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Silence as Message (Gender-related aspects of communicative competence)

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Silence as Message

(Gender-related aspects of communicative competence)¹

ABSTRACT

The 1920s saw the emergence of interest in gender-related issues of communication in the scholarly literature. Descriptive analyses of various cultural and linguistic patterns highlighted that there are speech communities within which women undergo linguistic discrimination in two ways: how they are taught to use language and how they actually use it. The present paper provides an analysis of the latter instance.

Within the methodological framework of the Ethnography of Communication, and on the in/occurrence of components of the SPEAKING model, the paper aims at discussing speech events in which silence is a gender-specific fact. Illustrative data have been drawn from ethnographic records and travelogues. Such an analysis of the problem in point enables to discuss key issues of communicative competence and infer that, alongside acquiring vocabulary and grammar rules of a language, it is significant to be aware of who and when is expected to avoid verbal communication in a given speech community.

Keywords: *Silence, Speech Event, Gender Asymmetries, Communicative Competence.*

Introduction

Gender-related features in speech events began to attract scholars' attention since the 1920s. It was in 1922 when Otto Jespersen, in his book *Language: Its Nature, Development and Origins*, included an individual chapter to differences between feminine and masculine speech behaviours. Based on missionaries' and travelers' accounts, Jespersen discusses cases from an indigenous Caribbean community where, as he observed, local women spoke distinctly from men; men understand women's discourse but they another variety, with its peculiar forms, to communicate (Jespersen, 1922, 237).

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When discussing differences between women's and men's linguistic portraits, Z. Kikvidze notes that only a biological sex cannot be a factor to facilitate generation of a linguistic variable; this will only be possible when a natural features takes on social relevance. As he goes on to say, Gender Studies have demonstrated that not a biological sex but rather cultural values play a decisive role in the development of a human as a social creature. This is culture that gives prominence to a set of human features and downplays another; this is why a women becomes feminine and a man becomes masculine made possible following the acquisition of behavioural standards acceptable for a given community (Kikvidze, 2001, 39-46). Whilst gender assumes social and cultural relevance, gender roles assume socio-cultural expectations being actualized in conversations.

Gender-related differences encoded in linguistic structures have repeatedly become object of scholar investigations. In her seminal paper "Language and woman's place," Robin T. Lakoff notes that in our society the dichotomy 'woman-man' is one of the instances of disparity and that individual cases of language use refer to these disparities, that women's linguistic discrimination is twofold: how they are taught to use language, and how they use it (Lakoff, 1973, 46). In the present paper we are concerned with latter aspect, that is, whether women are full-fledged participants of a communication process in the same way as men within individual speech events. My objective is to explore the problem in question based on analyses of individual speech events provided in Georgian ethnographic accounts and travelogues, and to present verbal communication avoidance by women as an instance of gender-based asymmetries.

Methodology

One of the models for the descriptive analysis of communication is D. H. Hymes' SPEAKING which was initially developed in the 1960s within the Ethnography of Communication, the then new research trend (Hymes, 1977, 58-66; Hymes, 1972, 59-67). This is an acronym standing for key components of a speech events: where and when an action takes place (Setting/Scene), who are its participants (Participants), what they want to achieve (Ends), what is a sequence of acts (Act Sequence), what is its tone (Key), what are the channels of communication (Instrumentalities), why individuals behave the way they do (Norms of Interaction), what genre a speech event belongs to (Genres). There is no rule, a ready-made recipe that would prescribe assigning individual components of the SPEAKING model to a speech event; therefore, each of their occurrences should be established empirically. In the present paper, empirical data are gleaned from Georgian ethnographic accounts and travelogues.

Communicative Competence

The theoretical goal of the Ethnography of Communication has been postulated onto the notion of communicative competence: what should a speaker know in order to conduct effective communication?

For the sake of the neutralization of the Chomskyan dichotomy between competence and performance, D. H. Hymes developed the notion of *communicative competence*, and defined it as *Rules of appropriateness* “acquired as part of conceptions of self, and of meanings associated both with particular forms of speech and with the act of speaking itself” (Hymes, 1977, 94); whilst Chomskyan ‘competence’ demonstrates radical *grammatism*, Hymes emphasizes that to speak a language implies not only command of its vocabulary and grammatical rules. It N. Chomsky charges ‘competence’ with a human’s mental grammar whereby language is represented as a set of abstract rules, ‘communicative competence’ is a whole aggregate of communicative skills acquired based on one’s social experience. Knowledge of norms of use are nonetheless significant than that of grammatical rules².

One’s communicative competence develops through interaction with various individuals. It is important to know what is assumed to be a request, assertion, command in a given language community, as well as allowed and forbidden topics, normal duration of silence, normal timber of voice, etc. Communicative competence incorporates answers to the questions: in specific conditions, who and when may talk, when is it necessary to stop talking, how to talk to individuals of various status and roles, what are non-verbal behaviours appropriate to various contexts, what are turn-taking rules, and so forth.

With intercultural distinctions, lack of communicative competence may impede communication. Besides, it should necessarily be emphasized that not all kinds of communication is conducted by means of language, and that speech is not the only one among means of communication. The following categories should be considered with respect to a speech event: speaker’s gender, age, social status, field of activity, etc.

² It should also be noted that, alongside ‘*communicative competence*’, there is a parallel term ‘*sociolinguistic competence*’, they essentially are terminological synonyms (Kikvidze, 2015, 204-205).

Gender-related aspect of speech events

When addressing anthropolinguistic peculiarities related to interlocutors' gender I give preference to the model which was developed by D. Hymes to treat speech behavior of Araucanians, a group of peoples inhabiting adjacent territories of Chile and Argentina, proposing the opposition of *voluble* and *taciturn* as dimensions in the interactional etiquette: a man is voluble interlocutor while a woman is taciturn (Hymes, 1977, 37).

Notwithstanding the occurrence of a number of experimental studies of mixed-gender communication demonstrating that women more tend to talking and much more solidary to their interlocutors in conversations than men (DeFrancisco, 1991; Coates, 1986; Fishman, 1983), there are instances in which Hymes' oppositional model seems quite plausible since he deals with not the human faculty of speech but rather of an opportunity of its realization. Even based on the stereotypes in European culture, eloquent speech in public appearances is men's job while women are required to be silent and submissive; a woman performs restrain and timidity.

As Hymes notes, in the Araucanian Indians' culture, "[t]he ideal Araucanian man is a good orator, with good memory, general conversationalist, expected to speak well and often. Men are encouraged to talk on all occasions, speaking being a sign of masculine intelligence and leadership. The ideal Araucanian woman is submissive and quite [...]. At gatherings where men do much talking, women sit together listlessly, communicating only in whispers or not at all" (Hymes, 1977, 37). According to their tribal traditions, "[o]n first arriving in her husband's home, a wife is expected to sit silently facing the wall, not looking anyone directly in the face. Only after several months is she permitted to speak, and then, only a little" (ibid.).

Silence as message

A tradition of women's taciturnity has occurred in Georgian culture. For instance, in his descriptions of wedding rituals, Archangelo Lamberti addresses an engagements ceremony and writes:

Even if they encounter a fiancé face-to-face, well-bred women will not raise their eyes and not look at him in order to prove their timidity. If a fiancé insists to talk to women, it is frequent that he receives a sharp answer instead of fine words (Lamberti, 1938, 85).

S (setting) —> Samegrelo in the 17 th c.: Engagement ritual
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<p>P (participants) —> Two participants: P1 —> Fiance P2 —> Fiancee (“a well-bred woman”) E (ends) —> Conversation A (act sequence) —> a) P1 addresses P2; b) P2 – # (“silence”); In case of repeated attempt: c) P1 addresses P2 (“fine words”); d) P2 addresses P1 (“sharp answer”). K (key) —> Intimate. I (instrumentalities) —> Oral. N (norms of interaction) —> Speech avoidance on the part of P2; P2 avoids eye contact with P1. G (genres) —> Conversation.</p>
<p>Scene: Meet-and-greet. Cannel of Communication: Oral. Form of Message: Verbal and non-verbal.</p>

Traditional linguistics does not consider silence as a linguistic unit, concentrating on such phenomena as word, utterance, text. In the meantime, it is clear that silence has its own plane of content and plane of expression. It is true that, in the plane of expression, silence is devoid of sonar effects; however, it has its own content. A concept of silence is formed whereby there is speech. Silence and speech are not mutually exclusive. Within a speech event silence has a specific function: it is a non-verbal communicative response and avoidance from speaking.

Silence is a behavioral stereotype of a communication strategy. One should distinguish between (1) short-term pauses between sentences, and (2) silence *per se*. While the former instance has a syntactic function to finalize one utterance before another starts, the latter one has a communicative function and its use is determined by a situational context.

It has been maintained in the scholarly literature that silence is not speechlessness, rather it is a peculiar form of speech, albeit with no words: if one speaks about zero desinences, zero suffixes in language, one should speak about ‘a zero speech act’ as well (Arutyunova, 1994, 110); even when

someone tries not to involve in a conversation, s/he is still a participant of a given communicative act (Croucher, 2016, 9); silence is not emptiness (Samarin, 1965, 115); silence is able to perform a function of a liaison (Jensen, 1973, 249-252); silence conveys a message in the same way as words to (DeVito, 1989, 153-154).

It should be noted that a communicative function of silence, considered within a theory of communication, is not always universal, this being attested by our above-analyzed examples. Women's avoidance of verbal communication is not their choice but rather a commitment from their speech community and a justification of expectations of those around them.³ A certain clarification of silence on the part of "well-bred women" can be found in a Laz story recorded by Georges Dumézil, a French Caucasologist: in accordance with the early custom in Lazistan, a maiden, who would not blush with shame when she was spoken to, would not be referred to in good terms, concluding: "WE do not take such a girl as a bride; we need a girl like an angel" (Dumézil 2009, 83). This is why nubile women of the Black Sea coast kept silence in the presence of visitors having come to ask for marriage.

Georgian ethnographic sources evidence an instance in which a third person occurs as 'a filler of silence' in a would-be couple's communication – a sender of a message; if we consider this instance with respect to the grid of components of the SPEAKING model, it can be viewed as a classical example of the distinction between a sender/receiver, on the one hand, and an addresser/addressee, on the other:

A nubile Megrelian woman avoids encounter with a man from a family other than hers, and regards much more indecent to talk anole to him even when they are going to make a declaration of love to each other. In all of such cases, a woman asks her relative or an aged lady to attend who should act as interpreters for a nubile woman and a 'Shkhvashturi' – a stranger, a man from a family other than hers (Sakhokia, 1956, 73).

S (setting) —> Samegrelo in the 1890s

P (participants) —> Three participants:

P1 —> Nubile woman

P2 —> Man ('Shkhvashturi' – a stranger, a man from a family other than hers)

³ With this respect, the following expressions with gendered connotations are notable; for instance, biblical "Let your women keep silence in the churches, for it is not permitted unto them to speak" (Epistles of St. Paul to the Corinthians, XIV, 34); Greek: "Ἡ σιωπή είναι στολίδι μιας γυναίκας" ["Silence is a woman's ornament"] (Seven Tragedies of Sophocles: Ajax, 5th Century B.C.; Ray 1768, 19; Speake & Simpson 2015, 285);

P3 —> ‘Interpreter’ (a nubile woman’s family member or an aged lady).

E (ends) —> Conversation (‘declaration of love’).

A (act sequence) —> P1, as a nubile woman, is not allowed to speak immediately to a man from a family other than hers, that is, to P2. Hence, an addressee of a message does not coincide with a receiver of message. There are the following sequences: P1 – P3 – P2 and P2 – P3 – P1

K (key) —> Modest

I (instrumentalities) —> Oral

N (norms of interaction) —> Indirect communication: when a woman is not married, she is not allowed to talk immediately to a man from a family other than hers.

G (genres) —> Conversation

Scene: Unofficial.

Channel of Communication: Oral.

Form of Message: Verbal.

A woman was obliged to avoid talking during a religious wedding ceremony. According to T. Sakhokia, a priest’s question “Do you agree?” is easily answered by a groom, while bride is silent. During the entire ceremony, it is indecent for a bride to speak up, and her silence implies consent (Sakhokia, 1956, 97).

It was necessary to keep silence both throughout a wedding day and following it: “On a wedding day, a bride is taken to a room where dowries are placed; she is adorned, fed, and put on her feet. She considers sitting to be very shameful; neither will she speak up; she would only whisper in a bridesmaid’s ear, her face being swathed (Tsaisheli, 1894, 3). For a whole year, a bride and a groom would not speak to each other in public since it was considered shameful (Makalatia, 1941, 270).

The American anthropological linguist Keith Basso provided a detailed study women’s silence in speech events based on an Apache community. In his paper “‘To Give up on Words’: Silence in Western Apache Culture,” published in 1970, Basso suggests that at an early stage of their companionship women avoid talking to men, this being conditioned by extralinguistic factors: “This is especially true for girls, who are informed by their mothers and older sisters that silence in courtship’ is a sign of modesty and that an eagerness to speak betrays previous experience with men” (Basso, 1970, 219). The author also states the following: “Few of us would maintain that “silence is golden” for all people at all times⁴. But we feel that silence is a virtue for some people some of the

⁴ Cf. Expressions associated with silence: 1. Geo. “Wise talk is pure silver, and silence is fine gold” (*Life of Gregory of*

time, and we encourage children on the road to cultural competence to act accordingly” (op. cit.: 215).

Concluding remarks

The opposition of ‘voluble’ (man) and ‘taciturn’ (woman), suggested by D. Hymes, which, as we already saw, seems to be quite regular in various cultures, is at odds with the Social Penetration Theory of the 1970s. The theory is an attempt to describe how in the process of communication a transfer is made from a comparatively superficial grade to an intimate one, from general issues to personal ones with respect to how well interlocutors know each other and how they achieve self-disclosure (Taylor, 1968; Croucher, 2016, 54). Gender-related aspects are one of the key ones in such circumstances. For example, masculinity is negatively linked to self-disclosure. A man who discloses personal information and emotions is considered to be more feminine and less masculine our culture. Hence, no matter how paradoxical it is, there are cases when the Hymesean dichotomy between ‘voluble’ (man) and ‘taciturn’ (woman) is quite legitimate, and, vice versa, when ‘speaking like a woman’ implies volubility, and it bears an explicitly negative connotation when referred to as a man. In its entirety, a meaning of silence depends on a context of its occurrence; this is why the problem of its treatment is part of communicative competence.

Silence is a message and its position is determined by one’s communicative competence. Alongside knowing of whom, when, and how to speak, it is important to be aware of with whom, when, and why to keep silence. Traditional linguistics adheres to a negative definition of silence: “absence of speech” (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). According to the Explanatory Dictionary of the Georgian Language, *dumili* (‘silence’) is “to keep still, to say nothing, not to speak up” (Chikobava, 1953, 1235). Based on these definitions, silence is an absence of verbal (phonational) speech. Such an approach gives rise to additional questions as far as there are speech events whereby ‘silence’ and ‘absence of speech’ are in no way synonymous notions. Our empirical data have shown that silence is an act of deprivation not of speech faculty but rather of a right to verbal communication.

The presented illustrative data demonstrate that silence is an act of restriction not of a speech faculty but rather of a right of verbal communication. Why are specifically women subject to those restrictions? Brown and Levinson associate it with a behavioral stereotype and note that in many communities silence occurs in women’s behavior as their ‘deferent’ self-humbling in front of men

Khandzta by Giorgi Merchule; 10th c.); 2. Eng. “Speech is silver, Silence is golden” (Carlyle, 1896, 198.). Brewer's Dictionary of Phrase and Fable refers to the oriental etymology of the expression in point considering the following Hebrew phrase to be its equivalent: “If a word be worth one shekel, silence is worth two” (Brewer, 1953, 855).

(Brown & Levinson, 1987, 186)

The analysis conducted within the framework of the Ethnography of Communication makes it clear that a) instances of silence are of systemic character and do not occur as exception, b) restriction of verbal communication occurs whenever there are gender-based asymmetries between participants of a speech event, and, c) such cases provide opportunities for identification of noteworthy parallels in terms of intercultural relationships.

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