

WHERE SILENCE TAKES US, IF WE LISTEN TO IT

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Careful ethnographic analysis of what goes without saying, or who is being silenced and how, can reveal a great deal about the society, community or situation under study. Yet questions concerning the modes and roles of silence in everyday cultural practices tend to go unasked. As Billy Ehn and Orvar Löfgren write in their book *The Secret World of Doing Nothing*, cultural researchers have been “pre-occupied with the explicit, eventful, and dramatic,” failing to pay attention to or grasp “mundane activities that are generally considered inconspicuous and unimportant – not worth paying attention to – or pursuits that remain unnoticed by others” (Ehn & Löfgren 2010: 4–5). Furthermore, silence itself is an elusive term. William O. Beeman argues that even if silence were to be defined in “essentialist” terms as “the absence of sound” it would still be a cultural construct since silence can only be “established in contrast to *particular*, culturally designated sound [...] and this contrast is likewise a construction” (Beeman 2006: 24, emphasis in the original). Listening to silence means listening to particular categorisations of sound.

Indeed, James Fernandez (2006) reminds us that silence and silencing are ever present in fieldwork, as well as in other parts of the research process, because we privilege, often tacitly, the voices of some interlocutors and pass hasty judgements on the credibility or worth of others. We also tend to prioritise verbalised knowledge and information gathered by means of sight at the expense of messages received by

smell, touch, taste or through emotions. Yet vision, too, is always particular and mediated, offering no route to disembodied, objective knowledge (Haraway 1988).

Contributors to this special issue¹ join Ehn and Löfgren in looking for the seemingly insignificant and the overlooked, taking what may be called a back-door approach to the study of cultural practices. We are interested in silence as it occurs in daily life, aiming to keep our senses open, and to listen to where it takes us. We also join Gregory Bateson and scholars inspired by his concept of noncommunication in exploring situations and circumstances where communication is avoided or deemed undesirable because it “would somehow alter the nature of the ideas” (Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005: 80). Withholding information can be a means of acquiring and abusing power, a tool of manipulation (e.g. Vesala et al. 2002: 30–37). Bateson, however, discusses the avoidance of communication as a necessary precondition for maintaining the “sacred”, a domain “where angels fear to tread” “for the sake of the whole system.” In his words, the damage is done not “due to a local effect of the message alone, but is a result of relationship between the message and the total system that is its overall context” (Bateson & Bateson [1987]2005: 89).

The main themes of this introduction – agency, power and the margins – pinpoint the topics connecting the articles collected here. Yet another recurrent issue is formed by the challenges of doing fieldwork on

silence and the wish to increase awareness of the unspoken and the unspeakable as they emerge in fieldwork and the research process (cf. Fernandez 2006; *PoLAR online*). Language is not the only way to grasp people's experiences and to understand cultural practices, nor is it always feasible or even possible to rely on language. However, rather than dichotomising the verbal and the non-verbal, we wish to explore communication as it takes place in many different practices, on many levels and via many channels within a social system (see Vesala & Knuuttila 2012: 5).

Silence, Agency and the Production of Margins

Keeping in mind the concept of noncommunication, on the one hand, and the significance of the obvious and the overlooked, on the other, we aim to investigate various modes of silence and silencing and, in particular, links between silence and agency. Not communicating gains significance under particular circumstances (cf. Ketola et al. 2002). The concept of noncommunication enables us to elucidate the intentionality and purposefulness of silence in cultural practices (cf. Vesala et al. 2002). We analyse noncommunication as a protector, enabler and maintainer of that what matters. Silence emerges from this issue's case studies as a productive and performative force as we trace the roles it plays in "doing family" (Pihla Maria Siim) and "doing old age" (Karoliina Ojanen), achieving control over the surrounding world and personal happiness (Tuija Hovi and Piret Koosa), and sustaining co-existence in societies divided by ethnic or religious lines (Piret Koosa and Elo-Hanna Seljamaa).

Yet systems maintained by means of silence can be fraught with power asymmetry. They can suppress the multiplicity of points of view and inhibit change, while also being safe by virtue of being familiar and predictable, based on a degree of mutual recognition. One can be forced into silence, choose to become or remain silent or appear to be doing so; forced and voluntary silences are not necessarily clearly distinguishable (cf. Thiesmeyer 2003a). These contributions scrutinise how noncommunication is not only (and not necessarily) empowering, how silence can indicate both agency and lack thereof, or serve as a

space where the conditions and limits of action and choice are negotiated, contested and tested. The ability or inability to mute certain aspects of reality or retreat into doing or saying nothing appears to affect the (in)ability to achieve a sense of discreteness, which is why we conceive of silence as an inspiring concept for broadening our thinking about agency (cf. Achino-Loeb 2006b; Hall 2000).

Linked to the topic of agency is another focus of this special issue, namely the production of margins of society and language through cultural practices of silence. Silence and silencing as culturally constructed practices are never merely matters of personal choice, but are also informed by shared evaluations and resources of conduct deemed acceptable or desirable in any given situation (cf. Muñoz 2014: 25). Our case studies suggest that silence can be an attribute of both the centre and those deemed on the margins of society. Moreover, an act of silencing points simultaneously to the centre and the margins, neither of which are fixed.

In cases of (perceived) refusal or failure to be listened to or to speak using one's own terms, silence and silencing serve as means of marginalisation and can be exercises in social control. Self-imposed silence, on the contrary, can be a means of establishing oneself in the dominant society (Pihla Maria Siim and Piret Koosa, this issue) or a form of resistance aimed at sustaining a centre of one's own (Vallikivi 2012). The inability to withdraw into silence may, correspondingly, result in a feeling of being defined from without and pushed to the margins, as in the case of ethnic groups expected to perform or at least engage with outsiders' stereotypes of themselves (Elo-Hanna Seljamaa, this issue).

However, a person can be forced into silence and marginality by the limitations of language: vocabulary, speech genres and conventions tacitly guiding their usage. Believers may be guided to follow conventional speech patterns that predetermine the form and content of their personal religious experiences. While this has the effect of silencing and marginalising alternative interpretations, it can be a precondition for becoming accepted into the core of the congregation (Tuija Hovi and Piret Koosa, this issue).

One Geography of Silence

Our interest in links between silence and agency and the production of margins in everyday life emerges from case studies from Estonia, Finland and the north-western and north-eastern part of European Russia. This focused geographical scope enables us to zoom in on a corner of Europe that has fairly recently experienced drastic cultural, political and economic changes. Post-Soviet societies, which in the past appeared to be rather egalitarian, homogeneous and atheist, have become guided by neoliberal ideals and have diversified, as well as divided along new lines, while older categories, such as ethnicity, have been repositioned. These political and social reconfigurations have also affected Finland, which had a carefully choreographed relationship to the Soviet Union. Since the early 1990s, Finland has received great numbers of immigrants from the former Soviet Union, mostly people with Finnish or Ingrian Finnish backgrounds and their family members.

Experiences of major social and cultural transformations and of relocation require both individuals and groups to selectively silence and reinterpret their past in order to represent it in terms suitable for the altered conditions. Though regime changes occurred over a quarter of a century ago, debates over the meanings and effects of the Soviet period are ongoing and, moreover, fuelled by current tense relations between the Russian Federation and member states of NATO and of the European Union. By taking a back-door approach to societies under scrutiny, we aim to cast light on negotiations over the conditions of belonging to ethnic and religious groups and to national categories as they are experienced and made sense of in the course of daily practices and discourses. The latter can differ markedly from official or public procedures and rhetoric, though the public and private may be tied together intimately behind the scenes (cf. Herzfeld 2005). The contributions collected here demonstrate, furthermore, how established notions of speech and silence play a crucial role in processes of working out new cultural and religious phenomena and negotiating conditions of cultural and societal change.

Silence as an Interdisciplinary Concept

The geographical and thematic foci of this special issue also aim to broaden the scope of scholarly analyses and applications of the concept of silence. Silence first emerged as an interdisciplinary research topic in the 1960s–70s, and its attractiveness to scholars working in the humanities and social sciences appears to have grown steadily since.² Ikuko Nakane (2007) links this trend to globalisation, arguing it has created a need for a more comprehensive understanding of silence in intra- and inter-cultural encounters. Among the first authors to connect silence and misunderstandings in intercultural communication was Edward T. Hall (1959) in his book on “silent language” or culturally learned non-verbal behaviour.³ Keith Basso’s (1970) study on the Western Apache was pivotal in that it focused on “situational determinants of silence” and their potential for understanding emic perceptions of social relations and different types of social situations (cf. Kenny 2011: 50–52, 77). Contributions to this special issue (Tuija Hovi and Piret Koosa) attest to the continued relevance of Richard Bauman’s ([1983]1998) analysis of the symbolism of silence and speaking among seventeenth-century Quakers.

Linguists and scholars of communication began by conceiving of silence “as a relatively bounded, identifiable phenomenon” (Muñoz 2014: 27; e.g. contributions to Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985; Jaworski 1993) and have since moved gradually towards “*silence as metaphor for communication*” in order to capture “different instances of ‘silence’” in verbal and non-verbal interactions, religion, music and the visual arts (Jaworski 1997b: 3, emphasis in the original; contributions to Jaworski 1997a). This expansion of the concept of silence is also illustrated by lists of different forms and functions of silence presented by Nakane (2007). Such micro-units as pauses can be measured and located precisely within particular conversations, while macro-units – silences that are constitutive of social or religious events and groups or result from acts of suppression – tend to lack a “recognisable ‘form’” (ibid.: 5–7). Consequently, the analysis of social and affective functions of silence is necessarily more interpreta-

tive than that of cognitive and discursive functions (ibid.: 7–12). Affective functions are linked to emotion management; social functions include means of negotiating and maintaining power and power relationships (ibid.).

Using Nakane's terminology, it could be argued that this special issue is concerned primarily with macro-level silences and silencing that serve affective and social functions, but manifest themselves at the micro-level of interaction and everyday life. Related to these aims are studies that explore interrelationships between silence, concealment and power. Intrigued by tensions between the personally experienced and publicly acknowledged, Eviatar Zerubavel (2006) has analysed "conspiracies of silence": socially patterned collective efforts to deliberately deny the existence or presence of something conspicuous. Melani Schröter (2013), meanwhile, has explored meanings ascribed to silence in public debates on political discourse, asking what happens when politicians do not talk about the things the public expects them to address. Attempting to theorise the relationship of silence and power, Maria-Luisa Achino-Loeb (2006a, 2006b) has drawn attention to the silence inherent in selection and suppression, which are the preconditions for perception and identity construction. In her view, "silence is a vehicle for the exercise of power" because it "allows us to believe that the nonspoken is nonexistent" (2006a: 3, 11), thereby veiling the constructedness of identities and self-interest that motivates ideological programmes (see also Thiesmeyer 2003a: 1–2; contributions to Achino-Loeb 2006c and Thiesmeyer 2003b).

Articles presented in this special issue focus less on revealing ideologies and exposing the covert (re-) creation of unequal relationships and more on silence as a force that is used to both enable and disable agency. Several contributions seek to push the boundaries of silence as an analytical category by testing its applicability to material culture (Karoliina Ojanen), and emotional and embodied manifestations of faith (Piret Koosa), as well as to everyday routines aimed at sustaining urban life partitioned along ethnic lines (Elo-Hanna Seljamaa). At the same time, this journal issue participates in the

ongoing folkloristic exploration of the dynamic relationship between the tellable and the untellable: a discussion that is closely tied to silence and silencing, but not yet framed in these terms.

Modes of Silencing

Karoliina Ojanen writes about the "social, cultural and structural invisibility" of old people living in care homes in Finland, arguing that silence constitutes a central element in the cultural narrative of old age in institutional settings. Her careful analysis of mundane interactions between care workers and residents reveals how the attempts of the elderly to construct themselves as coherent subjects of the present tend to fail. This non-recognition, argues Ojanen, is made and remade through different cultural practices – for example, by making private bodily practices public, or silencing the voices and sexuality of the elderly – and even materialised in care units' decor.

We may well ask what makes other kinds of narratives of old age untellable. In the words of Amy Shuman (2005: 19), "we can begin to understand how storytelling is used in negotiations of power by asking what makes one story tellable and another story not tellable in particular historical and social contexts." In her view, personal stories in particular can be untellable because they are about categories that listeners do not recognise or about things that are deemed unacceptable, even unthinkable, and should neither happen nor be talked about (ibid.: 19–23; cf. Zerubavel 2006; La Shawn Pagán's ongoing documentary project *Forced into Silence* on male victims of domestic violence⁴). Some experiences are not shared with others due to a lack of words to verbalise them or because of the emotions these experiences entail (cf. Kaivola-Bregenhøj 2003: 337). Elaine Lawless (2000), analysing battered women's narratives, suggested that women may be unable to find words to re-present violence because narrating re-creates these moments.

Diane Goldstein, analysing rumours and legends that circulated in the aftermath of 9/11, has observed that stories can "become untellable because the space the narratives would normally inhabit is

understood somehow unsafe. The risk is not simply a personal discursive risk, but one that may also reflect on the group or community implicated in the narrative events” (Goldstein 2009: 249). In her view, scholars “need to focus more on the process of risk taking and risk making in narrative” (ibid.: 252). Margaret Mills (1991: 20), meanwhile, has distinguished between “the obvious or consensual unsaid” (cf. Ehn & Löfgren 2010), “the unsaid of privileged or private knowledge” and “the unsaid which is omitted because it is not central to the speaker’s goals in this particular performance but could be present and foregrounded in other performances of the same story.”

The unsaid and untellable are indicative of different modes of silencing at work in everyday communication. Along with risk-taking entailed in narrating, they take us back to the concept of noncommunication and its protective as well as repressive capacities. In the Soviet time, and under Stalinism in particular, non-Russian ethnic origin, religious beliefs and political activities often became family secrets because revealing information on these matters could involve serious consequences for all those who knew. As Pihla Maria Siim (this issue) shows, silencing certain parts of family history has thus been justified by referring to the protective effect of unawareness, and in some cases this pattern of cultural silence may live on after the societal situation changes. This is connected to a more general wish to protect loved ones from negative memories or feelings (cf. Schiffrin 2002: 341).

Absence of narration may thus also function as an enabler of “normal” family life, keeping certain experiences and emotions related to them out of daily routines (cf. Peltonen 1996: 28; Lember 2016). Uku Lember (2016) has found that Soviet-era Estonian-Russian mixed families, in the interests of peaceful family life, avoided the discussion of certain topics. He self-reflectively admits that the question of the repercussions of public conflict in the family was raised during the interviews on his initiative. Lember’s findings resonate with Elo-Hanna Seljamaa’s observations (this issue) about the means used by Tallinn’s Estonian- and Russian-speaking residents

to negotiate, sidestep and neutralise ethnicity and ethnic connotations in ways that bespeak and produce mutual recognition and contribute to quotidian co-existence. Imbued with embodied knowledge of Tallinn’s geography, these practices of “silencing ethnicity” contrast rather sharply with Estonia’s official approach to multiculturalism, which can be said to amplify ethnicity by means of encouraging staged performances of ethnic particularity.

Piret Koosa’s article presents a different case of achieving co-existence by means of silence and accommodation. She analyses how members of an Evangelical congregation in a Komi village in north-eastern Russia employ silence and non-verbal expressions of faith to carve out a space for themselves in a pro-Orthodox environment, where Evangelicals are regarded with strong scepticism. Distinctive Evangelical speech practices, such as talking about becoming Christian or testifying to one’s conversion, urge believers to declare a dramatic break with the past, whereas local modes of self-expression value continuity. Koosa shows how her interviewees adhered to the latter and combined local ways of speaking with embodied manifestations of faith in an effort to navigate the contradictions of practising Evangelism in contemporary Russia.

The contribution by Tuija Hovi explores silences in another religious community, a Word of Life congregation in Turku, Finland. Hovi revisits fieldwork data from the late 1990s in order to closely examine silences as rhetorical choices meant to keep up the desired order of things. Drawing on Gregory Bateson, Hovi analyses group members’ reliance on noncommunication as “a performative practice that supports the Neo-charismatic reality” and distinguishes the saved from the unsaved. Her careful re-reading of interview data reveals how believers shun certain topics in an effort to control both spiritual and material environments, strengthening the feeling of safety, well-being and success in their everyday lives.

By exploring the symbolic meanings of silence (cf. Bauman [1983]1998) and its functions among Evangelicals, the articles by Hovi and Koosa respectively add to the growing body of literature that questions

the fundamental role of language in Evangelical Christianity and seeks to broaden perspectives on understanding conversion (e.g. Szuchewycz 1997; Coleman 2007; Luhrmann 2004, 2012; Webster 2013). Not only do Hovi and Koosa demonstrate that noncommunication and non-verbal means of self-expressions are constitutive of Evangelical subjects and communities, but they also make it clear that the uses of silence and silencing by Evangelicals are highly context sensitive and tactical, and grounded in given cultural, social and economic circumstances. Along with standardised, locally conventional ways of talking about conversion and other matters of faith, believers learn from their fellow Evangelicals what is supposed to remain unsaid.

The Challenges of Locating and Understanding Silences

Observations presented by Piret Koosa in particular hark back to issues raised by other scholars working on religious practices of Finno-Ugric peoples, especially those living in the Arctic. When revisiting materials collected by earlier scholars on the religious practices of the Nenets, a nomadic community living in northern Russia and western Siberia, Karina Lukin (2012) found silences, denial and misrepresentation, leading her to question “the possibilities of collecting oral religious data in ethnographic fieldwork” (cf. Vallikivi 2012). The methodological challenges related to studying the unspoken point to fieldwork as an embodied experience (Okely 1992) and to the importance of the sensitivity of the researcher. Studying the un-said involves a strong interweaving of the (fieldwork) method with the role of the researcher and his or her subjective experiences and impressions (see Schmidt-Lauber 2012: 566).

Silences experienced as, for example, soothing, irritating or uncomfortable can be the keys to capturing new knowledge, as illustrated by Karoliina Ojanen’s study. The way she experienced silence at care homes as stagnant, as a flow of “non-happenings”, led her to pay attention to the significant role silence has in constructing a particular narrative of old age in an institutionalised setting. Elo-Hanna Seljamaa’s discussion of “silencing ethnicity” in the

capital of Estonia is similarly guided by the uneasiness she felt when fieldwork prompted her to violate tacit expectations concerning the co-existence of Estonians and Russian-speakers that she had been socialised into while growing up in Tallinn.

Yet fieldwork and interview situations in particular may offer opportunities for negotiations over the (un)tellable and serve as sites for meta-speech on noncommunication. As an outsider, the researcher can “chase after the things that were not expressed explicitly” and people may be ready to share their personal views and experiences they are not willing to discuss with other community members (Tuija Hovi, this issue). Similarly, sharing one’s research findings with a faraway audience can be less sensitive and require less self-censorship than presenting them in front of one’s compatriots. As Margareta Hydén (2008: 135) points out, sensitivity is not an objective and permanent quality of a topic, but depends on the relationship between the teller and the listener, as well as on cultural, personal and other contextual circumstances of that relationship.

Kristine Muñoz (2014: 20) has emphasised along similar lines that “what counts as silence depends very much on what people expect to happen, and how quickly, in a particular sequence of events.” Ethnographic methods are geared towards engaged listening and recording the minute details that make up daily life, at a level of precision that is neither necessary nor sustainable outside of the context of fieldwork. Ethnographers immersed in collecting and analysing data are consequently likely to hear silences or silencing where a bystander would argue there is none.

In order to locate and understand absences, pieces of information or communication left out, we need to study carefully that which has been said (Klein 2006: 21–22; Goldstein 2009: 249). According to Muñoz, the unsaid and unsayable in communication are made possible and can be traced by focusing on those “properties of language use that make it plastic” (2014: 29), flexible and adaptable to given circumstances: polysemy, ambiguity and strategic choice as to what to say or leave unsaid (ibid.: 29–39). In the case of working with large corpora, which

is often the case in folkloristic studies focusing on a particular genre, tale type or motif, the unsaid could be traced by means of sifting through seemingly relevant texts and contexts, looking for and comparing recurrent patterns, motifs and textual characteristics (Goldstein 2009: 250).

Whether one is working with large corpora or relying on first-hand ethnographic data, pinpointing the aims and receptions of silences encountered in the field is neither an easy task nor one free of ethical scruples. Spelling out things that “go without saying” can throw light on the production and reproduction of power relations and possibly even contribute to undoing inequalities. However, if silence is used to protect and enable, who are scholars to break the seal of noncommunication? Giving – or receiving – voice is not always empowering (cf. Mills 1991; Strandén-Backa 2013). Moreover, what is at stake for a scholar in interpreting a “sniff” as an expression of silence (Karoliina Ojanen, this issue)? How does one explore rather than assume the meanings of silences (Kingsolver 2015)?

The messiness of the process of analysing culture cannot – and need not – be silenced. As Ehn and Löfgren admit in discussing “doing an ethnography of ‘non-events’”: “Although our book [Ehn & Löfgren 2010] may give the impression of intentional research, the fact is that many of the choices and decisions determining the final text are concealed even from us” (ibid.: 217). Margaret Mills (1991: 19) has emphasised, along similar lines, that “we must also find ways to include the muddle, that midden of our representation through which later analysts will sift for the objects we could not interpret or did not recognise as artefacts.” Including in our research reports that we do not understand could in her view contribute to the openness of scholarly accounts and, ideally, “move our sense of the ambiguities and multiplicities of meaning” closer to those of our fieldwork partners (ibid.: 18).

Conclusions

A lot more remains to be said about silence in cultural practices, including the use of silence in protests and public rituals (e.g. Margry 2011) or the

commodification of silence. Silence in its numerous forms appears to be ever-present if we only make an attempt to listen.

None of the case studies presented in this issue were originally about silence. Rather, silence was a feature or analytical tool that emerged in the field and in the process of engaging with fieldwork data. By attempting to listen to silence, authors of this special issue have found it to be filled with intentions, experiences, beliefs and, above all, communication shaped by the particularities of the given context. These “situational determinants of silence” (Basso 1970: 228), however, have histories of their own, prompting scholars to dig deeper into the fabric and flow of daily life as well as into the past. Silence overlaps with the secret and the sacred – too fundamental to be revealed – as well as with things too obvious to be noticed and talked about. From this ambiguous space that is both very personal and collective, silence emerges as an essential constituent of social life and cultural creativity.

Notes

- 1 This theme issue has its starting point in the “Silence in cultural practices: Agency, power and ideology on the border of language” session of the fifth autumn conference of the Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory held in Tallinn in 2012. The session was initiated by Laur Vallikivi, who kindly supported our proposal for a special journal issue. Contributions by Piret Koosa, Elo-Hanna Seljamaa and Pihla Maria Siim are based on papers delivered in this panel. Tuija Hovi and Karoliina Ojanen responded to our call for papers for a special issue of *Ethnologia Europaea*. Constructive criticism from Marie Sandberg, Monique Scheer and two anonymous reviewers has been invaluable in honing our diverse takes on silence and tying them together. This special issue was made possible through the generous support of the Estonian Research Council (grant no. 9271 and Institutional Research Project “Tradition, Creativity and Society: Minorities and Alternative Discourses” IUT2-43) and the European Union through the European Regional Development Fund (Centre of Excellence in Cultural Theory).
- 2 To list just a few titles from the past decade: Ainsworth (2013); Boldt, Federici & Virgulti (2013); Glenn & Ratcliffe (2011); Kenny (2011); Mazzei (2007); Muñoz (2014); Sim (2007); and Weber (2005).
- 3 The overview provided in Kenny (2011) includes earlier

theoretical approaches, e.g. Max Picard (*Die Welt des Schweigens/The World of Silence* [1948/1952]), Edward T. Hall (*The Silent Language* [1959]) and George Steiner (*Language and Silence* [1967]). See also theoretical overviews by Muñoz (2014: 15–43) and Nakane (2007).

- 4 Forced into Silence, the documentary. <https://lashawnpagan.com/forced-into-silence-the-documentary/>. Accessed June 15, 2016.

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