

FORMULAIC SILENCE*

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Linguistic routine has traditionally been associated with verbal forms. The main goal of this paper is to argue that some formulaic linguistic (communicative) behavior consists in remaining silent. Silent routine is discussed with reference to the Brown — Levinson Theory of Politeness and E. Leach's cultural anthropological view of communication. A more general theoretical point concerns the relation between speech and silence. Due to the close affinity of verbal and silent routines it is argued that silence does not fall outside the scope of pragmatic research on language.

This paper belongs to a larger body of research on communicative silence (Jaworski in preparation). One of the aims of the section on *formulaic silence* in this research is the illustration of more general theses: 1. speech and silence are not mere opposites, 2. silence is not the negative member of the pair *speech-silence*, and 3. the functions of speech and silence overlap to such a degree that sometimes they can be treated as functional equivalents (cf. Saunders 1985; Tyler 1978; Bruneau 1973).

I will begin with a short overview of those areas of communicative behavior where the functional overlap between speech and silence can be observed.

It is usually thought that speech (for example, 'small talk') is used to indicate one's willingness to communicate with another person, and that silence is avoided at all cost in order to prevent communication from breaking down (see, for example, Burton 1980: 22-23). However, I believe that the opposite is also possible, that is silence can sometimes signal that the channel of communication remains open, or that one has no intention of closing it down, for example, before leave-taking or in situations of anger or quarrel. The use of speech in such situations has precisely the effect of overtly terminating the possibility of further communication between the participants, for example, when the final 'good-bye' is said by both parties or when in an argument one person says something unpleasant to the other (see also Tannen in press). In their analysis of conversational strategies in Bergman's film *Scenes from a marriage*, Lakoff — Tannen (1984) quote examples in which avoidance of confrontation or discussions of unpleasant topics is achieved by the participants by excessive, irrelevant verbiage and

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pontification, or by resorting to silence (terminating a conversation).

For similar reasons people refrain from complaining to others, even when they have a good reason to do so. Bonikowska calls this an 'opting-out choice' in the performance of a given speech act. In her study this is the speech act of complaint. One informant gives the following reason for remaining silent rather than uttering complaint to another party: «He may be offended, this could finish our relationship» (Bonikowska 1988: 178).

Silence and speech complement each other on a number of planes. Philips (1985) discusses two types of communication: communication structured through talk and communication structured through silence. In many situations in which communication is structured through talk, it is sufficient to rely on verbal signals to understand and interpret a conversation. But sometimes during interaction structured through talk, silence or breaks in speech occur and add to the interpretation of the situation. These are temporary shifts to interaction dependent on physical activities or visual stimuli (for example, while eating, passing food, lighting a cigarette or reading), or marking a turn-taking juncture. Philips suggests also that when interaction is structured through silence, for example, in a dance or in a football game, the dependence on the visual channel is so great that any talk which *accompanies* the interaction (but does not turn away from it) is secondary to the co-occurring visual stimuli and physical activities.

The following is an example of how a dyad may switch from interaction structured through talk to interaction structured through silence and back to talk again. I was driving with my wife to a place located some 250 kilometers away from our hometown. When we got quite close to the destination of our trip and we saw a sign informing us that the town we were driving to was only 8 kilometers away, my wife said: *To już można dojść pieszo*. 'One can make it on foot from here'. I slowed down the car and extended my arm pointing to the door on her side as if suggesting that she should leave the car and start walking. My wife said: *Wiedziałam, że to zaraz skomentujesz*. 'I knew you were going to comment on it right away'. In this example my wife's turns were structured through talk and mine was structured through silence. My contribution was interpreted without hesitation and reacted to as if I had actually spoken something. My wife even referred to what I did as a «comment», which is usually associated with verbal statements. In short, what this situation indicates is that interaction structured through talk and interaction structured through silence can exist side by side in a conversation and one can successfully replace the other. In the same vein, Bonikowska (1988) suggests that the illocutionary force of a complaint can be achieved either verbally or nonverbally, e.g. 'I hate your smoking around the house', or by opening the window or sweeping out, respectively. (See Kendon 1985 for a related study on the use of gesture in conversation).

Another area where speech and silence overlap functionally is hesitation. Hesitation can take the form of filled or unfilled pauses (silence) or repetition. It has been argued (Tannen 1987) that the preference for the use of silence or repetition in a narrative, for example, may be culturally conditioned and that communities vary with respect to the valuation of silent and verbal hesitation strategies of achieving greater fluency by a speaker (see also Tannen 1979).

Being a very indirect way of 'saying' things (Tannen 1985) silence is also a good way of refusing invitations or offers. In this way the face threat (Brown – Levinson 1987 [1978]) of a refusal or rejection is considerably minimized. It is also a convenient way of

being refused because after a silent rejection it is easy to repeat the invitation or offer (Davidson 1984).

Speech and silence are also interrelated on 'lower' levels of linguistic analysis. Crutenden (1986) lists three major types of places in utterances in which pauses occur: 1. at major constituent boundaries; 2. between minor constituent boundaries but before words with high lexical context; 3. after the first word in an intonation group. Types 2 and 3 typically belong to hesitation phenomena. Type 1, however, has a rather profound role in organizing one's speech into a grammatically patterned and comprehensible structure.

An interesting relationship between silence and speech holds in the case of so called 'phatic communion' (Malinowski 1972), or 'small talk' (e.g. Laver 1981). In some cultures small talk requires relatively more speech than in others. For example, when meeting strangers in a Western culture one is expected to talk much to them (Laver 1981). The topics of these conversations are fairly predictable and restricted in scope depending on the situation (Schneider 1987). As is well known, however, in the Western Apache culture meeting strangers requires silence (Basso 1972). Several other studies have now shown that cultures differ in their notions of how much (small) talk is required and sufficient in various situations and that cultures differ in their tolerance for silence (see, for example, Samarin 1964; Reisman 1974; Philips 1976; Scollon 1985; Lehtonen – Sajavaara 1985).

'Routine' or 'formulaic' language constitutes a special case of small talk. Laver (1981: 290) maintains that «routine behavior is *polite* behavior». He also mentions that one of three main functions of (routine) phatic communion at the beginning of an interaction is to avoid the awkwardness of silence (see also Schneider 1987). It seems then that it has been taken for granted up till now that linguistic routine is verbal. Thus, relatively much attention has been devoted to the use of verbal linguistic routines as well as to certain aspects of routine use of gestures. However, to the best of my knowledge, no one has yet dealt with *silent* routine. Thus, it is the main goal of this paper to argue that some formulaic linguistic (communicative) behavior consists in remaining silent. Silent routine is discussed here with reference to some aspects of the Brown – Levinson Theory of Politeness and Edmund Leach's cultural anthropological study of communication.

As has been said, linguistic routine has traditionally been associated with verbal forms. Laver (1981) states that routines are commonly used in potentially face-threatening acts. The face threatening acts discussed by Laver include what he calls the marginal phases of conversations, i.e., openings, closings and introductions, as well as church ceremonies, i.e., baptisms, weddings and funerals. Since routine behavior is treated as polite behavior, the use of formulas and ritual language in these situations has the potential of minimizing the face threat of the participants. Similarly, Tannen – Öztek (1981) observe that one of the three categories of Greek and Turkish formulae involves 'anxiety provoking events' which «seem to occasion formulas for the purpose of creating a sense of control over forces that otherwise seem uncontrollable and threatening. They fall into two categories: *health* and *loss*» (ibid.: 39-40). Some of the examples of anxiety-provoking events quoted by Tannen – Öztek are: choking on food, illness, going on a trip, leave-taking, and dying.

Elaborating on Leach's (1964, 1976) anthropological theory of communication, I would like to suggest that all of these situations and events are special in two ways.

First, they mark the boundaries between two states or activities of a person, e.g. not knowing someone and knowing someone (introduction), talking to someone and not talking to someone (leave-taking), being 'here' and being 'there' (going on a trip), being a 'non-person' (in a Christian sense) and being a child of God (baptism), being single and being married (wedding), etc. Secondly, situations like that give their participants ambiguous status: a person choking on food is and is not eating, people getting married are not single any more but not quite married yet, somebody who is critically ill is not dead but not fully alive either. As Leach argues, points of transition and ambiguous status have a special place in every cultural system:

A boundary separates two zones of social space-time which are *normal, time-bound, clear-cut, central, secular*, but the spatial and temporal markers which actually serve as boundaries are themselves *abnormal, timeless, ambiguous, at the edge, sacred*. [...] Whenever we make category distinctions within a unified field, either spatial or temporal, it is the boundaries that matter; we concentrate our attention on the differences not the similarities, and this makes us feel that the markers of such boundaries are of special value, 'sacred', 'taboo'. [...]

The crossing of frontiers and thresholds is always hedged about with ritual, so also is the transition from one social status to another (Leach 1976: 35).

Thus, the use of linguistic formulas typically overrides the use of non-formulaic but otherwise conventionally appropriate language in 'interactions containing the highest risk to face' (Laver 1981; 290), or, to use Leach's terms, in situations perceived as 'sacred', 'ambiguous', or 'taboo'. In different cultures and sub-cultures, different concepts and their exemplifications will be tabooed to a greater or lesser extent. For example, Leach (1964) states that most bodily fluids (for example, urine, menstrual blood, saliva, etc.) are generally taboo when they leave the body: they are part of someone's body but at the same time they are outside it and 'autonomous'. This is why we do not talk about bodily fluids very freely and when we do we often employ euphemisms to refer to them.

The concern as to what constitutes taboo will of course vary from (sub)culture to (sub)culture. Take spitting, for example. Skillful spitting (in public) is for some Polish male adolescents an expression of a 'cool' and 'laid-back' attitude, and they will probably see nothing taboo about big (the bigger the better) splatters of saliva on the pavement. In Clemson, South Carolina, an annual spitting contest is organized by the Redneck Performing Arts Association.

Biting nails, or chewing and swallowing them is for some individuals the same kind of habit as chewing gum for others. To most people, however, 'eating' one's (own) nails is a taboo—nails are not food. Similarly, a lot of people find it 'improper' to make bubbles with bubble gum. What goes into one's mouth should stay there and be either swallowed or disposed of in privacy.

In the same way various social situations and events may also be perceived differently by people from diverse cultural or ideological backgrounds.

Some students, for example, consider their graduation ceremony to be an unnecessary formality. They probably do not think of their degree as substantially changing their social or economic status; for them this is not a transition which is worth celebrating. Yet, they often do attend their graduation ceremony to give their parents the opportunity to celebrate what they (the parents) see as an important transition in their children's lives. In other words, perceptions of what is 'sacred', 'ambiguous', or 'taboo',

vary. These differences are often reflected in different repertoires of linguistic formulae available to speakers of particular languages. In Turkish and Greek, for example, there are more formulae than in English, in terms of both their absolute number and the range of situations which are marked for their obligatory or optional use (Tannen – Öztekin 1981).

Languages probably also differ in the distribution of what I call *formulaic silence*. By formulaic silence I understand a customary act of saying nothing in reaction to specific stimuli. Formulaic silence occurs most often when saying or doing something would pose a threat to another person's face. However, not all instances of silence which simply occur in place of possible verbal formulas count as silent routines. When someone sneezes, for example, it is almost a categorical rule in Polish to say: *Na zdrowie* 'To your health'. In English *Bless you* or *Gesundheit* is sometimes said in such a situation, but 'some people say nothing, and few people mind if they sneeze and nothing is said' (Tannen – Öztekin 1981: 38). Here silence is an accepted, conventional, but *not* a formulaic reaction to someone's physiological bodily reaction. In Turkish and Greek reactions to events which provoke anxiety result in the use of formulas whose task is to create «a sense of control over forces that otherwise seem uncontrollable and threatening» (ibid.: 40). However, as I will show now, many situations of that kind (i.e., when more or less controllable bodily functions/reactions occur publicly) do not trigger the use of a predictable *verbal* formula¹.

For example, other things being equal, one will say nothing formulaic to a person, even a friend or relative, who passes gas, has a dripping nose, or coughs out some phlegm and swallows it. The only available formula in situations like these is to remain silent. If one wants to be rude, or ridicule someone, one can say something, but it will not be formulaic².

Obviously, under certain circumstances one can react verbally to someone's passing gas (e.g. when my baby daughter does it, I ask her to try and control herself), a dripping nose (e.g. my close friend whom I want to save from the embarrassment of others noticing it), or coughing (e.g. when I suggest a family member take a medicine to relieve a sore throat). However, one will do that only in the belief that the addressee will not perceive this verbal reaction as threatening to their negative face but as having the purpose of being positively polite. Indeed, Brown – Levinson (1987 [1978]) state that to alleviate the face threat inflicted on the hearer by him- herself due to «a breakdown of body control, or any *faux pas*» (ibid.: 104), the speaker may joke about what happened or tease the hearer (*God you're farty tonight!*). Another positive-politeness strategy in a situation like that can be claiming common ground with the hearer (*We ate too many beans tonight, didn't we!*). The authors observe that in the same context the counterpart strategy in the negative politeness is to ignore the source of the face threat to the hearer (e.g. his/her runny nose).

This is my contention that a lot of instances of ignoring someone's *faux pas* (verbal

1. I believe that my observations have most relevance to the prevailing patterns of communication in Europe and among the Anglo population in North America.

2. I have to rule out all the joking and otherwise marked usage from the present discussion. Peter Trudgill (p.c.) informs me that saying *Cheers!* among British males is an institutionalized, jocking reaction to farting.

or non-verbal) are predictable and therefore it can be claimed that the silence following FTAs are to some degree formulaic.

Another connection between silence and speech becomes apparent here. Just as saying *nothing* that is relevant to the contents of the *faux pas* (i.e. remaining silent) may minimize the face threat caused by this *faux pas*, flouting the Gricean (Grice 1975) Maxim of Relevance and saying something totally irrelevant to the context may have the same negative politeness (i.e., unimpeding) effect. Consider the following example quoted by Grice (1975: 54):

At a genteel tea party, A says *Mrs. X is an old bag*. There is a moment of appalled silence, and then B says *The weather has been quite delightful this summer, hasn't it?* B has blatantly refused to make what HE says relevant to A's preceding remark. He thereby implicates that A's remark should not be discussed and, perhaps more specifically, that A has committed a social gaffe.

The use, distribution and interpretation of formulaic silences, just like verbal routines, is regulated by a set of sociolinguistic rules which involve external, situational factors. For example, in Polish, when a high-ranking superior asks an inferior *Co słycać?* 'What's new?', that does not mean that this formula can be returned by the inferior to the superior. Similarly, the patterns of rank and relative status between participants will determine who should remain formulaically silent and when. For example, in a Polish family, when a child belches accidentally after a meal, to alleviate the possible embarrassment of the child and the disgust of others, one of the parents can quasi-formulaically say *Brzuszek podziękował za obiadek* 'The tummy has thanked for dinner' or *No, to dziecko najadło się* 'Well, the child has eaten well'. But when this happens to his/her spouse or some other adult, nobody is expected to say anything. Even when the 'offender' says *Przepraszam* 'Excuse me', a possible response to this apology in other situations: *Nic nie szkodzi* 'Never mind' would be rather rude here. (Unless it can be safely assumed to be an accommodating positive politeness strategy intended to minimize the face threat of the hearer [cf. above]).

Another example illustrates how context influences the choice of formulaic silence or formulaic speech. When a group of people sit at a table in a bar and one of them takes leave of the party to play a video game or in a slot machine, for example, the others may say *Good luck*, or *Have a good game*. But when a person takes leave of the party to go to a restroom, the others do not say *Good luck* or anything like that.

In another context, a person has a smudge on the face. Even when one does not know this person very well, one can say (non-formulaically): *You have a smudge on your face*. But if this person had a pimple coming to a head, one would not say anything about it, least of all: *You have a pimple coming to a head on your face*.

Formulaic silences do not occur only in situations which do not offer any verbal formulae to minimize face loss. During funerals, for example, the relatives of the deceased typically hear many formulas expressing sympathy, shared grief, or consolation. But it is not uncommon to see in obituaries in the Polish press families' requests like: *Prosi się o nie składanie kondolencji* 'No condolences [at the funeral], please'. In other words, a request for formulaic silence is made.

I hope this paper has been able to achieve two things: 1. to indicate that the role of silence in the study of linguistic formulae cannot be disregarded; and 2. to give some

support to my general claim that silence falls within the scope of pragmatics as much as speech does.

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