

WHAT SILENCE SAYS: COMMUNICATIVE STYLE AND IDENTITY

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Abstract. Silence as used in interpersonal communication can be regarded an aspect of communicative style. Because of its ambiguity, silence is a rich medium of communication, but at the same time has a high potential for miscommunication, especially in intercultural encounters. The role of silence in Estonian communicative style is explored against the background of research in cross-cultural communication and a comparative study of attitudes towards silence in communication (conducted among Estonian and Canadian students as well as North American students visiting in Estonia). Attitudes towards silence in conversation are linked to dimensions of culture and constructs in social psychology. The relationship between changes in national identity and communicative style is examined. The use and appreciation of silence is identified as a valuable resource for both communication and identity, and in need of recognition by professional communicators.

Changes in society are inevitably accompanied by changes in how people interact, in their communicative behaviour (style). Communicative style can be explored from the two interrelated aspects of interaction and identity. These may be specified as intercultural communication and national/ethnic identity when focussing on a nationality or ethnic group. On the one hand, communication with interactants from different cultural backgrounds supplies knowledge about potential sources for the miscommunication that stems from discrepancies in the communicative behaviour of the two parties (and, not less significantly, offers information about the similarities that enhance mutual understanding). On the other hand, the culturally determined characteristics of communicative style may have implications for understanding and developing national identity.

For the Estonia of recent years international, and thus intercultural, communication has opened up vastly, the society and national identity have passed through transformations. Values, attitudes and beliefs have changed at a fast pace (cf. Lauristin and Vihalemm 1997). While Estonians are striving to

become part of, integrate into and be accepted by the rest of the world, notably the Western world, we are willing to change in order to fit in, to get trained and be educated. Determined to abandon the post-Soviet, we desire to embrace the European, sometimes the Scandinavian, perhaps even the Estonian, still never quite clear about what the labels designate. Research into how we speak and interact, especially with socio-cultural others serves not only the obvious pragmatic need of successful intercultural communication, but also a less tangible purpose of exploring our own identity, social and cultural development.

1. Communicative silence. Recent approaches

For a discussion of speech communication, silence may sound like an awkward starting point, even more so in the context of Estonia's present heightened need for (purposeful) communication with the rest of the world. However, silence may provide a flexible handle in grappling with the evasive notions of communicative style and its relationship with culture and identity once we recognise silence as part of, and not the opposite to, the communication process.

This view of silence characterises much of the recent writing on silence by linguists and communication researchers. The revival of interest in silence in linguistics (e.g., Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985, Schmitz 1990, Jaworski 1993, Jaworski 1997) originates from the general shift away from abstract, syntax-based linguistics towards interest in the actual use of language in communication. Also, the postmodern fuzziness of borderlines between traditional disciplines enhances the treatment of phenomena like silence that are hard to confine within one field of study.

Still another impulse for research may have come from the ever-growing deficit of silence. The 'bipolar' (Schmitz 1990) nature of silence calls for a remark here: modern urban life often suffers from the lack of the soothing, meditative and thought-inducing ('positive') silence, while at the same time creating forced-upon isolation between people, a 'negative' silence, which, in turn, needs to be filled by talk, often at the expense of the meaningfulness of the talk. Silence (and a slower-paced, relaxed, quiet way of communication) is seen as an endangered value in need of protection (cf. Scollon 1985).

Saville-Troike (1985:4) argues that "adequate description and interpretation of the process of communication requires that we understand the structure, meaning, and functions of silence as well as of sound". It should be added here that it is equally important *how* we understand them. Although a universal phenomenon, silence is not universally used or universally understood.

The main common link between speech and silence has been seen in the same discourse-interpretive processes that apply to both someone speaking or remaining silent (Jaworski 1993:3). Rejecting the 'figure and ground' metaphor for the relationship between speech and silence, Schmitz (1990/1996) claims silence is a constitutive element of human communication that has the same functions as

observed in language – syntactic (shapes sequences of speech), semantic (carries meaning), and pragmatic (organises social relationships).

The complete turn away from the view of silence as non-communication is perhaps best exemplified by the suggestion to see silence as a metaphor for communication (Jaworski 1997a). While there is an array of analyses of the metaphor from a multitude of vantage points, silence will be treated here as an aspect of the communicative style of a speech community.

The majority of research on silence in communication is cross-cultural, with an all-too-familiar pattern of sampling: the focus is on ethnic cultures markedly different from the mainstream Anglo-American cultural tradition (that of the researchers, very often), e.g., Athabascans, the Western Apache or other Indian nations (Scollon 1985, Basso 1972, Philips 1985); Nordic peoples (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1985, 1997, McCroskey et al. 1990), African tribes (Nwoye 1985), and, to a great extent, Asian cultures that have a longstanding tradition of cultivated silence. Also, cultural minorities such as the religious societies of the Old Order Amish and the Quakers (Enninger 1987, Bauman 1974/1989) have been researched for the role they attribute to silence.

Recently, the focus of comparison has shifted thanks to the participation of researchers with different ethnic backgrounds, e.g., Sifianou (1997) on English and Greek politeness systems, where England is seen as a more “silent” society. The variety of empirical studies testifies to the lack of a universal norm for the amount of silence/talk in interaction that cultures then diverge from or adhere to. Labels such as ‘silent’, ‘taciturn’, ‘talkative’ or ‘voluble’ can be meaningfully used only in a relative sense.

2. Dimensions of culture

In order to speak of the Estonians as a speech community with culturally determined speech behaviour, we need to specify the characteristic features of communicative style, and the common way to do this is by means of a contrastive study. Apart from folk-theories we do not have a solid database to lean on though attempts have been made to compare the communicative behaviour of Estonians to our close neighbours the Finns (cf. Pajupuu 1995) or Americans (Vogelberg 1995).

Since the beginning of the eighties the most exploited polarity-dimensions for comparing cultures have been **individualism-collectivism**¹ (Hofstede 1980), and the roughly parallel **low-** and **high context**, based on the prevailing low-or high context types of communication (Hall 1976).

As regards silence in communication, these dimensions have been characterised by Triandis (1994:184) as follows: in an individualist culture where

¹ See Realo (this volume) for an overview.

emphasis is on clear, explicit, and sender-oriented communication, silence “indicates disagreement, hostility, rejection, weakness, unwillingness to communicate, incompatibility, anxiety, shyness, lack of verbal skills, or a troubled person”. By contrast, in collectivistic high-context cultures the valued communication is implicit, much is unspoken and receiver- (perceiver-) oriented, “context is very important, and words are not taken at face value. Silence can mean being strong or powerful, feeling comfortable, or simply thinking there is nothing important to say” (op. cit. pp. 185–186). As Triandis (in Giles et al. 1992:225) suggests, individualists, who are not born into groups like the collectivists are, have to work hard to be accepted into a group, and for that reason, they “speak more, try to control the situation verbally, and do not value silence”. However, this view can be compared to the by now rejected (mis)understanding of individualism and collectivism – as there can be no unidimensional polarities of individualist and collectivist cultures, there can be no one meaning attributed to silence in any one culture without considering contextual or situational factors.

The use and interpretation of silence across cultures illustrates the non-linear relationship between individual and societal dimensions of culture, and the non-existence of sharp polarities (e.g., East-West, collectivist-individualist). If we used a hypothetical silence-talk scale for measuring attitudes towards talking and being silent in different cultures, then proceeding from the distinction made by Triandis, we should locate the ‘taciturn’ cultures to the collectivist, and the ‘loquacious’ cultures to the individualist end of the scale. While some of the cultures contrasted with the mainstream Western/Anglo culture as more ‘silent’ can be characterised as collectivist (e.g. Indian, Amish), the Nordic cultures (e.g. Swedes) have been seen as quiet and valuing silence, yet according to Hofstede (1980) they are among the most individualistic.

More helpful than Hofstede’s initial dimensions are later conceptualisations of collectivism, e.g., hierarchical collectivism with society-, peer- and family-related subtypes (see, e.g., Allik and Realo 1996). Different groups within a society may display different individualistic/collectivistic attitudes with regard to these subtypes. These subtypes also conform to the clearly marked differences in tolerance /use of silence in interaction with strangers, friends and family members.

Recently, studies have tried to locate Estonia within the culture dimensions, e.g., Allik and Realo (1996), Realo, Allik and Vadi (1997), Realo and Allik (in press) in social psychology research; Pajupuu (1995) more speculatively on the basis of communicative behaviour. Estonians have been seen as individualists, or becoming more individualistic in their values (cf. Lauristin and Vihalemm 1997). See also Realo (this volume), for a comprehensive treatment of collectivism research in Estonia and its controversial aspects.

The causes for change in values held by the Estonians outlined by Vihalemm (1997:225) are “western entertainment industry” and “increasing consumerism of

the transitional society". As is the case with values, the changes in communicative style can be attributed to these two factors, perhaps substituting 'entertainment industry' with a broader notion of Western (Anglo-American) influence, especially in professional communication. The traditional Estonian understanding that talking a lot usually means 'empty' talk, still valued by the older generation, is popularly seen as being replaced by the younger generations' appreciation of 'communicative skills' involving assertiveness and verbal fluency, as these are very often features that are in high demand on the job-market. However, there is no research that would support these claims or systematically link changes in communicative style to social changes (e.g., towards individualism). Also, more subtle characteristics of culture than individualism/collectivism may have to be utilised to analyse the transition period in Estonia.

3. Cultural attitudes towards talk and silence. Miscommunication

Almost any writing concerning itself with "culture" in any sense has to revert to the defining of the term at some point. Kramsch (1995) juxtaposes two definitions of culture, that of the humanities (the way a social group represents itself and the others) and that of the social sciences, where shared attitudes and beliefs, ways of thinking and behaving become central. Speaking of culturally determined features of communicative behaviour we also speak of the attitudes and value judgements that in turn are constructed through language. According to Kramsch: "Culture in the final analysis is always linguistically mediated membership into a discourse community".

Giles et al. (1992:224) comment about the cultural differences in beliefs about talk that these 'are not due to culture *per se* but to belief dimensions on which cultures vary'. This notion has led to research into actual differences regarding people's beliefs about talk. Wiemann, Chen and Giles (1986, cited in Giles et al., 1992) report fundamental intercultural differences:

Caucasian Americans tend to use talk for affiliative purposes, for entertainment, and to fill silences which they find stressful. Easterners, on the other hand, appear to tend to use talk primarily for instrumental purposes, and when there is nothing specific to say, remain in comfortable silence (1992:220).

These differences may easily lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication situations. Several scholars (e.g., Deen 1995) have criticised the social psychology approach to linguistic phenomena and the study of beliefs and values by means of survey questionnaires. A conversation-analysis type of study of actual interaction is considered more fruitful in identifying problems in intercultural communication.

However, an understanding of values and attitudes underlying the speech behaviour of a community can supply a valuable background to the micro-analytic analyses of interaction, especially in the case of rapid social change within a

community. It is obvious that the attitudes and beliefs people express about their own speech behaviour need not correspond to their actual behaviour. Still, the benefit from the study of these attitudes can be two-fold: on the one hand, as the opinions and beliefs will probably operate in the assessment of the partners in interaction, we can trace the origins of intercultural stereotyping. On the other hand, they might provide insight into the ideal 'model' of communication that people would like to see themselves following. Both these aspects, if viewed from an intercultural communication viewpoint, can help to identify possible sources of miscommunication.

Miscommunication is an ubiquitous phenomenon, by no means limited to communication across (cultural) borders. As Coupland et al. (1991:3) put it: "Language use and communication are in fact pervasively and even intrinsically flawed, partial, and problematic". The problems are increased when there is a lack of shared sociopragmatic background (even if the linguistic code is shared) that serves the function of smoothing the flawed and partial process of information exchange. Because of its ambiguity, silence is especially vulnerable to misinterpretations. As the meaning of silence is "derived by convention within particular speech-communities" (Saville-Troike 1985:10) interpretations may result in cross-cultural misunderstandings. Apart from the fact that silence depends more on context than talk does, the quantity of speech versus silence may be interpreted differently, e.g. 'friendliness', 'sincerity' or 'honesty' may have culturally different expressions in terms of speech and silence (op.cit.: 11). Enninger (1987:297) concludes that silences or 'non-phonations' are "particularly treacherous 'sign material' because they are not even suspected of carrying a sign, and thus not expected to vary across cultures 'neither materially, nor semantically, nor pragmatically'".

Coupland et al. (1991:13) distinguish six levels of analysis of miscommunication (according to the characteristics attributed to miscommunication):

1. "discourse and meaning transfer are inherently flawed;
2. strategic compromise, minor misunderstandings or misreadings;
3. presumed personal deficiencies;
4. goal-referenced; control, affiliation, identity and instrumentality in normal interactions;
5. group/cultural differences in linguistic/ communication norms;
6. ideological framings of talk; socio-structural power imbalances"

Silence as a source of miscommunication can be located on the higher levels (3-6), of the Coupland et al. model. On level 3, e.g., "unwillingness to communicate" (1991:14) may lead to "down-graded evaluations of misperforming participants" (Ibid.). This aspect is common in intercultural encounters between representatives of cultures that value talk at the expense of silence and those that do not. Silence can also be used as a strategy to achieve a conversational goal (level 4), and, when failing to achieve it, result in miscommunication. At level 5, cultural beliefs and norms concerning silence play a crucial role. But

miscommunication at this level, as Coupland et al. point out, can “offer a dimension for the positive socialisation and acculturation of speakers” and repair of miscommunication at this level is “by understanding of social processes rather than by improving skills, by learning rather than training” (Ibid.).

On the ‘ideological analysis’ level, silence can be seen as an attribute of socially disadvantaged groups, or, interculturally, of a culture of a less powerful (economically, politically) nation. Silence can be interpreted as an attribute of a subordinated group. Estonians as a nation were silenced during the Soviet regime in many ways, thus this aspect can give silence a negative connotation for us at this level.

Scollon and Scollon claim that when the misunderstanding is “out of awareness, it is not corrected but directly interpreted” (1983:158). Therefore, it has a high potential for giving rise to negative attitudes towards the misunderstood party in interaction (Weizman and Blum-Kulka 1992). Enninger (1987:273) outlines the ‘faulty interactant’ – ‘faulty person’ – ‘faulty people’ stereotyping routine as a result of miscommunication in a case of “an inter-cultural clash” between differences in the use of silence.

A native English-speaker has referred to her experience in interacting with Estonians as characterised by two problems, the first one being a ‘purely linguistic’ problem ‘due to forcing English to behave like Estonian’ (Kallas, 1995:54). Most certainly, any miscommunications resulting from this problem would be negotiated and clarified on the spot. She describes her second problem as follows:

The second is pervasive and hard to define, as the English person gets to know Estonians better, it is as though relationships keep dropping into a black hole. The words are right but the messages do not seem to be getting through. The English person starts asking questions, reaching out into the deep reserve of an Estonian to find out why promises given or questions asked seem to disappear. (1995:54)

Significantly, Kallas (1995) proceeds to specify silence as one of the puzzling Estonian conversational features. Cultural differences in the use of silence are probably one of the factors that contribute to her ‘second problem’.

4. Kommunikationsbund

The close neighbours of the Estonians, the Finns, are known for their ‘silent character’ (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1985 1997). It would be tempting to see Estonians and Finns as similar in their communicative style, drawing on the similarities in language. Clyne (1994:198), however, warns against such conclusions. He argues that culture rather than language determines discourse patterns. Historically, there are deeply-rooted differences in the development of culture and in the external influences experienced in Estonia and Finland. At the

same time, the countries are close geographically and linguistically, and certain 'Finno-Ugrian' communication patterns can be traced in both cultures, silence and slow pace being the most notable among these. Pajupuu (1995) compares Estonian and Finnish communicative behaviour, but as her aim is to bring forward the differences to warn against assuming sameness on the basis of linguistic similarity, the comparison over-emphasises differences and would benefit from including data from a third group, against which the similarities between Estonian and Finnish communication would stand out.

Clyne (1994:29) has used the term *Kommunikationsbund* (following Neustupny 1978) to refer to languages/ cultures with common communicative features within an area. He claims that "people from cultures on the periphery of a cultural area (e.g. Indonesians, Filipinos, Maltese) are often among the good inter-cultural communicators, because their own discourse patterns are more 'open'" (1994:204). From the hypothetical 'Finno-Ugrian *kommunikationsbund*' viewpoint, Estonia is certainly peripheral while Finland is more central. The Estonians may have some characteristics of the 'Silent Finn', but also more flexibility to open up their silence. While the openness is a strength in regard to successful communication with the others, it may prove a weakness with respect to identity, especially during social upset and transformation.

Another *kommunikationsbund* that could be put forward concerning some aspects of communication behaviour is that of 'post-Communist' or 'post-Soviet' states/cultures that would group Estonians with East Europe and /or former Soviet republics. The basis for this grouping would be patterns of behaviour induced by the experiences under the Soviet occupation, by the socialist society and Soviet Russian 'cultural imperialism' on the one hand, and subsequent aversion to these influences accompanied by an increased susceptibility to Western (American) 'cultural imperialism' on the other.

These 'groupings', however arbitrary on the diverse background of actual behaviours, are operative at least in the popular stereotyping. A British teacher (of Estonian descent) sharing her experiences as a lecturer at an Estonian university remarks that she has "come to understand, respect, and like the Finno-Ugric silence" (Kallas 1995: 61). At the same time, several émigré Estonians settled in the Anglo-American cultural environment have characterised the relative silence of Estonians in Estonia, often seen as verbal clumsiness, communicative incompetence, or outright lack of manners, as a legacy of the Soviet era. Silence, alongside with, for example, avoidance of eye-contact is interpreted as distrust, dishonesty or even hostility.

Thus the interpretation of the Estonian communicative style can depend on what *Kommunikationsbund* is assumed.

5. Estonians and Canadians about silence: a cross-cultural study

The implications that the norms for using talk and silence could be different for Estonians and native speakers of the English language were empirically tested in my cross-cultural study involving Estonian, Canadian and American participants.

Sifianou (1997) while comparing “societies” or “cultures” on the basis of the place of silence, conceptualises silence as “associated with the appropriate amount and type of talk in the particular context rather than complete absence of talk”. In my questionnaire², and interview study, a similar approach to silence was taken, allowing the participants to interpret silence freely, depending on context, e.g., as a noticeable pause or a less-than-expected amount of talk in interaction. The data for comparative analysis were collected from Canadian students at the University of Saskatchewan in 1995, from Estonian students and from visiting North American students at the University of Tartu in 1996.

5.1. Procedure

The respondents in the Canadian group were undergraduates from the College of Education at the University of Saskatchewan (N = 72) and in the Estonian group from the departments of English (the majority of respondents) and psychology at Tartu University (N = 46). These samples were estimated to be comparable since the majority of participants in both groups were future teachers, both universities are of comparable size and are located in a university town of approximately the same size and administrative position.³ The respondents in the Estonian group were considered to have a good command of the English language and considerable knowledge of Anglo-American culture as they were either majoring in English or advanced learners in English language classes.

In Estonia, the questionnaire was also administered to a group of rural schoolteachers (N = 22) who participated in a requalification programme at the University of Tartu. This group was estimated to differ from the student group not only by age, but by their knowledge of the English language (beginners through intermediate levels) and Anglo-American cultural background. In previous research, beliefs about talk/silence have been found to differ intergenerationally (Giles, Coupland and Wiemann 1992).

² The Silence and Talk questionnaire was modelled after the BaT (Beliefs about Talk) instrument developed by Giles, Coupland and Wiemann (1992). The first part concentrated on silence in conversation (silence vs talk), the second part on the so-called environmental silence (silence vs noise). The third part of the questionnaire (open-ended question) requested the respondents to describe a situation where they would feel uncomfortable with pauses in conversation, and another situation where pauses in conversation would not disturb them.

³ The gender ratio was :Can: M-25, F-42; Est: M-4, F-42. The samples were tested as to gender effects. These were found not to interact significantly with cross-cultural comparison, except in case of item 7 (silence and family members) and are not discussed here.

The respondents were administered the Silence and Talk questionnaire for take-home and the questionnaires were collected by the researcher or returned to the researcher in approximately a week's time. The Estonian respondents were randomly administered questionnaires in English and in Estonian.⁴

The respondents were asked to indicate their agreement with the questionnaire items on a 5-point Likert scale (1 – strongly agree, 2 – agree, 3 – do not know/neutral, 4 – disagree, 5 – strongly disagree). In the open-ended question part the respondents were instructed to either report a real encounter or describe a potential situation.

Initially, a version of the questionnaire was designed in English⁵ and later translated into Estonian. The Estonian variant was back-translated by two experts and after minor revisions was estimated to correspond well to the English-language original. However, results for the people who responded in both languages suggest that there may have been slight differences left. These variations were detected only in the case of a few items, the overall variation may still be considered too small to affect the cross-cultural comparisons significantly.

Interviews were conducted with participants from the Canadian sample, from the Estonian sample and with an additional sample of North-American visiting students at Tartu University. The purpose of the interviews with the respondents to the questionnaire (N = 6 in Canada, 4 in Estonia), was to obtain additional information about beliefs and attitudes towards silence and validate the questionnaire results. The main aim of the interviews with the Americans in Estonia (N = 6, this sample did not participate in the questionnaire) was to obtain information about Estonians as communicators, and to focus on differences in the communicative styles and possible misunderstandings or problems the visiting students might have experienced in Estonia.

The tape-recorded interviews were analysed, noting and transcribing the most clear descriptions of observed differences in cultural patterns of communication.

The open-ended (paragraph-writing) part of the questionnaire was analysed with a coding scheme of situations that emerged from the data itself.

5.2 Results

The results of the survey questionnaire suggested that although there are universal beliefs and opinions about silence (e.g. silence is usually uncomfortable with strangers and indicates a problem in communication, while silences with

⁴ The order of languages was randomised to minimise the test-retest effect on the language factor. On returning the completed questionnaire, the Estonian group were asked to complete the questionnaire again but in a different language, so that the participants who had first filled out an English-language variant, were given one in the Estonian language the second time and vice versa. 20 respondents completed the questionnaire in both languages.

⁵ The initial variant of the questionnaire was piloted on six Canadian students who were asked to supply comments on clarity of item wording. Minor changes in wording the items were made after the pilot.

close people usually do not disturb, and can be a sign of closeness and affection), in a number of cases attitudes towards silence-related conversational behaviours appear to differ according to cultural 'norms'. Estonians⁶ are much more likely than Canadians to believe some things should not be talked about (see Table 1, item 2), while Estonians are less likely to initiate conversations (item 15), attribute negative characteristics to untalkative people (4) or feel uncomfortable with silences in conversation with family members (7). In this survey, the Estonian respondents appeared more tolerant of silence both in conversations with friends and strangers (see discussion of open-ended questions below). Alongside with the greater tolerance of silence, the Estonian sample demonstrated a more explicit belief in the informative vs. social function of talk, e.g., the Estonians were more likely than the Canadians to believe in solving interpersonal problems through talking (21). Apart from the possible discrepancies in wording caused by translation, in case of item 27, the fact that Canadians were less likely to want to talk to someone when depressed could point to more explicitly social function of talk for them.

In order to investigate the possible effect of age (generation) on beliefs about silence, a group of Estonian schoolteachers (N = 22, mean age 37, the 'Old Est' group) was included in the study. In comparison with the Canadian student sample, the older group expressed even more clearly the attitudes that characterised the Estonian student group (N = 47, mean age 21) in comparison with Canadians, e.g., some topics should not be talked about, reluctance to initiate conversation, believe in solving problems by talking (see Table 2).

However, when the older sample was separately compared to Estonian students writing in Estonian and in English, it appeared that in the comparison with the students writing in English there were two times as many differences as there were in the comparison with students writing in their mother-tongue. Thus, (and because of the small sample sizes) no conclusions can be drawn about generation differences in communicative style.

The responses to open-ended questions were coded according to the situations mentioned (participants, setting, topic). So far, only preliminary observations (see Table 3) can be reported. Generally, the Canadian students' responses to the open-ended questions were shorter and more concise in wording than the Estonians'. They also seemed to be more uniform with regard to the (social) situations mentioned (e.g. job interview, date), while the Estonians' responses concerned more varied personal experiences, often in the forms of 'stories'. This could point to the stronger social conventions about using talk and silence for Canadians as compared to the Estonians.

⁶ In this discussion, 'Estonians', 'Canadians', 'North Americans' denote the student samples from these populations that participated in the study with no further claims for generalization.

Table 1

Canadian sample (CAN) and Estonian student sample writing in Estonian (EST EST) compared in an individual samples t-test. ($p = .05$, $*p = .10$)

Variable	Mean	SD	2-Tail Sig
1.I believe that most people are afraid of conversational silences in this society			
CAN	1.9420	.873	0.063*
EST EST	2.2903	.824	0.060
2. There are some topics I feel should not be talked about.			
CAN	3.3235	1.227	.002
EST EST	2.4848	1.302	.003
4. I think that untalkative people are boring.			
CAN	3.5147	.889	.009
EST EST	4.0000	.791	.007
7. I feel comfortable with silences in conversation with my family members.			
CAN	1.9286	1.196	.060*
EST EST	1.4848	.870	.036
15. I take responsibility for breaking the ice by talking when I meet someone.			
CAN	2.3571	.964	.000
EST EST	3.1515	1.004	.000
17.I prefer to be silent to arguing in a conversation when I do not agree with the others.			
CAN	3.2609	1.291	.034
EST EST	3.7879	.820	.014
19. I prefer to be silent when I do not agree with a professor			
CAN	3.1571	1.150	.001
EST EST	2.3939	.966	.001
21. I think that all conflicts between people can be solved by talking about the problem.			
CAN	2.4143	1.280	.109*
EST EST	2.0000	1.061	.088
22. I believe women are more quiet than men.			
CAN	3.4857	.944	.028
EST EST	3.9091	.805	.021
27. When I am depressed I do not feel like talking to anyone.			
CAN	2.5143	1.260	.008
EST EST	3.2121	1.139	.007
28. I think men are more comfortable with pauses in conversation than women			
CAN	3.1429	.889	.046
EST EST	2.7879	.696	.031
III. When I am alone, I usually turn on the TV or radio			
CAN	2.1143	1.186	.008
EST EST	2.8182	1.334	.012
II3 I need silence to be able to concentrate.			
CAN	2.2286	1.169	.052*
EST EST	1.7879	.781	.026

Table 2

Age groups. Canadian Student (N = 70) and Older Estonian (Teacher) Sample (N = 22) compared

Item	Group	Mean	SD	2-Tail Sign
1. I believe that most people are afraid of conversational silences in this society	Can	1.9420	1.873	.015
	Old Est	2.4545	.739	.010
2. There are some topics I feel should not be talked about	Can	3.3235	1.227	.000
	Old Est	2.0909	1.151	.000
4. I think that untalkative people are boring	Can	3.5147	.889	.004
	Old Est	4.1364	.774	.003
13. Silences in a conversation usually mean breakdown of communication	Can	3.8429	1.879	.001
	Old Est	3.0909	1.019	.004
15. I take responsibility for breaking the ice by talking when I meet someone	Can	2.3571	.964	.013
	Old Est	2.9545	.950	.015
18. I feel uncomfortable when I do not get a chance to participate in the conversation.	Can	2.5857	1.028	.028
	Old Est	3.1364	.941	.025
21. I think that all conflicts between people can be solved by talking about the problem.	Can	2.4143	1.280	.092
	Old Est	1.9091	.971	.056
28. I think men are more comfortable with pauses in conversation than women	Canadian	3.1429	.889	.002
	Old Est	2.5000	.673	.001

Table 3

Responses to open-ended questions about situations where silences would be comfortable/uncomfortable

Situations characterised by:	Number of times mentioned	
	CAN	EST
Uncomfortable silences	45	41
strangers	10	12
semi-strangers	7	11 (incl foreigner, friend's friend)
new people (just met)	5	2
conflict situation	7	5
physical setting	car	bus, lift, car, plane, party
interview	6	-
date	8	1
Comfortable silences	26	37
family, friends, close people	23	29
strangers, new people	-	9
need to think	2	6
emotional situation	2	-

5.3. Discussion

The features of a “silent character” outlined by Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997) that were explicit in the Estonians’ responses and interviews with Americans, were the following:

1. ‘You speak only if you have got something to say’. Even in situations with strangers which usually are most uncomfortable for silences, Estonians reported not being disturbed by silence if it is mutually clear that there is nothing to talk about. The most notable difference between the samples is the absence of ‘comfortable silences’ with strangers in the Canadian group, while the Estonian students expressed the idea that ‘when it’s clear there is nothing to be talked about, it is better to be silent’ or that they were disturbed ‘when strangers should start talking to each other in a public place, e.g., at the dentist’s door.’ In the interviews the North American students singled out that the ‘really proficient small-talkers’ they had met in Estonia were all people who had lived abroad (Western Europe, the U.S.) for some time.

2. ‘Social silence’, i.e., ‘unwillingness to appear in public’ was also exemplified by several responses by the Estonian participants, e.g., in a group setting talk was seen as a compulsion. If there were more than two people talking, one respondent wrote, he/she would be comfortable with silence ‘as there are other people who share the compulsion of breaking that silence’. ‘Uncomfortable silences’ for Estonians were also connected with their (perceived) inability to express themselves in public, or in a foreign language.

3. ‘Passive information gathering in new and unknown situations’. This strategy of uncertainty and anxiety reduction is contrasted with the typical American principle of talking a good deal to induce further talk from the interactant. People in high-context cultures are more cautious in initial encounters (Gudykunst 1983). The North American visiting students reported it was extremely difficult for them to find contact with Estonians. The reason they suggested was ‘Americans being intimidating as a group’ or lack of knowledge of foreign languages. The difference in strategies in initial interactions might lead to misinterpretations: those who talk to reduce uncertainty (e.g. Americans) can be seen as intrusive and selfish by those who do not. Those who observe, and even keep silent, (e.g., Estonians, Nordics) may be perceived as apprehensive, incompetent or even hostile. Also, some Estonians, but no Canadians reported not being disturbed by silence with new acquaintances, “when it is not clear yet, what to talk about”. At the same time, a Canadian wrote: “For some reason I feel that we should always be talking /when meeting someone new/ in order to get to know one another” – although quite a number of Estonians reported feeling uncomfortable silences with someone new, they did not express such feeling of compulsion.

4. ‘Respecting the other party’s privacy’. In responses to open-ended questions, the concern for not being intrusive was expressed. Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997) propose ‘tolerance of *talk*’ as a ‘correct measuring-stick’ for countries in Asia and

Scandinavia (as opposed to the anglocentric 'tolerance of silence'. In interactions with strangers, 'tolerance of talk' rather than 'tolerance of silence' seems to be the measure for Estonians as well. An Estonian respondent: (While hitch-hiking and trying to keep up a conversation in the car) "there is a feeling as if you were, so to say, an invader, trespassing on the driver's property of privacy". However, respecting the private space may become a problem with people "who do not want that respect"(as reported in an interview by an American).

5. At the fifth point – 'It is typical of Finns to respect the other person's opinion' – the results of the present work seem to diverge somewhat from the Finnish observation. In the questionnaire, Estonians denied they would prefer to be silent in a conversation if they disagreed with others, while the Canadian result was in the opposite direction. It should be emphasised that the conversation was specified as a conversation with friends. Estonians express their own viewpoint even if it contradicts the others', when they are interacting with friends, whereas conflict avoidance is common among American friends (an example of peer-related collectivism).

6. Embarrassability, self-disclosure and competence

6.1. Embarrassability

Related to attitudes towards silence and talking behaviour in general, are embarrassability and self-disclosure. As proposed by Singelis and Sharkey (1995:636), there is a "curvilinear relationship between social distance or intimacy and embarrassability". meaning that with close in-groups (family members) as well as with socially distant others embarrassability should be low. Situations where there is modest social distance, like an unknown member of in-group (distant relatives, co-workers in large company) the potential for embarrassability may be the greatest.

Following their theory, Singelis and Sharkey argue that individualist cultures, such as mainland US, "emphasise independence from one's social groups" and that it is natural for members of such cultures to "become resistant to others' evaluations, and hence, embarrassability" (ibid).

It should be plausible to suggest then that silence occurring in a conversation would cause less embarrassment for an American, but it would be more of a problem for someone from a more collectivistically oriented culture. Actually, the cultural norms about how much silence is embarrassing and when, play a more important role.

A universal claim that found support in my study is that silences are comfortable in close and secure relationships, and uncomfortable in uncertain and insecure situations involving strangers (social distance) or hierarchical relations (social power). This universal rule varies with respect to how much silence or talk is considered the norm among strangers or in close relationships.

Thus the curvilinear relationship for embarrassing silences in conversation generally holds true, though with cultural variations. More Estonians than Canadians reported that they are not uncomfortable with silences with someone they do not know very well or a stranger - as the relationship between politeness and silence is different, hence the norm for embarrassment (resulting from possible impolite readings of silence) also differs. It is most obvious that in Canada where social talk and avoidance of silence are more a politeness norm than in Estonia, people should feel more embarrassment when not able to follow the politeness norm. Silence as face-threatening and embarrassing was emphasised by Canadians, as several participants mentioned a first date as the most uncomfortable context for silence.

6.2. *Self-disclosure*

Silence can be related to self-disclosure, when we think of the content-silence, when, where and what should be talked about.⁷ As culture is manifested in an individual's communication patterns, it contributes to self-disclosure and a greater depth of self-disclosure is associated with people from non-Western cultures while greater amounts of self-disclosure are associated with Americans (Chen 1995).

According to Gudykunst (1983), self-disclosure along with interrogation is among the strategies to reduce uncertainty in initial encounters. As he points out, this notion is entirely based on research in the U.S. and cross-cultural studies of initial interactions need not confirm these patterns. The Canadian participants in my study often singled out 'meeting someone for the first time' as an occasion where they would talk a lot, and silence would be embarrassing.

6.3. *Competence*

On the background of modern international professional communication (based on the Utilitarian discourse system, cf. Scollon and Scollon 1995) silence in conversation is often seen as communicative (and perhaps professional) incompetence. However, the silence/talk relationship in conversation cannot always be related to competence, as it depends on cultural factors.

In a cross-cultural study by McCroskey et al (1990), Swedes reported they were less prone to initiate communication, but saw themselves as more competent communicators than Americans did. This paradoxical result was explained in terms of different emphasis placed on verbal communication skills in the two cultures. In American schools and colleges, unlike Swedish (or Estonian) schools, verbal performance is much more important. Also, a huge body of research on speech anxiety exists in America, whereas in Sweden quietness and reticence are

⁷ Self-disclosure has been defined as "the process of making the self known" (Jourard and Lasakow, in Chen 1995) and the process of self-disclosure is "the process of communication through self-disclosive messages" (Wheless and Grotz *ibid.*).

considered individual differences rather than problems (Daun, in McCroskey et al, 1990). Therefore, the cultural *expectations* of higher communication competence might have made American students feel less competent than their Swedish peers. Pajupuu's (1995) high assessment of the Estonians' communicative competence compared to the Finnish, may also be influenced by comparatively lower expectations of verbal skills, rather than of a more positive national self-attitude as claimed by the author. These lower expectations, along with rapid economic/political success give rise sometimes to overly strong self-confidence of Estonians in intercultural (professional) encounters that may decrease sensitivity to possible miscommunication. The attitudes of the early 1990s were certainly induced by the political situation; the high tide of nationalism and optimism will probably give way to more realistic self-assessment.

7. Attitude reporting in different languages. Link to identity

In the study reported above the question of the effects of language environment on communication style was also raised, as the Estonian participants filled in the questionnaire in both English and Estonian. The results in English were expected to attest to transfer of first language strategies and style in attitude reporting. However, some results did not corroborate the transfer hypothesis on the attitude level. While looking for an explanation, the relationship between communication and national identity surfaced.

The data for the discussion were supplied by two statistical tests. First, 20 Estonians responded to the TandS questionnaire in two languages. Their English-language responses were more in the direction of talkativeness in case of items with a direct reference to conversation behaviour. Also, the responses to some items (2, 15, 27 and 7 – see Table 4) in the English-language questionnaires resembled the responses of the Canadian group to these items, so that the Estonians appeared more 'Canadian-like' in their English-language responses and more 'Estonian' when responding in their mother-tongue.

Second, the comparison of the English-language responses of Estonians (N = 28) and Canadian responses (N = 70) yielded 8 significant differences (compared to 14 in the Estonian language/Canadian test, see Table 1 above), e.g., in the following responses (with group means):

2. There are some topics I feel should not be talked about.

CAN 3.31

EST ENG 2.79

3. In general, I feel comfortable talking to a stranger

CAN 2.65

EST ENG 2.27

16. I feel uncomfortable when strangers tell me about their personal life.

CAN 3.01

EST ENG	3.72
II2. I often wish I could be in a more quiet place	
CAN	2.70
EST ENG	3.21
II3 I need silence to be able to concentrate	
CAN	2.11
EST ENG	2.68

the Estonians expressed views on talk/silence that were closer to the Canadian than to the Estonian-language responses, with the effect of appearing even more uncomfortable with silences and more 'communicative' than the Canadians.

Table 4

Means of EST EST (responses in Estonian) and EST ENG (responses in English) paired - samples t-test .N = 20. p = .05,* p = .10

2. There are some topics I feel should not be talked about	EST EST	2.221
	EST ENG	2.774
12. I have positive feelings toward people who, in general, talk a lot	EST EST	2.712
	EST ENG	3.071
13. Silences in a conversation usually mean breakdown of communication	EST EST	4.214
	EST ENG	3.785
15. I take responsibility for breaking the ice by talking when I meet someone	EST EST	3.071
	EST ENG	2.571
25. I think it is impolite to do all the talking in a conversation and not give others a chance to speak.	EST EST	1.357
	EST ENG	1.643
27. When I am depressed I do not feel like talking to anyone	EST EST	3.361
	EST ENG	2.861
7. I feel comfortable with silences in conversation with my family members*	EST EST	1.432
	EST ENG	1.861
9. I believe that one always communicates most effectively through talking.*	EST EST	3.072
	EST ENG	3.243

The reasons here can be multiple: one being that the encounters possibly retrieved while filling in the questionnaire were those involving the use of English, e.g., those with English-speaking people that most likely are with strangers or peers, and less likely intimate relaxed situations where silence would be normal and pauses not disturbing.

Another possible explanation is that the English language in the instrument evokes also the communication strategies common for the language. Scollon and Scollon (1995) claim that inherent to the English language is the Anglo-American discourse system, including communicative style. By the young Estonians participating in the study this style may be regarded as desirable and a model to be followed. Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997) have commented about Finland that it is considered important to be similar to the representatives of what is regarded as 'mainline international culture' and 'national' characteristics are seen as handicaps.

Similar labelling of some communicative behaviour as 'better' or 'communicatively more suitable' (Sajavaara and Lehtonen, *ibid.*) is most certainly true of Estonia as well. And 'mainline international culture' reaches Estonia (as well as many other countries around the world) almost exclusively via the English language.

According to the Accommodation Theory (e.g. Giles and Smith 1979) people adjust their speech in order to express their values and intentions to their interlocutors. The change in the speaker's speech style is a reaction to the style of the interlocutor. The change may be either *convergence* – a move towards the interlocutor's style – or *divergence* (a shift away).

The Silence and Talk questionnaire results suggest that Estonians converge, at least in their attitudes, towards their English-speaking interlocutors'. The extent of actual convergence needs to be further studied. Currently, social exchange theory⁸ seems to be a valid explanation of shifting style, as the rewards are often seen to outweigh the costs of shifting towards the other's way of speaking and interacting. Job interviews with native English-speakers as gatekeepers or business negotiations with more powerful international partners are clear examples. Similarity-attraction is also effective as a result of influences from the entertainment-industry.

As Gudykunst and Schmidt point out, values influence the nature of accommodation that occurs, and language itself influences accommodation (1988:8).⁹

Libben and Lindner (1996) in their discussion of SLA (second-language acquisition) and SCA (second culture acquisition) observe that "in speaking a

⁸ Beebe and Zuengler (1983:202) describe Accommodation Theory as encompassing four social psychological theories: similarity-attraction, social exchange, causal attribution, and intergroup distinctiveness.

⁹ They refer to a study by John, Young, Giles and Hofman (1984) who found that Arabs and Jews in Israel differentiate in-group values from out-group values more when tested in Hebrew than when tested in English. Banks (1988) observed that minorities must accommodate to the majority in their discourse before access to power positions becomes available to them and San Antonio (1987) found the same about the Japanese in an American corporation.

second language individuals can often switch to cultural understandings which would otherwise contradict their first culture concepts."¹⁰

However, Giles, Coupland and Wiemann report an opposite result from the studies by Michael Bond and associates (Bond 1983, Yang and Bond 1980) that

requiring Cantonese students to complete a questionnaire in English can actually induce them to affirm their values and become culturally more Chinese than when the same questionnaire is completed in their in-group language (1992:225.)

In my study, the possible intergroup comparison did not urge the Estonians to emphasise the characteristic cultural traits that were present in the first-language responses, but rather the traits that are employed in (or considered more fit to) intergroup (intercultural) communication in the English language.

Generally, the popular stereotype of the American style of communication has not been held in high esteem by Estonians, because it contradicts the values and corresponding norms of behaviour Estonians have held traditionally, and also those that have been imposed on them during recent history. Recent political and economical changes, however, have affected old value systems, especially in the case of younger generations.

Vogelberg (1995:51) has analysed miscommunication arising from the Estonian applicants' use of message-construction strategies that differ from those expected by the American gatekeepers. As the interviewer would expect positive/solidarity politeness¹¹, he or she will easily interpret the Estonians' negative/deference politeness strategies as uncooperative or even hostile. Vogelberg, however, notes that many Estonians have become adjusted and are able to accept the American strategies. She concludes that

the number of Estonians who have adjusted has by now become significant enough for newly-adopted message-construction strategies to spread beyond American-Estonian encounters proper and give reason to talk about a general trend in Estonia toward positive/solidarity politeness/.../ (1995:53)

To what extent 'the spread beyond these American-Estonian encounters proper' will take place and what further effect the change in communicative style will have on their ethnic identity, is yet to be seen.

A similar dilemma between a 'non-communicative' national character and the need to 'communicate' with the rest of the world has been tackled in the discussion

¹⁰ cf. Ervin-Tripp (1964) where Japanese bilingual women gave contradictory endings to unfinished sentences in Japanese and English. As Libben and Lindner note, the contradicting answers were clearly tied to 'language environment'.

¹¹ Positive and negative politeness (Brown and Levinson 1987) denote politeness strategies that are oriented, respectively, to the saving of the interlocutor's 'positive face', i.e. the need for involvement with others, and 'negative face' – the need for independence. Scollon and Scollon (1995) prefer *involvement* and *independence* and note that silence whether in the form of general taciturnity or longer pauses, is on the side of independence and deference (however, silence can mean high involvement as well, as in intimate or emotionally loaded situations).

of the 'Silent Finn' (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1985). The authors finish off with a point that though some are worried about the pervasive foreign influence on the traditional Finnish character, if the result is a 'more communicative Finn', the changes are only welcome.

There has been a noticeable shift since the 1985 article in the authors' attitude towards the Finnish silent communicative style, as evident from 'The Silent Finn Revisited' (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1997). Listing features that would 'reinforce the image of a silent culture held by people coming from western Europe or the United States' the authors underscore a crucial notion that these characteristics are neither positive nor negative and, depending on the *observer* [my emphasis], they might be regarded as strengths or weaknesses. And, they close this time with a reference to a warning from 'hazards arising from inadvertent talk' – a warning to be found in the traditions of many cultures that reminds one, according to the authors, of 'the fact that it is not always wise to say things without considering the possible consequences.' In short, the Silent Finn does not have to be *ashamed*, but rather *aware* of his silence, and even proud of it. To what extent a group can hold on to its communicative style in the face of external influences depends on the stability of its identity. Unstable (national, ethnic) identity contributes to negative perception of one's own behaviour.

An Estonian has probably never been that much of a 'silent character' that the Finn has. However, we are still able to draw some parallels in the cultural norms for silence and talk, and also in the difficulties in accepting these norms as part of national identity.

8. Conclusion

The cross-cultural differences in attitudes towards conversational phenomena like silence can be a source of (covert) communication problem. However, critical awareness of the relationship between national identity and conversational style should be applied in language teaching and intercultural communication. While identifying the potential problem-sources and minimising the risk of misunderstanding, we should also be critical of the extent of accommodation.

Silence is a natural part of communication. Slower communication where pauses give room for thought have been identified as a valuable resource that is often not used or understood in the mainstream Western culture. The present paper claims Estonians possess this valuable resource, and what is needed is recognition, and awareness of the 'tolerance of silence' as a culturally characteristic feature, not a deficiency in need of remedy. At the same time, we need to be able to converge towards our interlocutor's style **consciously** in some situations and **be aware** that our relaxed pauses or non-communication may be read as incompetence or impoliteness by the other party who comes from a culture with different conventions for speaking and being silent.

Although English is the most widely used language in intercultural communication, it need not be accompanied by the Anglo-American style of communication. Neither should the latter be considered a norm. It should be the task of language teachers as well as communication trainers to point to the situations where accommodation is necessary to some extent (e.g., in a job interview), but the nature and purpose of this accommodation should always be made explicit and specified according to the situation.

While the importance of pragmatic and cultural aspects (including conversation style, uses of silence) of language use in second-language teaching is beyond debate, what we need is a careful and critical approach, especially when the national identity of the language learners is unstable or undergoing transformation. Awareness of the first language uses and characteristics of one's own communication style are necessary preconditions for the success in the use of a second language and in intercultural communication. Openness and readiness to change must be accompanied by a clear understanding of what is expected from the changes, and a clever vision of future developments that should not be sacrificed to any gains at the present moment. The skills of intercultural communication can be improved by an analysis of our own needs as well as strengths and weaknesses rather than by means of imitating and adopting the ways of those more powerful and successful.

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Appendix

Items from the Talk and Silence questionnaire. * denotes items directly adapted from the BaT questionnaire (Giles et al. 1992).

1. I believe that most people are afraid of conversational silences in this society
2. There are some topics I feel should not be talked about.
3. In general, I feel comfortable talking to a stranger.
4. I think that untalkative people are boring.*
5. I feel comfortable with silences in conversation *with friends .
6. I feel comfortable with silences in conversation with strangers.
7. I feel comfortable with silences in conversation with my family members.
8. In conversations, I usually prefer listening to others to talking myself.
9. I believe that one always communicates most effectively through talking.*
10. People who do most of the talking in a conversation are in control of the situation.
11. It is not polite to talk a lot and in a loud voice.
12. I have positive feelings toward people who, in general, talk a lot.*
13. Silences in a conversation usually mean breakdown of communication
14. People in close relationships can understand each other without using words .
15. I take responsibility for breaking the ice by talking when I meet someone.*
16. I feel uncomfortable when strangers tell me about their personal life.
17. I prefer to be silent to arguing in a conversation when I do not agree with the others.
18. I feel uncomfortable when I do not get a chance to participate in the conversation.
19. I prefer to be silent when I do not agree with a professor
20. I have learned very many useful things from talking with other people.
21. I think that all conflicts between people can be solved by talking about the problem.
22. I believe women are more quiet than men.
23. I usually feel the pressure to say something when a pause occurs in the conversation
24. I find it annoying when there is silence among the audience in response to the call for questions
(from a lecturer, a presenter)
25. I think it is impolite to do all the talking in a conversation and not give others a chance to speak.
26. I often talk just because I do not want to be seen as an uncommunicative and boring person
27. When I am depressed I do not feel like talking to anyone.
28. I think men are more comfortable with pauses in conversation than women
- III. When I am alone, I usually turn on the TV or radio
- II2. I often wish I could be in a more quiet place
- II3. I need silence to be able to concentrate.
- II4. Silence helps me to relax and restore energy.
- II5. I often find silence irritating and frightening
- II6. I think everyone should spend some time silently by oneself to order one's thoughts.