

# Analysis of Silence in Intercultural Communication

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**Abstract.** Verbal communication and non-verbal communication are two ways of communication between human beings. Verbal communication is important and has significant influence on human behavior, meanwhile, non-verbal communication should not be ignored. Silence is one aspect of non-verbal communication. It can also express our ideas and convey information. People from different cultures have different understandings of silence. In order to reach successful intercultural communication, different cultural connotations of silence should be known. This paper explores the reasons for different understandings of silence in American culture and Chinese culture through comparison, illustrating the social and pragmatic functions of silence.

## Introduction

Communication, which is our ability to share our ideas and feelings, is the basis of all human contact. Language is a foremost way of communication, while silence can also convey a lot of information, even something difficult to express with language. An African proverb states, "Silence is also speech". Silence is a common social content; at the same time, it communicates some specific social and cultural implications. We make important judgments and decisions concerning the internal states of others--states they often express without words. In daily communication, people from different countries or from different cultures have different attitudes towards silence. Such differences become the serious obstacles in intercultural communication.

This paper firstly compares silence in American culture and Chinese culture, investigating the reasons for the different attitudes and understandings of silence in these two cultures. Then it analyzes the social and pragmatic functions of silence. The analysis of silence is helpful to understand its communicative functions in different cultures, therefore, the efficiency and success of intercultural communication can be improved.

## Comparison of Silence between Chinese Culture and American Culture

Although people generally think that silence can be used to communicate, in fact, people from different cultures have different understandings of silence. This section makes a comparison of silence between Chinese culture and American culture, which are the representatives of the eastern and western cultures.

**Silence in Chinese Culture.** Generally speaking, silence is used in most situations in Chinese culture, thus the attitude of Chinese towards silence is positive. Chinese people emphasize the functions of silence in their communication. In Chinese people's communication, pause and silence can express plenty of meanings, such as agreement, praise, disagreement, protest, decision, respect, etc. When Chinese people talk with strangers, they will not break the ice, for they think that it will be embarrassed to talk with someone that they don't know at all. So it is very common to find in train or plane or even bus that Chinese people would like to keep silent instead to talk with each other if they do not know each other, even though they have nothing to do and they feel the trip or journey bored. In class, Chinese students are just audience. They usually listen to the teachers quietly. They seldom participate in the activities in class, let alone proposing their own opinions, asking questions to their teachers or offending their teachers. In Chinese culture, when the superior are speaking or put forward some proposals, the inferior just keep silent to show their respect to the superior.

**Silence in American Culture.** In contrast, Americans' attitude towards silence is negative. In most situations, Americans tend to consider silence in communication as indifference, anger, shame, disgust, embarrassment, disagreement, etc. They cannot bear those who always keep silent. They cannot understand what conveys from silence. In America, speech is crucial to the president candidates. These candidates have to travel around the country from state to state and show their political talents through their speech, so they cannot be silent. Americans tend to explain their thoughts clearly and like to talk with each other. They try to bridge the gap of silence in their communication with words, so that they would not feel embarrassed.

“Silence is not a meaningful part of the life of most members of the dominant culture in the United States” (Samovar 1998). Talking, watching TV, listening to music, and other sound-producing activities keep them from silence. The American saying “The squeaky wheel gets the grease.” demonstrates that silence is negative to Americans.

**The Similarities of Silence in Chinese and American Cultures.** The perceptions of 2.1 and 2.2 should be considered as stereotypes. Roach and Wyatt point out that whether silence is considered as positive or negative, communication depends on the property of communicative situations. In fact, human beings have certain common understanding. When we are sad or tired, we will wish not to be disturbed by someone but to stay alone silently. At this time, silence is what we expect. It is positive and proper. While when we want to transmit information or exchange emotions or feelings, silence is negative and improper, but language is the best way. When humans pray in the church, attend a concert, they will be expected to keep silent, otherwise, their behavior would be thought impolite. The stereotypes about Chinese and Americans understanding silence can play an important role in anticipating and understanding what is conveyed in intercultural communication correctly.

### **The Reasons for the Different Attitudes towards Silence in Both Cultures**

**The Perceptions of Language in Traditional Philosophy.** Chinese and Americans have different opinions about the functions of speech and silence in communication. Chinese culture is influenced by the thoughts of Confucianism and Taoism, so the power of language is limited, while silence (or few words) is praised and initiated.

Lao Tzu is the first thinker who tells the perception of language in Chinese culture. He said: “The way that can be spoken of is not the constant way; the name that can be named is not the constant name. The nameless was the beginning of heaven and earth; the named was the mother of the myriad creatures. Hence always rid yourself of desires in order to observe its secrets.” In Lao Tzu's opinion, human language is limited and cannot reveal and explain the laws and rules in the world completely. The way plays its part in a silent way, so the relation between human beings and nature cannot be fulfilled or established by language, and the truth of human life is something that can be controlled, exchanged and accumulated by silence. Lao Tzu despised and distrusted language. In TaoTe Ching, he taught us: “One who knows does not speak; one who speaks does not know.”

Confucius emphasized “The superior man wishes to be slow in his speech and earnest in his conduct.” He told his pupils to do more rather than speak more. Confucius' words “Believe not others' tales, / Others will lead thee far astray.” “And yet the four seasons turn and the myriad things are born and grow within it. Does Tian speak?” illustrate that no words are very natural, and speaking is not necessary. In his opinion, the laws of nature are out of language and cannot be controlled by language. Confucius himself is a man who is taciturn.

In western world, the worship to God seriously influences the emphasis on language. The first settlers who became the forefathers of the American nation were mostly puritans. They were a group of serious, religious people, advocating highly religious and moral principles. They carried with them to America a code of values, a philosophy of life, a point of view as American Puritanism, which was one of the most enduring shaping influences in American thought. Most Americans are Puritans. “Many hold that America is a Christian nation that believes in God.”(Naylor 1998) They believe that God creates the world in chaos by language like other westerners. In Genesis the Old Testament, God said, “Let there be light.” “Let there be a dome in the midst of the waters, and let it

separate the waters from the waters.” According to Bible, God spends six days creating the world. God names everything in the world by language. So to some extent, the relationship between human beings, the universe and God must be established and maintained by language. In a word, Americans consider language as holy as God.

**The Encoding and Decoding Methods.** Hall offers us an effective means of examining cultural similarities and differences in both perception and communication. He categorizes cultures as high-context culture and low-context culture. The Halls (1990) define these two terms in the following manner: “A high context communication or message is one in which most of the information is already in the person, while very little is in the coded, explicitly transmitted part of the message. A low context communication is just the opposite; i.e., the mass of the information is vested in the explicit code.” According to Hall, Chinese culture belongs to a high-context culture, while American culture belongs to a low-context culture. In a high-context culture, information is provided through gestures, the use of space, and even silence (Samovar 1998). While in a low-context culture, the verbal messages contain most of the information. That is to say, in Chinese culture, the information is entailed in the social and cultural backgrounds or contexts, or is internalized in the inner world of communicators. The mode of communication is often indirect and implicit. In contrast, in American culture, most of the information is reflected in the messages explicitly. Their communication tends to be direct and explicit. That’s the reason why Americans will say what they want to convey and what they think directly. Americans must depend on language to exchange their real intentions and nearly all information. They expect messages to be detailed, clear-cut and definite. However, in Chinese culture, the transmission of information mainly depends on context. In the process of decoding, they must think about the addresser’s identity, place, time and manner of speaking, etc. Otherwise, the information that they get cannot be full and correct. They believe that silence often sends a better message than words, and anyone who needs words does not have the information.

Chinese and American degrees of dependence on context make their degrees of need of language different. In Chinese culture, the importance of context exceeds that of language encoding. In American culture the function of context is little and secondary. To Americans, no words mean without communication. They appreciate talking and try to avoid silence. Once they keep silent in communication, their reaction will be negative naturally.

## **Social and Pragmatic Functions of Silence**

**Social Mark.** Condon and Yousef (1975) categorize non-verbal behavior into 24 aspects. Silence is one of them. Thus silence also has the same social functions as non-verbal behavior.

1. **Social Relationship Mark.** Silence can mark the solidarity or hierarchical relationship between communicators. We can know some basic information about the communicator such as his social place, background, sex, and education, and so on through silence. For example, when the person is speaking, others usually keep silent and listen to him carefully. We can infer the person in the superordinate or upper position, others in the subordinate or lower position. In Chinese family, the older generation has the right to speak more. So when the older generation says something, the younger generation has to listen instead to interrupt the former ones. In a conversation, the one who usually keeps silent is the one in the subordinate or lower position.

In the hierarchical society, the one who has more opportunities to speak out is the one who has higher social place. The people in the subordinate or lower position are deprived of the right to speak out their own voices. In most situations, they have to keep silent. Women’s social position is lower than men’s in many cultures. Men have the right to control women. Men always order women to do something with words. Women do not say anything instead to perform the orders. So in many societies, women are more prone to be silent than men. The people in the same social position may have the equal right to speak during their conversation.

2. **Discourse Organizing Mark.** Silence cues affect interpersonal communication by providing an interval in an ongoing interaction during which the participants have time to think, check or suppress an emotion, encode a lengthy response, or inaugurate another line of thought. After

someone puts a proposal forward, the other participants need think about it for several minutes. At this moment, silence is the best way to help make judgments. When people are talking about something, suddenly, their conversation stops, and they are silent. After a short period, they will change their topic, since they are aware that they have no interest in the former topic or the former topic is not worthy of discussing, or they will recognize their words to express in a clearer way.

3. **Semantic Mark.** Silence is a psycholinguistic behavior. The communicator needs enough time to organize his idea so that he can express himself in a correct and clear way and he can transmit enough information to the counterpart. Meanwhile, the communicator needs some time to infer the counterpart's meaning or intention and he can make response in a proper way and understand the counterpart fully. In other words, silence helps provide feedback, informing both addresser and addressee about the clarity of an idea or its significance in the overall interpersonal exchange. In response to the question "Will you marry me?" silence in English would be interpreted as uncertainty; in Chinese it would be interpreted as acceptance.

4. **Affective Mark.** Silence cues may be interpreted as lack of interest, injured feelings, or contempt. Silence can be used to express agreement, disagreement, praise, respect, etc. Silence entails abundant connotations. In an American conversation, when addressees keep silent, the addressers will think that addressees are not interested in their words. In response to boring topics, addressees choose to be silent. That's why American teachers feel uncomfortable when Chinese students do not ask them questions but listen to them quietly.

**Pragmatic Function.** Silence can be used to maintain communicators' face. We can consider positive face and negative face (Brown & Levinson 1987) as two polars of a continuum. In communication, speech and silence may be in the two polars. That is to say, speech can be used to maintain positive face, while silence may be the strategy to keep negative face. To some extent, the communication between humans in any form can be used to maintain positive face. For example, that I ask you a question and you answer me reaches the basic relevance, so we can say that positive face is maintained minimally. On the other hand, if we keep silent, we maintain our negative face in the minimal degree. In American society, the silence between communicators may be the symbol of independence. In conversations, silence may be understood as addressee having no interest in addresser's speech. Sometimes, there are exceptions in American society. Silence may represent a positive face. For example, between intimate friends, silence may be considered as mutual understanding and trust in the maximal degree.

Americans seldom use silence because silence contains negative meanings to them. Compared with Americans, Chinese tend to use silence to show politeness and respect to others. When the person in the superordinate or upper position talks with the person in the subordinate or lower position, the latter must be silent when listening to the former's speech in order to show his politeness. When people are in an embarrassing situation, the best way to solve this problem is to be silent. For example, if someone misrecognizes you as another person, after he called the name, he realized that he made a mistake and then he felt embarrassed; at the same time, you also felt embarrassed, you did not know how to respond. In this kind of situation, silence could be the best way to avoid embarrassment.

## Conclusion

The forms of silence are similar in various cultures, but the differences of its cultural effect bring barriers in intercultural communication. In conclusion, Americans usually neglect the messages that are transmitted by silence. Even if they realize the existence of silence, they always have negative attitude to silence and understand it by their own cultural rules. This pragmatic mistransference is the crucial factor of the failure of intercultural communication.

The emphasis on the function of silence does not mean the denial of the communicative function of language. Silence and speech are mutual complements and relative factors. The ignorance of one of them could lead to misunderstanding or failure in communication.

The successful communication requires us not only to get information from speech but also to understand what is conveyed by silence, because sometimes "silence is more useful than speech."

The intercultural research of silence is helpful to improve our competence of intercultural communication.

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