The Cultural Significance of Silence in Japanese Communication*

Silence is a communicative act in all cultures. This paper discusses intended and perceived meanings of silence in Japanese communication and their cultural values. The author distinguishes and illustrates four dimensions of silence that are culturally salient and mutually contradictory: truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment, and defiance. These dimensions may also be marked in other cultures in other ways.

It is well recognized that silence is a communicative act rather than a mere void in communicational space. If indirect or metaphorical speech is a way of ‘saying one thing and meaning another’, as Tannen (1985: 97) states, ‘silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something’. It is in this spirit that this paper was conceived.

Since I have made no comparative study on silence, the following discussion is based upon my personal observations and experiences in Japanese and American situations of social interaction. If cultures can be differentiated along the noise-silence continuum in a similar fashion to the fascinating comparison made by Maltz (1985) in worshiping styles between noisy Pentecostals and silent Quakers, there are many indications that Japanese culture tilts toward silence.

Compare, for example, American and Japanese soap operas on TV and just listen with closed eyes and you will immediately notice the difference in the amount of vocalization. Guided by Jourard’s (1964) idea of the ‘transparent’ versus ‘opaque’ types of person, Barnlund (1975) compared Japanese with American college students in responses to questions regarding self-disclosure. In conversation, as well as in tactile communication, the Japanese were consistently found to disclose themselves less than Americans. Thus, the ratio of private self to public self, Barnlund contends, is larger for Japanese than for American communicants. It is my impression that Japanese silence stands out not only in comparison with Southern Europeans or New Yorkers but with East Asian neighbors like Koreans and Chinese as well.

Despite the prevalence of silence, the Japanese do not take silence for granted but instead cultivate it. Personalities are often described in terms of reticence or loquaciousness, and actions are characterized as taken ‘in silence’. The cultural cultivation of silence, if I may digress a little, is best manifested in traditional music, in which silent intervals called ma are central while sounds play an auxiliary role in marking ma. Similarly essential to
Japanese painting is the painter's awareness of the expressiveness of blank space, the spatial metaphor of silence, whether within or outside the picture frame. In theatrical dancing, kabuki performance, or even in film, too, freeze in motion may convey a peak of emotional intensity. In writing, which is verbal but nonvocal, Japanese writers pay special attention to silence, as noted by Saville-Troike (1985: 5-6), using the silence marker ‘……’. Writing itself may violate the cultural norm of silence. Miyoshi goes as far as to say:

writing in Japanese is always something of an act of defiance. Silence not only invites and seduces all would-be speakers and writers, but is in fact a powerful compulsion throughout the whole society. To bring forth a written work to break this silence is thus often tantamount to the writer's sacrifice of himself, via defeat and exhaustion. (1974: xv)

The suicidal tendency of Japanese writers is thus imputed to such stress inherent in Japanese writing. This may be an exaggerated statement since writing is an important alternative, as will be shown later, for the vocally reticent Japanese, but it does illuminate the Japanese compulsion for silence.

It is in the light of such compulsive silence that we can better understand the function of aizuchi, back-channel signals generously supplied by the Japanese listener. The speaker in conversation will be unable to continue to speak unless supported and encouraged by the listener's aizuchi utterances signaling ‘Go on, and then what?’, which occur between words and phrases, many times within a sentence. The absence of aizuchi indicates the listener's hostility or distrust. The English speaker, too, expects supportive signals like nodding from his listener, but the amount of vocal backchanneling by the Japanese listener seems by far to exceed the American counterpart. In intercultural communication, I notice that the English speaker is annoyed by the Japanese listener uttering aizuchi too often, too untimely, and too loudly.

CONTRASTIVE MEANINGS

If silence is a communicative act as stated at the outset, what do the Japanese try to convey through silence or what kind of meaning do they read in one another's silence? What cultural values and beliefs underlie their silent communication? What, in other words, does silence symbolize for the Japanese? I will show the polysemic value of silence involving its contrastive meanings. It may be hypothesized that the multiplicity, opposition, and, hence, ambiguity of the meanings of silence correlate with the prevalence of conversational silence. Instead of being exhaustive, the following analysis focuses on the four dimensions of silence which I regard as culturally salient and as mutually contradictory.

I am not arguing the uniqueness of Japanese communication style, but rather presenting the Japanese case in order to offer a possible contribution toward the understanding of human communication in general. It should be noted, however, that with my meager research experience outside Japan I am in no position either to assert the uniqueness of Japanese silence or to read universals into the Japanese case. The truth may lie somewhere between these