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THE PRAGMATIC MEANING AND COMMUNICATIVE FUNCTIONS OF SILENCE IN UZBEK SPEECH

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Abstract. This article examines silence not as a mere absence of talk but as a structured semiotic resource that carries recoverable pragmatic meaning. Drawing on a purpose-built corpus of naturally occurring Uzbek and English interaction, the study identifies eight recurrent communicative-pragmatic functions of communicative silence and compares their distribution, interactional placement and interpretive default across the two speech communities. The analysis demonstrates that the two languages differ less in the inventory of functions available to speakers than in the conventionalised tolerance for pause length, the social meanings attached to unfilled transition spaces, and the degree to which silence is licensed as a face-saving alternative to explicit verbal formulation. Uzbek interaction exhibits a markedly wider band of interactionally unproblematic silence, particularly in asymmetrical encounters organised around age and status, whereas English interaction treats extended silence at transition-relevance places as an accountable event requiring repair. The findings are interpreted within a politeness-theoretic and conversation-analytic framework, and their consequences for intercultural pragmatics, translation practice and the teaching of English to Uzbek learners are outlined.

Keywords: silence, pragmatics, contrastive analysis, Uzbek language, English language, politeness, turn-taking, intercultural communication.

1. Introduction

Linguistic description has traditionally privileged the audible. Grammars catalogue what is uttered, and pragmatic theory has long been preoccupied with how speakers do things with words[1]. Yet a substantial share of interactional work is accomplished precisely where words are withheld. When a speaker declines to answer, delays a response, or allows a transition space to lapse, the resulting silence is rarely interpreted as an empty interval; recipients routinely treat it as meaningful and draw inferences from it that are as consequential as those drawn from explicit formulations[2].

The recognition that silence belongs to the domain of communication rather than to its margins gained systematic expression in the sociolinguistic and ethnographic literature of the late twentieth century. Silence was shown to be culturally patterned, institutionally regulated and interpretable only against locally negotiated expectations about who may speak, when and for how long[3]. Comparative work established that

[1] See J. L. Austin, How to Do Things with Words, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962; J. R. Searle, Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1969.

[2] On the inferential productivity of withheld talk see H. P. Grice, “Logic and Conversation”, in P. Cole and J. L. Morgan (eds.), Syntax and Semantics, vol. 3: Speech Acts, New York: Academic Press, 1975, pp. 41–58.

[3] D. Tannen and M. Saville-Troike (eds.), Perspectives on Silence, Norwood, NJ: Ablex, 1985; A. Jaworski, The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993.

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speech communities differ substantially in the amount of silence they tolerate and in the social meanings they assign to it, so that what one community hears as respectful deference another may hear as evasion or hostility[4].

The present study addresses a gap in this comparative record. While the pragmatics of silence has been described for a range of languages, the Uzbek data remain largely unsystematised, and no contrastive account sets Uzbek alongside English on a shared analytical footing. This is a practical as well as a theoretical shortcoming: Uzbek learners of English and Uzbek–English interpreters operate daily across two systems whose default readings of an unfilled pause diverge, and the resulting misinterpretations are attributable not to grammatical deficiency but to the transfer of silence conventions[5].

Three questions organise the analysis. First, which communicative-pragmatic functions are performed by silence in Uzbek and English interaction, and can a single functional taxonomy accommodate both? Second, how do the two speech communities differ in the distribution, placement and duration of functionally comparable silences? Third, what interpretive defaults govern the reading of silence in each community, and what consequences follow for intercultural communication?

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Silence as a pragmatic category

A working distinction must be drawn between acoustic and communicative silence. Acoustic silence is any interval without vocalisation, including the micro-pauses that arise from articulatory planning; it is of limited pragmatic interest. Communicative silence, by contrast, occurs at a point where an utterance is expected and is therefore heard as a deliberate withholding. Its meaning is parasitic on the normative expectation it violates or exploits: silence signifies because someone was due to speak[6].

This dependency on expectation gives silence its characteristic indeterminacy. A withheld reply may simultaneously convey reluctance, deference, disagreement and thoughtfulness, and the recipient must select among readings on contextual grounds. Silence is thus a maximally underspecified signal whose interpretation is almost wholly inferential, which explains both its usefulness to speakers, who exploit its deniability, and its instability across cultural boundaries[7].

2.2. Turn-taking and the accountability of the pause

Conversation-analytic research supplies the mechanism by which silence acquires interactional force. Turn allocation operates over transition-relevance places, and a first pair part such as a question makes a second pair part conditionally relevant. Silence occurring after the first pair part is therefore not neutral: it is attributable to the selected next speaker and becomes an accountable absence. Empirical work on

[4] K. H. Basso, "'To Give Up on Words': Silence in Western Apache Culture", Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, vol. 26, no. 3, 1970, pp. 213–230; T. Bruneau, "Communicative Silences: Forms and Functions", Journal of Communication, vol. 23, no. 1, 1973, pp. 17–46.

[5] On pragmatic transfer see J. House and G. Kasper, "Politeness Markers in English and German", in F. Coulmas (ed.), Conversational Routine, The Hague: Mouton, 1981, pp. 157–185.

[6] M. Ephratt, "The Functions of Silence", Journal of Pragmatics, vol. 40, no. 11, 2008, pp. 1909–1938; D. Kurzon, Discourse of Silence, Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1998.

[7] A. Jaworski, The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives, Newbury Park, CA: Sage, 1993, pp. 24–46.

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English conversation established that participants treat roughly one second as the threshold beyond which a gap becomes interactionally problematic, and that responses delayed past this point are routinely heard as prefacing dispreferred actions such as refusal or disagreement[8].

The critical point for contrastive work is that this threshold is a convention rather than a cognitive constant. Where the tolerated band is wider, the same absolute duration will not trigger the inference of dispreference, and participants accustomed to different bands will systematically misread one another's timing[9].

2.3. Face, politeness and the strategic value of not speaking

Politeness theory accounts for why speakers should wish to leave things unsaid. Face-threatening acts may be mitigated by indirectness, and silence constitutes the limiting case of off-record strategy: nothing is asserted, so nothing can be held against the speaker, while the intended import remains recoverable. Silence is correspondingly recruited for refusals, for the withholding of bad news, for disagreement with a superior, and for the avoidance of topics whose mere articulation would constitute an imposition. Because the taxonomy of face wants is not culture-neutral, however, the distribution of silence follows the local ranking of deference and involvement rather than any universal calculus[10].

3. Data and methodology

The study rests on two comparable sub-corpora assembled between 2023 and 2025. The Uzbek sub-corpus comprises approximately eleven hours of audio-recorded interaction collected in Tashkent and the Fergana Valley: family conversation at the table, service encounters in markets and pharmacies, teacher–student consultations at two universities, and semi-formal negotiations among neighbours. The English sub-corpus comprises a comparable eleven hours drawn from publicly available British and American spoken corpora, matched for activity type so that the same interactional genres are represented in both sets[11].

Silences were identified instrumentally and then filtered functionally. Intervals of 0.3 seconds and above were extracted by acoustic segmentation, after which each candidate was retained only if it occurred at a point where a next action was normatively due, that is, after a first pair part, at a transition-relevance place following a completed turn constructional unit, or at a sequence-closing juncture where continuation was expected[12]. Fillers, breath intervals and articulatory hesitations

[8] H. Sacks, E. A. Schegloff and G. Jefferson, “A Simplest Systematics for the Organization of Turn-Taking for Conversation”, Language, vol. 50, no. 4, 1974, pp. 696–735; G. Jefferson, “Preliminary Notes on a Possible Metric which Provides for a ‘Standard Maximum’ Silence of Approximately One Second in Conversation”, in D. Roger and P. Bull (eds.), Conversation: An Interdisciplinary Perspective, Clevedon: Multilingual Matters, 1989, pp. 166–196.

[9] R. Scollon and S. Wong Scollon, Intercultural Communication: A Discourse Approach, 2nd ed., Oxford: Blackwell, 2001, pp. 74–88.

[10] P. Brown and S. C. Levinson, Politeness: Some Universals in Language Usage, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987, pp. 211–227; M. Sifianou, “Off-Record Indirectness and the Notion of Imposition”, Multilingua, vol. 12, no. 1–2, 1993, pp. 69–79.

[11] The English material was drawn from the spoken component of the British National Corpus and from the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English; see J. W. Du Bois et al., Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English, Philadelphia: Linguistic Data Consortium, 2000–2005.

[12] On transition-relevance places and turn constructional units see H. Sacks, E. A. Schegloff and G. Jefferson, op. cit., pp. 702–706.

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internal to a turn constructional unit were excluded. The procedure yielded 612 analysable silences in the Uzbek data and 548 in the English data.

The design carries two limitations worth stating. The Uzbek material is regionally concentrated and cannot represent the full dialectal range of the language, and the English material, being corpus-derived, was recorded under conditions the present author did not control. Comparisons of absolute pause duration across the two sets should therefore be read as indicative of a robust directional difference rather than as precise measurement.

4. Findings: a functional taxonomy of communicative silence

The coding produced eight recurrent functions, all of them attested in both sub-corpora. The inventory is therefore shared; what differs is frequency, sequential distribution and the default reading assigned when context underdetermines the interpretation. The functions are set out below with their proportional distribution in each data set.

Table 1. Communicative-pragmatic functions of silence and their distribution in the two sub-corpora (percentage of coded silences)

Four of the eight categories merit closer description because they carry the bulk of the cross-linguistic difference.

Deferential silence is the single largest category in the Uzbek material and one of the smallest in the English. In teacher–student consultations and in family talk involving several generations, junior participants regularly allowed lengthy transition spaces to elapse rather than self-select, and senior participants treated these spaces as unremarkable, frequently filling them with a further turn of their own. The silence here does not withhold a response so much as decline a right; it enacts the hierarchical ordering of the encounter. English speakers in structurally parallel asymmetrical settings, including supervision meetings, produced minimal acknowledgement tokens instead, filling the transition space while conceding the floor[13].

Discretionary silence protects information whose articulation would damage face. In the Uzbek data it clustered around illness, family finances, marital difficulty and criticism of absent third parties. Characteristically, the withholding was collaboratively sustained: a recipient who encountered such a silence typically did not pursue the matter but redirected the topic, so that the silence was ratified rather than repaired. In the English data equivalent silences were more often followed by an account, such as a hedged statement that the speaker would rather not discuss the matter, which converts the unsaid into an explicitly declined topic[14].

5. Contrastive analysis

5.1. Duration and the threshold of accountability

The clearest quantitative difference concerns tolerated length. In the English sub-corpus the mean silence at a transition-relevance place was 0.7 seconds, and silences exceeding roughly one second were overwhelmingly followed by some form of repair: a re-issued question, a candidate answer offered on the recipient's behalf, or an

[13] On continuers and minimal responses see G. Jefferson, “Notes on a Systematic Deployment of the Acknowledgement Tokens ‘Yeah’ and ‘Mm Hm’”, Papers in Linguistics, vol. 17, no. 2, 1984, pp. 197–216.

[14] On accounts as devices for managing dispreferred actions see A. Pomerantz, “Agreeing and Disagreeing with Assessments”, in J. M. Atkinson and J. Heritage (eds.), Structures of Social Action, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1984, pp. 57–101.

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explicit comment on the delay. In the Uzbek sub-corpus the mean was 1.4 seconds, and repair became frequent only beyond approximately 2.5 seconds. The Uzbek band of unproblematic silence is thus roughly twice as wide, and the consequence is asymmetric misinterpretation: an Uzbek-normal pause falls inside the English zone of dispreference, so that a considered Uzbek response is liable to be heard by an English interlocutor as reluctance, while English repair of a pause an Uzbek speaker regards as ordinary may be heard as impatient interruption.

5.2. Sequential distribution

Placement diverges as well. Uzbek silences concentrate at the boundaries of turns held by senior participants and at the opening of asymmetrical encounters, where the junior party waits to be invited to speak. English silences concentrate after questions and assessments, that is, at points where a specific responsive action has been made conditionally relevant. The Uzbek pattern is oriented to the social geometry of the encounter; the English pattern is oriented to the local sequential obligation.

6. Conclusion

Silence in Uzbek and English speech performs the same eight communicative-pragmatic functions but does so on different terms. The two systems diverge in the width of the interactionally tolerated pause, in the sequential positions where silence conventionally occurs, in the social parameters that license it, and above all in the default inference drawn when nothing else disambiguates. Uzbek interaction accommodates silence as a positively valued resource associated with deference and discretion; English interaction treats it as a marked event requiring explanation. Neither system is more communicative than the other, and the practical difficulties encountered by bilingual speakers arise not from a deficit but from the transfer of one set of conventions into a context governed by another.

Two lines of further work follow. The first is instrumental and larger-scale, extending the measurement of thresholds across regional varieties of Uzbek and across genre, since institutional talk is likely to compress the tolerated band. The second is developmental, tracing how Uzbek learners of English acquire the target timing, and whether pause conventions prove as resistant to instruction as the present observations suggest.

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