discussion." *English for Specific Purposes 18/3*. pp 243-59

Lebra, T S (1987) "The Cultural Significance of Silence in Japanese Communication." *Multilingua 6/4*. pp 343-357

—. 1993 "Culture, Self, and Communication in Japan and the United States." *Communication in Japan and the United State*. Ed. W B. Gudykunst. Albany· State University of New York Press. pp 51-87

—. 1986. *Japanese Patterns of Behavior* Honolulu. University of Hawaii.

Sontag, Susan. (1966) "The Aesthestic of Silence." *Style of Radical Will* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 3-34.

—. "Thinking against Oneself: Reflection on Cioran." *Style of Radical Will* New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux. pp 74-95

Tannen, Deborah, and Muriel Saville-Troike. (1985). (eds) *Perspective on Silence*. Norwood. Ablex.

Yamamoto Shichihei and Kumuro Naoki. (1981). *Nihonkyō no*. Tokyo: Kōdansha.

Wong, N.L. (2005). *Communicative Silence in the Cybersociety of Japan*. Unpublished PhD Dissertation, Nagoya University, Japan.