PERSPECTIVES
ON
SILENCE

edited by
Deborah Tannen
Georgetown University

and
Muriel Saville-Troike
University of Illinois

1985
ABLEX PUBLISHING CORPORATION
NORWOOD, NEW JERSEY 07648
Chapter 10

Eloquent Silence Among the Igbo of Nigeria

Gregory O. Nwoye
University of Benin, Nigeria

Traditional Igbo society was marked by the major importance of face-to-face relationships. With a total absence of writing, and only a rudimentary form of mechanical communication, oral communication held a central place in the transactions and values of the society. Igbo people are still reputed for their cultivation of the art of speaking, and much has been written about their use of proverbs to embellish speech (Achebe 1958; Isichei 1973, 1976). Oratory is a highly cultivated art form and orators are held in very high esteem.

The Igbo are typically very extroverted in their personal interactions. Greetings—verbal as well as nonverbal—are very elaborate in form, and grace in their execution is highly valued. Such greetings, which are normally expected between even total strangers, are exchanged at all times and under all circumstances, with significant exceptions to be noted below. Handshaking is the prevalent form of greeting, accompanied by protracted solicitations about the health and welfare of the person being greeted, and of his or her parents, children, and relatives, whether known or unknown to the speaker. It is against this background of ebullient loquacity and vivacity that the ominous meaning of silence among the Igbo can be interpreted. For a people with this type of disposition, silence is a highly marked form of behavior. It is not regarded merely as the absence of speech, but in almost all instances, silence is interpreted as having significant communicative functions. In short, silence can be very eloquent.

In this chapter I will examine the use of silence in several contexts in which it is mandatory and others in which the choice of silence would signal a socially understood message. These occur at all levels in the structuring of communication within Igbo society. For convenience in discussing silence in these contexts, I will follow the sequence set forth by Saville-Troike (Chapter 1).
INSTITUTIONALLY DETERMINED SILENCE

The Igbo view death as a part of the normal human life cycle. People die when they have completed one life cycle on earth, which ordinarily should happen at a ripe age. Since the Igbo reckoning of longevity is not necessarily mathematical, any person who dies before his or her parents, or before raising offspring to adulthood, is considered to have died young. The Igbo live in deeds, not in years. If someone dies ‘prematurely’, the grief caused by his or her death is so overpowering that the bereaved are almost physically weighed down by it. People who come to sympathize or mourn with the bereaved are not supposed to increase or sharpen the grief of the bereaved by any verbal reference to what happened.

Customarily, bereaved persons are avoided for some days following the death of a family member. About four days after the death it is deemed appropriate to visit them. Sympathizers walk in, go straight to the bereaved, stand before them for a short time, then find a seat somewhere among some other mourners and join them awhile in mutual silence. When they feel they have stayed long enough, they again approach the bereaved, repeat the process of showing themselves to them, and take their leave as silently as they came in. Although no word has been spoken, quite a bit has been communicated. They have shown by their physical presence that they sympathize with the bereaved and share in the loss of their beloved.

This is all the more physically demonstrated by standing before the bereaved. Apart from registering physical presence, the sympathizers have further shown that they had no hand in the death of the person. Since to die young is unnatural and can only be caused by malevolent forces, it is necessary to absolve oneself from any suspicion of being instrumental in an individual’s death by showing up in person. It is believed that someone with magical powers that can cause death cannot stand before the spirit of the deceased (which is supposed to be hovering around his or her home until the final burial rites are performed) without receiving immediate retaliation. Additionally, it is assumed that since everyone knows what has happened, it would be superfluous to talk about it. Furthermore, such discussion would intensify the grief of the bereaved, which no genuine sympathizer intends.

Silence is also mandatory in many ritual contexts. For instance, the Igbo make sacrifices for many purposes. Sacrifices can be offered to appease, thank, or solicit the aid of the numerous spirits and elements that control, guard and guide people in their perpetual struggle against the malevolent influences of evil spirits and their fellow beings. When the sacrifice has been made, it is carried by the person for whom it is made to a place specified by the officiating priest. On the way to this place, the carrier neither greets nor is greeted by the people he or she meets. People not only refrain from speaking to anyone carrying a sacrifice, but show deference by giving the right of way, stepping aside until the carrier has passed. Thus body contact is also avoided.

Silence in this context, apart from marking the solemnity of the situation, further shows that the carrier of a sacrifice is engaged in a serious spiritual task and should not be disturbed by such mundane things as the exchange of greetings. Besides, the sacrifice might be for the purpose of diverting the attention of malevolent spirits from the carrier, in which circumstance it is to be expected that the malevolent force would be making all efforts not to be dislodged. Intervention of any form in this combat between the carrier of sacrifice and his or her adversaries might incur for whoever intervenes the wrath of the already offended malevolent spirit. Therefore, both in the interest of the carrier and any observers, it is better that he or she be left uninterrupted. Finally, and perhaps because of the above reasons, the officiating priest usually imposes the observance of strict silence as a prerequisite for the efficacy of the sacrifice. If and when this condition of silence is violated (a very rare occurrence), the sacrifice has not only to be repeated, but the offender has to make an additional sacrifice.

Other ritual contexts requiring silence include the annual Ogbanigbe festival among the Aniocha Igbo in the Bendel State of Nigeria. For two days certain male members of a village group are required to remain within the confines of their houses without ever coming out at all. Members of their families are expected not to utter any word during those two days. They are not even allowed to ‘break firewood’. It is firmly believed that the men are in serious consultations with their ancestors and therefore should be neither disturbed nor distracted by any form of noise. The end of this period of mandatory silence is signalled by the firing of a dare gun at sundown on the final day.

Another ritual in which silence is mandatory is in the lehu iyi nwe (literally ‘going to the stream for a baby’) ritual, which is the concluding part of the naming ceremony that takes place on the 28th day after a child is born. In this ritual, the mother of the new baby, accompanied by a young girl acting as a maid, takes a ritual trip to a stream, carrying a clay bowl. On her way to the stream and back to perform the ritual cleansing after childbirth, she is forbidden to speak to anyone. People who meet her excuse profusely, but she must not speak.

A final example of ritual silence is related to the belief in reincarnation which is widely held by the Igbo. Some evil children, called Ogbanje, are believed to come into the world simply to torment their mothers. This they do by dying shortly after birth, and then coming into their mothers’ wombs to be born again in an endless cycle of birth and death. These
children are believed to have made a pact with their kindred spirit in the 'other world', and this pact can be severed only by medicine men well versed in the ways of these 'repeater' children. The pact is severed when the personal symbol (iyi ọza) of the child is discovered and dug out of the ground, where it is believed the child buried it prior to the onset of its birth-death cycle. The child is asked threateningly by the medicine man to show where it buried the symbol and to identify and claim it as its own when dug out of the ground.

Since noise in any form is believed to interfere with the discovery of the iyì ọza, silence is demanded by the medicine man of all the observers. If ever this is violated, it is almost always by the mother of the Ogbanje, who adds her own motherly entreaties to the menacing demands of the medicine man. As the principal victim of her tormentor (her child), her failure to comply with the requirements of total silence is ignored on the grounds that she is only attempting to end her torment. She is, in a sense, another ritual speaker, rather than a forcibly silent observer.

GROUP-DETERMINED SILENCE

Collective or group silence is a very effective means of social control in traditional Igbo society, where silence can be used as a sanction against the deviations of members of a village community. This is done by passing a law which makes it punishable by some stipulated penalties for any member of the village to greet, accept greetings, and/or be aided by the deviant. This extreme measure is resorted to when all other measures adopted to bring the offender to repentance and submission to the will of the people have failed. When this happens, the entire village—men, women, and children—are forbidden to talk to the offender and members of his or her immediate family. This ostracism is so complete that nobody trades with them or their family in the village market. Since it is almost impossible to survive for very long under such conditions, because of the mutual dependence upon which life in the village is based, offenders are quickly brought to their knees, and seek means of reestablishing themselves and their family in the good graces of the community. When this is done the embargo on speech is lifted and once more everyone may speak to them. They become full members of the society again.

Another group-determined context in which silence is expected is in the acceptance by a girl of a proposal for marriage. In traditional Igbo culture, the marriage proposal precedes courtship. Courtship is a group affair. After a young man has the consent of a girl he wishes to marry, courtship begins. In this, the young man is joined by his parents, his relatives, and friends who start treating and behaving toward the girl as his 'wife'. This involves, among other things, being generally nice to her, meeting her legitimate demands (which for a girl eager to please are bound to be few), and showering her with gifts. Marriage is a serious affair that needs some form of societal approval and witnessing. When the actual proposal is made, whether by the young man himself or through a middleman, it is always made in the presence of other people, usually the girl's parents and relatives. The witnesses at this scene watch the girl's nonverbal behavior and interpret her actions. If the girl accepts the proposal, she simply turns shyly and runs away to rejoice in the protective seclusion of her room. She is neither supposed nor expected to say yes or no. If she turns down the offer, she just stands there for as long as the suitor considers it decent to stay before taking his leave. Either way she is supposed to be so overwhelmed by emotion to be bereft of speech. If she accepts she should be too happy to talk; otherwise she should be too sad to say anything. Moreover, she is not supposed to know the right answers to give in either case because an answer, particularly if it is appropriate, would indicate she is versed in the ways of the world—an obvious disqualification for a girl who hopes to be married.

Silence is interpreted as meaning consent in many other circumstances as well. This is reflected in an Igbo proverb: Ogbolu nkiri Kwegu ala 'He consents, who keeps silent'. Thus one who keeps silent over, for example, a collective decision by a community, has given consent and therefore participates in the collective responsibilities attached to the decision.

Another meaning of silence among the Igbo is respect. Silence symbolizes respect in hierarchical parent/child, elder/younger, husband/wife, and male/female relationships. Children are expected, as a mark of respect and evidence of good upbringing, to keep silent while their parents speak to, admonish, rebuke, or advise them. The young should listen while the old speak, and females generally should defer to males by remaining silent, unless asked to speak.

INDIVIDUALLY NEGOTIATED SILENCE

Because greetings have such a central place in the life of the Igbo, avoidance of them becomes distinctively marked. Morning greetings in particular are supposed to be very important. Since the morning is the beginning of the day, and since it is believed that the sort of person you first encounter in the morning determines your fortune for that day, people are rather careful about whom they greet first. It is assumed that one did not meet a person if one did not speak to him or her. Therefore people
consciously refrain from speaking to those who they know or suspect can bring ill luck to them and thereby ruin their entire day. Silence in this context is a pragmatic instrument for avoiding misfortune.

Before the advent of western medicine, certain diseases were held in very great awe. One such disease was smallpox, an outbreak of which was a great disaster. Dread of its destructive capacity (not many people ever survived its attack) and belief that the disease can take human form and walk about, combine to impose a moratorium on greetings whenever the disease is known to be around. At such times, when one meets a person on the road, the greetings that are usual even with complete strangers are not exchanged. Since no one knows in whom the dread disease has been incarnated, discretion dictates that one speak only to those with whom one is familiar or much better still, in daily contact. These do not normally extend beyond the immediate nuclear family. It would not be strange to observe a mother passing a daughter who is married into another village on the road without even showing a sign of recognition, if it were known that someone in her marital village was stricken with smallpox. Anyone known to be even remotely related to a smallpox victim is not only not spoken to, but is totally avoided. Thus silence is a powerful tool for ritual protection in an extremely threatening situation.

Given the importance of greetings in all face-to-face encounters, silence becomes a recognized means of showing that two people or two groups of people are so unfriendly that they do not even exchange greetings. The Igbo expression of the English equivalent of 'not to be on speaking terms' is much more sinister than its English equivalent. While it is neither strange nor peculiar to the Igbo, they carry out this state of affairs with such elaboration that silence becomes an art. When one encounters someone to whom 'you do not speak', one is required not only to keep silent, but to make it known to whoever is around that you are not on speaking terms with the other person. This is achieved by stopping, if one is walking, turning one's back while at the same time covering one's mouth or at least making some such symbolic gesture. Meanwhile the other party does the same with an equal if not greater display. Thus by a combination of silence and kinesics, the Igbo tell anyone who may chance to witness it that the person coming in the opposite direction is an enemy who should be avoided.

Finally, although I have reported that silence means assent in most circumstances, in some situations it can imply deferred action. It is generally believed that if one hurts a person and that person keeps quiet, he or she is contemplating an action to take in the future, while a person who vociferates immediately would be unlikely to do much more. An Igbo folk tale about the kite (a predatory bird) and the duck illustrates this belief:

Once upon a time, the kite sent her son to hunt for food. He soon saw a duck with her brood. The young kite swooped down on them and carried off one of the ducklings. The duck stared at him, but said nothing. Meanwhile the kite came back to his waiting mother with his prey. The mother asked him what the reaction of the duck was. He answered that she merely stared at him and said nothing. The mother kite ordered her son to return the duckling to its mother, because her silence forbids some future action. The son complied. On his way back, he saw a hen with her brood and once more swooped down and carried off one of the chicks. The mother fretted, shouted and cursed. On his return the kite asked once again what the reaction of the hen was. The son replied that she made a lot of fuss. Mother kite ordered her son to prepare the chick for dinner because there is nothing more its mother can do.

The story supports the belief that there is a potential and unfathomable decision or action in silence, whereas immediate verbal response to a vexing situation either reveals immediately one's intended line of action, or symbolizes the sum total of all expected action.

As in all cultures, silence in Igbo communication is a figure which reveals its meaning against the ground of speech. Given the values attached to loquacity in Igbo culture, silence becomes all the more marked in its expressiveness. As seen in a variety of situations, silence serves as a means of managing highly-charged situations and relationships. It serves both as a medium of communication in itself and as a context for communication through nonverbal channels. Importantly, it may provide social and psychic protection for one or both communicants in an interaction. The potential power of silence among the Igbo thus achieves a significance not always found—or not found to the same degree—in other societies. For, just as elaborate speech plays such a prominent part in both public and private life, so it is possible for silence in such a setting to become truly eloquent.

REFERENCES


An episode in an old Finnish movie:

SCENE: The common room in a traditional Finnish farmhouse. The farmer and his wife are carrying out their daily tasks in the room.

A middle-aged man enters, takes off his hat and shakes the snow from the top of it, walks slowly across the room, and sits down on the bench that runs along the wall. The man takes his pipe from his pocket, fills it very slowly, sticks it into his mouth, and smokes the pipeful in silence. The farmer and his wife go on doing their duties. Finally -

FARMER: Is it very far you come from? . . .

Each culture maintains its own norms concerning acceptable as well as unacceptable or aberrant speech behavior in social interactions. Values regarding appropriate behavior are often reflected in proverbs, popular sayings, and jokes. In Finland, the following proverbs and sayings illustrate such values:

Listen a lot, speak little.
One word is enough to make a lot of trouble.
One mouth, two ears.
A barking dog does not catch a hare.
A fool speaks a lot, a wise man thinks instead.
Brevity makes a good psalm.
One word is as good as nine.

(Kuusi 1953)

It is evident that popular opinion as reflected in these proverbs and sayings is positive toward people who do not speak much. People are expected to ponder their words carefully because words are powerful. A word once said cannot be recalled, and a careless word may cause a fire
which is difficult to extinguish. A common opinion is that wise persons keep silent: speaking a great deal is not desirable.

The same attitudes were reflected in a humorous pseudoscholarly paper published a few years ago by two Finnish linguists, Auli Hakulinen and Fred Karlsson, on ‘Finnish Silence’ (1977). The authors caricature some of the stereotypical characteristics of communication among Finns. Parodying Grice (1975), they provide a list of Finnish ‘conversational maxims’ which purport to ‘guarantee’ success in various interactional situations in Finland. The first general principle they give is: ‘Do not speak’. If speaking cannot be avoided, however, they offer a number of alternative strategies, such as ‘drink as much alcohol as possible’, ‘avoid direct address’, ‘never mention the addressee’s name’, and ‘try to avoid unnecessary small words like thanks, excuse me, and sorry’.

Their second general principle is: ‘Remain uncommunicative’. This injunction applies to nonverbal as well as verbal behavior, such as not smiling, and not looking an interlocutor in the eyes lest comprehension be revealed. Instructions given for specific situations include: ‘Never ask anything in the classroom, because if you do, you are lost for good; if the teacher asks you a question, look out the window or scratch behind your ear looking thoughtful.’

Although these ‘maxims’ were intended as a humorous exaggeration, they are not without basis in fact. ‘The silent Finn’ is a popular image both within Finland and without. Even at international meetings and conferences, Finnish participants are frequently labeled with this characteristic, either because they avoid taking part in discussion due to a lack of communicative competence in other languages, or because they transfer communicative patterns from Finnish. We shall consider here some of the sources for the existence of the stereotype, both in folklore and in linguistic research. That the use and tolerance of silence by Finns is different from that of other national groups, at least within the Western European culture area, is attested not only by the experiences of Finns in contact with other nationalities, but by the intuitive impressions of other Europeans visiting Finland as well.

**INTERPRETATION OF SILENCE**

We have little empirical data from any society regarding the limits of silence which will be tolerated by participants in conversation before they feel compelled to speak. It is obvious, however, that the threshold of tolerance varies from culture to culture and from language to language. Comparison of the intuitive data about the situation in Finland with similar data about America or Central Europe clearly indicates that the duration of silences tolerated by Finns in conversation is much longer.

Finns who live in Sweden report that they have to be particularly alert to be able to participate in conversation carried out in Swedish, because the tempo of the exchange moves much faster than in Finnish discourse. However, Allwood (n.d.) claims that the response time (the extent of time allowed between speaker turns) seems to be longer in a Swedish conversation than in an American one. Allwood hypothesizes that response time is shorter in cultures in which the speakers are more tolerant of being interrupted. This seems to be the case in Southern European cultures, where the norm that only one person speaks at a time does not hold to the extent that it does in Sweden. (See, for example, Tannen, Chapter 6.)

A Finn’s tolerance of silence is not unlimited however. There are certain implicit norms in Finnish conversational behavior which set the limits in terms of the social constraints characterizing the situation. The duration of silence causing no embarrassment is shortest in informal situations between strangers while longer pauses between turns are tolerated in intimate, relaxed discussion, on the one hand, and in conversations dealing with abstract topics involving reflection and contemplation. This is what Baker (1955) terms ‘positive’ silence.

One of the basic principles in dyadic interaction is the exchange of speaking turns: while one of the participants is speaking, the other is supposed to take the role of the listener. Listeners are not, however, totally silent and passive. While listening, they are engaged in various types of backchannel behavior. They may nod or shake their heads, purse their lips, raise their eyebrows, or they may make use of vocal backchannel signals accompanying the speaker’s verbal message, such as (in English) uh-huh, yeah, right, I see. They may also finish off sentences begun by the other party, interrupt the other person’s speech, or make brief independent statements. This activity of the listener is not meaningless to the speaker. It is not possible for the speaker to accomplish a successful speech act without first attracting the attention of those to whom the speech act is addressed. One of the things of which the speaker wants to be sure is that the listener understands what he or she is saying, which normally requires cooperation from the listener. As part of the process of communication, the speaker regularly examines and interprets the backchannel behavior of the interlocutor.

The social and cognitive organization of speaking and listening and, accordingly, the cues in the speech which give information to the interactor of the other’s attitudes vary in different cultures and languages, and it is obvious that cross-cultural differences in feedback cues can lead to erroneous pragmatic interpretation of the interlocutor’s intentions as a result of intercultural interference (cf. Erickson 1979).

The use of vocalizations and verbal backchannel signals is less fre-
quent in Finnish than in Central European languages or in English as spoken in Britain and America. Verbal backchannel signals do exist in Finnish (e.g., joo, niin, aivan, kyldä), and they are used especially in informal and enthusiastic discourse, but too frequent use of them is considered intrusive; that this is negatively regarded is seen in the fact that such behavior is considered as typical of drunken people. Finns ‘backchannel’ primarily by nonverbal means: head nods, mimics, on and off eye contact with the speaker (with the gaze typically directed towards the distance), and occasionally wordless murmurs. Interruptions are not normally tolerated. The typical Finn is a ‘silent’ listener.

In cross-cultural communication, any of the three interaction strategies typically employed by Finns in discussion can lead to problems and misunderstandings:

1. ‘Active’ participation, which for a Finn may mean delayed attempts at turn-taking, clumsy gambits, disfluency, slow speech, and silent observation of ongoing discourse.
2. Silent participation, which may result in a low level of attraction towards the Finn, because a person who does not speak remains invisible.
3. Entire withdrawal from the discussion, which can easily be misinterpreted cross-culturally as hostility towards the group, and the group may react accordingly, creating a vicious circle.

A Finnish listener’s silence or the absence of verbal signals for active listening may result in a foreign interactant inferring that the Finnish interlocutor is not paying attention, or that the Finn is indifferent, sullen, or even hostile. The long silences that tend to occur in interactional situations with Finns are sometimes interpreted by foreign participants as indicating that the Finn is feeling anxiety and wishes to conclude the interaction, or that the Finn considers the topic as annoying. In contrastive linguistic terms, this suggests that the Finnish interactant has transferred behavioral conventions and pragmatics from the native language/culture in ways that did not meet the expectations of the other participant. The result is a breakdown in communication in which the interactants are mutually unaware of the nature of the conflict.

THE RATE OF SPEECH

Does an average Finn speak slower than speakers of other languages? The results of speech rate measurements do not support such a perception. The percentage of pauses in Finnish out of total speaking time is about the same as it is in other languages. In a test, for instance, in which speakers of different languages gave verbal descriptions of cartoons, the average percentage of pause time of Finns was 39 percent, that of Swedish-speaking Finns 41 percent, of Swedes 34 percent, of native speakers of British English 39 percent, and of native speakers of American English 40 percent (Lehtonen 1979).

The actual rate of speaking varied drastically in the test when measured in words or in syllables. The figures for different languages cannot be compared, however, because of the differences in word and syllable structures in different languages. These differences are the reason for the seemingly paradoxical result that Finnish was spoken slightly faster than English when measured in syllables, the articulation rate being 305 syllables per minute for Finnish and 291 syllables per minute for English, but it was spoken much slower than English when the rate was measured in words, the rate being 146 words per minute for Finnish and 202 words per minute for English (obviously Finnish words are longer than English words). Moreover, differences between individual speakers were great, especially with regard to the amount of pausing and the overall rate of speaking.

Physical measures of speech rate and pauses do not necessarily serve as ‘objective’ parameters of time and tempo. There are no ideal values which could be used as norms to label speech as relatively fast or slow. The interrelationship between objective and subjective temporality is complicated by a multitude of intervening factors such as personality, contextual configurations, and register and style expectations.

The impression of an interactant being slow may also be a function of the interaction itself, when the personal style of one member of a dyad is more active than that of the other (cf. Bruneau 1980:104). Baker (1955) reports some experiments with interactions between psychiatrists and their patients. When the interviewer (psychiatrist) exercised a passive role, the subject’s vocabulary expansion rate remained normal, but when the interviewer adopted a more active stand, the subject was forced to adopt a defensive role and there was less variety in speech.

Within a certain culture, members of a subcultural group, or even the inhabitants of a particular geographical area, may be considered slower or faster in speech than their fellow countrymen. In some cases, the speakers of an entire nation have gained the reputation of being slower in speech (and sometimes, pejoratively, in other cognitive tasks?). In Germany the slow speakers are the East Frisians; for the Frenchmen the slow speakers are found in Belgium; and in Switzerland the people who are allegedly to speak slowly are those who live in the area of Berne or Zurich.

In Finland, the positive stereotype of fast and vivid speech rests with the inhabitants of Carelia in the southeastern parts of the country, while the speakers of the dialect of Häme in the southwestern areas of Central
Finland are negatively stereotyped as slow in speech, taciturn, clumsy, and often somewhat simple-minded. In some languages such people are even characterized by specific names; in Germany they are called *Schildbürger*, and in Finland they are *hölmöläiset*, who in many people's imagination live in Häme.

The reputed slowness of the Häme people is reflected folklorically in well-known jokes about them, such as the following taken from the Folklore Archives of the Finnish Literary Society:

A Häme man enters a neighbor's house, sits for quite a while before the neighbor asks why he has come, and then says that he came to tell him that his house is burning.

A popular Saturday night TV show was discontinued. What was the reason? —The Häme inhabitants had such a great time on Sunday morning in church.

Two Häme brothers were on their way to work in the morning. One says, 'It is here that I lost my knife'. Coming back home in the evening, the other asks, 'Your knife, did you say?'

There are two possible reasons for this reputation of the Häme inhabitants: either they are really slower than other Finns or the impression of slowness in their speech results from certain linguistic features of their dialect, such as the relatively conservative morphophonology which lacks the consonant and vowel elision typical of other dialects.

As part of a research program examining the impact of the English language and Anglo-American culture on Finnish, the Finnish-English Cross-Language Project carried out experiments with a student population, which was differentiated in terms of the domiciles of the informants and their parents (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1980a). Informants who had lived all their lives in Häme, and of whose parents at least one had done the same, were found to be statistically significantly slower than the others. The total amount of silence during pauses in their speech was longer, the number of hesitations was higher, and the number of repairs in the case of errors in reading tests was smaller (see Lehtonen and Helkkiläinen 1981). Thus at least part of the impressionistic stereotype appears to have a foundation in fact.

THE FINNISH CHARACTER

One of the recurring popular explanations of Finnish silence is the national character of the people. At the beginning of the twentieth century, Hugo Bergroth, a lecturer at the University of Helsinki, described the character of Swedish-speaking Finns as phlegmatic, introverted, reticent, and unimaginative (Bergroth 1916:31). The Finnish linguist Lauri Hakulinen accepted this characterization and stated that it was even more fitting for the description of Finnish-speaking Finns (Hakulinen 1979:32–34). While ‘national character’ is no longer a generally accepted social science construct, cross-cultural differences in the uses of talk and silence clearly exist. Americans ask questions and force others to talk to fill up interpersonal silence, because silence is not tolerated socially. In many cases, the function of talk among Americans is not in the transference of information or messages, but in the avoidance of silence. In Finland, silence is socially acceptable to a different degree. Differences of this kind may arise from differences in educational backgrounds. The American experiences the interactional situation differently because of differences in education and socialization.

Communicatively meaningful silence may result from a speaker's intentional switch from the verbal to the nonverbal communication channel: silence can make up a silent speech act and thus becomes the message itself or part of it. In many cases, it can be the silence that contains the most important cues for the meaning of the message. Much can be said by keeping quiet. Silences of this type are often clearly culture-specific in their use and meaning, but even within one and the same culture such silences may function differently between different types of interactants and in different types of situations: meaningful silence between friends is not the same as meaningful silence between strangers (cf. Baker 1955).

Samarin (1964) observes that ‘in normal social intercourse between friends and between members of the same in-group, there seems to be a tendency to “translate” messages into informal, redundant, even poorly structured idiom—even when one knows clearly what one wants to say’. In such situations too much information content in speech can easily throw the interlocutor off balance. Silence may substitute for such idiom in certain cultures or subcultures. Samarin (1964:119) notes that the Gbeya of the Central African Republic do not seem to feel under any obligation to talk in social situations, that for them ‘speech, not silence, is what gets a person into trouble’.

Samarin, in comparing the use of silence between Americans and the Gbeya, concludes that the American expects 'straight talk' from his interlocutors and does not understand silence at all. Casual conversation between an American and a speaker of a 'silent language' is liable to result in misunderstanding and disharmony (cf. Crocker 1980).

In Finland, children are traditionally not supposed to be engaged in conversation with adults unless the adults clearly indicate their wish to enter a conversation with them. Children may only talk under the condi-
tions set by adults in the speech situation. At meals, silence rather than talk is the rule; it is not considered necessary to be engaged in social small talk while eating. This may have very important implications for socialization because for the important in-group of the family, meals are one of the few social situations where all the members are present.

The reasons for Finnish silence may also be at least partly historical. In Finland, the rural population, which until the 1960s meant a majority of the population, used to live in separate houses instead of villages. The forms of social interaction which developed in this situation were quite different from what develops in communities which offer more possibilities for interpersonal contacts. The scarcity of social contacts is reflected also in international relationships and cross-cultural contacts. The impact of international contacts is being felt in Finland today, and we predict that as a result the number of ‘silent Finns’ will be reduced considerably in the future. Many people see foreign influences as a threat to Finnish culture (see Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1980a), but if the result is a more communicative Finn, the development is not certainly for the worse.

REFERENCES


