

**M. D. Poutrova**

*Polotsk, Belarus*

## LINGUISTIC PERSPECTIVES OF SILENCE

Silence has been the object of analysis within many disciplines. Conversational analysis, Gender Studies, Philosophy, Theology have always paid considerable attention to silence but their interpretations of it are often partial and contradictory.

Linguistic research into silence has been very fragmentary so far too, though it is common knowledge that authentic verbal behavior obviously includes silence into the list of its most effective means. Nowadays linguists as well as representatives in other fields of analysis agree that every act of silent reactions has its specific meaning. But since there is very little data on semantics of silent reactions in verbal communication, one of the major problems for researchers of silence from linguistic perspective nowadays is to discover those specific meanings of silence which come up in authentic interactions.

One of them is that variety of silence when the speaker enjoys saying nothing, that is when both the signified and the signifier are nothing but zero.

If we want to examine the linguistic value of silence which is zero, we must first of all draw a distinction between silence (a zero) as a signifier and silence (or again zero) as a signified [1, p. 6]. There are recurrent cases in everyday conversations when we produce silent reactions with both zero signifiers and zero signified. It is quite possible to doubt such reactions as being linguistic because the speakers producing them seem to have no intentions for their silence. But they do have intentions. The latter may seem unusual and present difficulties for immediate participants of communication and researchers.

In our analysis of the silent reactions with zero signifiers and zero signifieds we used recordings of authentic conversations in four cultures: Belarusian, Russian, American and English. The samples of free talking taken for investigation constituted about 40 000 words in every culture. The acts of silence with zero signifieds were selected from them and put to thorough examination.

Our investigation of intentions of unaccountable conversational silences in four cultures (Belarusian, Russian, American and English), carried out with the help of consultations with the producers of the silent reactions, discovered that they may result from the speakers desire to enjoy silence, quietness, etc.

Let us consider the below fragment of authentic communication in Belarusian domestic setting.

1. A<sub>1</sub>: *Алік!*  
 B<sub>1</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>2</sub>: *Алік! Памажы ручку адвінціць. Вечна ты усё намертва заварочваеш!*  
 B<sub>2</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>3</sub>: *Ну Алік жа!*  
 B<sub>3</sub>: (In a low, quiet voice) *Што?*  
 A<sub>4</sub>: *Ручку памажы мясарубцы адкруціць.*  
 B<sub>4</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>5</sub>: *Алік!*  
 B<sub>5</sub>: (Sharply) *Ладна! Січас!*

From the perspective of traditional Gender studies the numerous silent reactions in the fragment are very easy to interpret. They are all produced by a male speaker, which is quite typical of communication in domestic settings. No less typical is the account of them as entirely derogative and humiliating. From the perspective of Gender studies male domestic silence regularly diminishes the status of women and singles out men as creatures of greater personal value. The conversation in the above fragment seems to be a very good illustration of the claim, especially as the tone of the final male reaction (B<sub>5</sub>) is sharp.

Yet our investigation of the intentions which were guiding the speaker B contradicts the claim. He explained that one of his greatest pleasures in life had always been warm and friendly quietness of his family settings. He said that silence had always been his best and dearest relaxation. The above conversation happened on the first morning after coming back from a week long business trip. He felt pleased being home again and enjoying “secure quietness and warmth of his home.” It was difficult for him to pull himself together and get engaged in talking and endless routine things of family life. His rather sharp voice in the final reaction (B<sub>5</sub>) manifests the tension he felt when the comfort of “the secure silence” of his home was suddenly interrupted.

This type of silence is very much different from just not speaking because of shyness or due to any other psychological condition, feeling superior including. It looks like a sort of escape into silence to enjoy the very process of being silent.

The same variety of silent reactions can be revealed in the conversation of fragment 2.

2. A<sub>1</sub>: *Bill!*  
 B<sub>1</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>2</sub>: *Billy, are we going out tonight?*  
 B<sub>2</sub>: (Silence)

- A<sub>3</sub>: *Are we?*  
 B<sub>3</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>4</sub>: *Are we, Billy?*  
 B<sub>4</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>5</sub>: *Are you here Bill? Hi! Billy!*  
 B<sub>5</sub>: (Suddenly looks up and smiles)  
 A<sub>6</sub>: (Smiling back) *Bill, you said it'd be fine to dine out on Sunday.*  
 B<sub>6</sub>: (Silence)  
 A<sub>7</sub>: *You said Billy, you... didn't you?*  
 B<sub>7</sub>: *Oh! Ye! Ye! Dining out! Fine!*  
 A<sub>8</sub>: *Are we going ...*  
 B<sub>8</sub>: *Ah yes! Are you ready then?*

Note: underlined are the fragments of simultaneous speaking.

Gender studies are very suspicious of any silent reactions qualifying them all as signs of submission and empowering, which is especially true of the silences described in the article. Our careful study of intentions for silent reactions having zero signified allowed us to get a list of the speakers' interpretations of their intentions. The most recurrent of them are seeking for quietness, having desire to enjoy silence or even listen to silence, feel the quiet of home, 'be myself through keeping silent', 'get to myself', relax. Importantly such varieties of silence with zero signified come up in authentic communication in all four cultures, though the proportion of them may be culturally specific. The specificity is rather vague as far as the comparison concerns communication in British, Russian and Belarusian cultures, though the exact frequencies of the discussed varieties of silence are lined just in the presented order: comparatively the lowest in British culture and the highest in Belarusian. American culture stands obviously apart from Belarusian though remains not very distinct from the silence frequencies in British and Russian cultures, which justifies the assumption that Belarusians value silence more than Americans. Besides, in all four cultures the discovered varieties of silent reactions in domestic settings are mainly male. But they may be almost equally male and female in interactions in established, harmonious and happy couples, who really enjoy the company of each other. All silences in their communicative behavior, including those with zero signified, are indicative of mutual understanding and respect. In both cases the varieties of silence are not actually humiliating but they may produce a lot of excitement in everyday conversations if the other party is not used to them or cannot handle them [2, p. 75].

The data obtained questions the claim that silence in general and the one with zero signified in particular can only be described in terms of derogation and empowerment. Rather the varieties of silence which come up in authentic interactions allow us to view silence as yet another code which together with other codes, verbal and non-verbal, gives shape to our communication. Disregard of the meanings produced by the acts performed with the help of the silent code may bring about inadequacies in the interpretation of communicative events and what's more, they can result in reading into them the meanings they do not have.

## LITERATURE

1. Kurzon, D. *Discourse of Silence* / D. Kurzon. – Amsterdam/Philadelphia : John Benjamins, 1997. – 161 p.
2. Poutrova, M. *Silence. Communicative and Cultural Aspect* / M. Poutrova // *Māksla un mūzika kultūras diskursā. Arts and music in cultural discourse. Proceedings of the International Scientific and Practical Conference.* – Rēzekne, 2014. – P. 73–80.