

SELF-FULFILLING WORDS AND TOPICS NOT TO BE TOUCHED UPON

Noncommunication in Neo-Charismatic Rhetoric

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Uttering certain words with certain intention is understood as having performative power to produce desired outcomes in social life. However, a deliberate silence as well as words spoken out loud can function as an objectification of reality. With the help of Gregory Bateson's concept of noncommunication, silences are approached in personal narratives in the Word of Life congregation. Whereas explicit communication would alter the nature of ideas, *noncommunication* works by "keeping up sacredness", the unchangeable or untouchable. For believers, avoiding particular topics is an attempt to control the surrounding world and strengthen the feeling of safety and success in the spiritual as well as material life. The article studies four aspects of Neo-charismatic rhetoric as noncommunication: avoided topics, confirming, protection and meta-speech.

Keywords: noncommunication, Faith Movement, positive confession, performative speech, personal narrative

Silence is not the first thought that comes to mind when talking about Pentecostalism and Charismatic Christianity. On the contrary, noisy meetings with shouting evangelists, collective praying in tongues, ecstatic praising, amplified music and the oral traditions of sharing and witnessing give an impression of a culture where the human voice, talking, preaching, hearing and being heard are pivotal issues. Undoubtedly, they are essentially meaningful manifestations of faith in a ritual context, whereas stillness can cause confusion being that it is considered a completely strange element in the grammar of Neo-charismatic meeting practices (cf. Coleman 2007). Nevertheless, there are also situations and topics that require a believer to remain silent at times or to

look for substitutive and euphemistic words. "Growing in faith" should be the goal for every believer, and since the use of language is said to make a great difference to the personal spiritual development, not all topics are accepted to be worthy of conversation. However, contextually meaningful silence can be more than mere speechlessness.

Introduction

In this article, I am returning to the interviews that I carried out among the adherents of a Neo-charismatic congregation called the Word of Life at the end of the 1990s. I have re-read the material in order to examine more closely the silent aspects of narration as rhetorical choices which are meant to keep up the

desired reality. The Word of Life (Elämän Sana in Finnish) in Turku on the south-west coast of Finland was founded in August 1990. The founders were a group of Finnish members of the Livets Ord congregation, the Nordic centre of the (Word of) Faith Movement led by Pastor Ulf Ekman in Uppsala, Sweden. At this time, the Neo-charismatic Prosperity Gospel or the Health and Wealth doctrine, as it is often pejoratively called, was only paving its way to Finland and was facing strong criticism especially from the traditional Pentecostal community in the country. The Finnish Pentecostals were most displeased with all Neo-charismatic influences. Especially, they condemned the open teaching of the importance of money in religious life and the objective of being “successful” in all areas of life. In addition to that, the Finnish Pentecostals disapproved of doctrinal differences concerning the idea of miraculous healing, not to mention the “too American” meeting practices.

I interviewed 15 members of the Word of Life in Turku, including the pastor. The interviewees represented the first adult generation of the newly founded local community with a strong pioneer spirit. At that time, about half of the approximate 130 members of the congregation attended the Sunday service regularly. In addition to this main occasion of the week, there were several minor gatherings and thematic weekly meetings along with occasional team trips to evangelise in other towns. Most of the active meeting goers were 20–40 years of age, and fairly equally women and men. Such a gender balance was somewhat exceptional because, more often than not in religious communities, women have been found to be the majority (cf. Niemelä 2003: 187–189; Walters & Davie 1998: 641–643), not the least within Pentecostalism (e.g. Brusco 2010). According to my observations, the exceptional gender division in the Word of Life was due, at least in part, to the fact that the importance of marriage and partnership of women and men in religious life was emphasised. Moreover, prayers were made for the unmarried to find spouses and it was taken for granted that a husband and a wife belong to the same congregation.

I participated in several Sunday meetings of the

congregation where most of the members used to attend. However, in actuality, I learned to know most of my interviewees through a “key informant”, a 40-year-old woman whom I had met previously in a temporary job where she had enthusiastically told me about her faith and her active involvement in a new congregation. All the people whom I interviewed, nine women and six men, were actively involved in the congregational life and, accordingly, willing to share their experiences of faith with an outsider.

The discussions with the believers followed the principles of open-ended thematic interviews, typically used in an ethnographic study. It was my intention to discover how the believers themselves describe and explain their religious development. I asked them to tell me about their membership, involvement in congregational activities and their personal spiritual life in the Word of Life. Instead of a readymade and structured list of questions, I let the interviewees talk rather freely about the themes I was particularly interested in. I asked them to tell me about their experiences of guidance and healing, their understandings of prosperity theology, the role of the “gifts of the Holy Spirit” in their lives as well as their possible personal difficulties and challenges in faith. Studies at the Bible school of the congregation and the frequently read teachings of Ulf Ekman, the Swedish branch of the Faith Movement (Livets Ord) set the tone for the speech of the interviewees while they told about their beliefs and experiences as “born-again” believers.

For approaching the certain silences in the narration of the believers, I have adopted Gregory Bateson’s (1987) concept of *noncommunication*. Essentially, noncommunication means saying nothing about negative and undesired things, or issues which may be too delicate to be shared. In addition to simply keeping silent by not saying anything about dubious issues, there are also other manners used, such as veiling and belittling things that are, for one reason or another, considered incongruous or even harmful. According to Bateson, whereas explicit communication would alter the nature of ideas, noncommunication works by “keeping up sa-

credness” (Bateson & Bateson 1987: 80). For a Word of Life believer, an attempt to avoid speaking about spiritually damaging themes is an attempt to control the surrounding world and strengthen the feeling of safety, well-being and success. Thus, noncommunication is a cultural practice that supports the idea of positive confession to keep up the Neo-charismatic reality (cf. Coleman 2000).

This article studies four aspects of Neo-charismatic rhetoric as noncommunication. These rhetorical aspects are avoided topics, silence as a confirming act, protection, and the meta-level of noncommunication. To be able to understand noncommunication and the faith-affirming role of personal narrative in the context of the Pentecostal-Charismatic social world it is necessary first to present an overview of some doctrinal and rhetorical principles of the tradition in question.

Prosperity Gospel and Positive Confession

The Healing Revival that emerged within Pentecostalism of the 1940s and 1950s in the United States promoted the idea of well-being and a healthy body being optimal for the Holy Spirit to manifest in the human life (Teinonen 1965: 109). The legacy of the Healing Revival became processed and refined later on in several forms of the so-called Third Wave Charismatic Christianity.¹ Especially the (Word of) Faith Movement, inspired by Pastor Kenneth Hagin’s (1917–2003) teachings, is known for those principles. According to Hagin, a born-again Christian enjoys success and well-being in every area of life because, while accepting Jesus as the saviour, a person simultaneously gets emancipated from Satan’s control and its negative outcomes in human life (Hagin [1966]1980: 18). As a result of this, health and wealth are said to be automatic divine privileges of true believers. Well-being may be procreated by faith as a part of the “salvation package”, since the Atonement of Christ is said to include not only the removal of sin, but also the removal of sickness and poverty (Hunt 1998, 2000: 333). In the Faith teaching, receiving all these benefits preconceives controlling one’s thinking, and heading it towards biblically acceptable ideas because negative thoughts and in-

correct faith are regarded as sin. The thoughts, be they positive or negative, are said to be self-fulfilling. Thus, by thinking in the “right way” – positively and following the biblical instructions – a person can receive all good things, like health, economic freedom and success.

The ideological roots of the self-fulfilling words and thoughts in the Prosperity Gospel have been traced back to the *mind cure* thinking² (Hambre et al. 1983: 35). There were certain elements that may have inspired the teachings developed by the Pentecostal Healing Revival, and further on, by Neo-charismatic teachers such as Hagin, for instance. Even though there is no straight connection between the healing doctrines of the nineteenth century in the United States and the Faith Movement of the twenty-first century in the Nordic context, it is in many ways likely that the ideas of the healing spiritualists assimilated in later Charismatic Christianity. The prominent authors of Christian Science of the nineteenth century shared the belief in the positive thinking as a reality changing power.³ Correspondingly, the teachings of the Faith Movement emphasise the power of visualisation and the meaning of the “right confession”. The idea of the right confession has even been compared to certain forms of shamanism, which, with the help of magic, seek to influence the supernatural powers (Coleman 1998: 248; Hunt 1998: 274).

Regarding the idea of success and well-being, the interrelatedness of speech, language and believer’s lived reality is obvious in the Faith Movement. The roots of positive thinking come into sight in the notion that the words and actions are believed to directly affect people’s mental and spiritual state. Presenting oneself as a successful person is understood as a means for changing the situation in a desired way. The “right confession” thus functions in the performative way and maintains the relationship between a believer and God as well as strengthens the cohesion in the community of believers. By contrast, talking publicly about one’s failure or doubts is believed to cause failure (Coleman 1991: 13).

Anthropologist Simon Coleman has pointed out the importance of *positive confession* as a strategic

mode of communication in the Faith Movement as a branch of Neo-charismatic Christianity. Positive confession as a way of speaking (and thinking) has virtually led this type of Christianity to be called Health and Wealth Gospel or Prosperity Theology. These attributes are given to the doctrine because of the idea of a true believer being materially rewarded by God already in this world, not only in the after-life, which typically is the basic idea, for instance, in old Pietistic revival movements. Especially in the Neo-charismatic Faith Movement, words spoken with certain intention – “in faith” – are regarded as objectifications of reality (Coleman 2000: 28). Even ritualising the everyday life by using conscious and intentional positive confession, also as silent and personal inner speech only in thoughts, aims at the same goal. For the believers in the Faith Movement, it is a holistic way of life that supports their “growing in faith” (Coleman & Collins 2000: 323). As I also discovered while interviewing members of a Finnish Word of Life congregation, not only saying something out loud but also a deliberate silence as avoidance of uttering certain things, can function as an objectification of reality (Hovi 2007: 218). It is a method of excluding, marking the borders, and thus, protecting a believer’s biblical reality from dangers of both “worldly” and “demonic” influences, which are not always easily separated.

Performative Power of Silence in Narration

According to Jerome Bruner, narration is a way of making personal experiences meaningful in a certain social, historical and cultural context. It fills the past with meanings in relation to the present and frames the future orientation (Bruner 1987: 15). Moreover, as psychologist Brian Schiff argues, one of the primary functions of narrating is to make life experience and interpretations of life present again. Narrating brings experience and interpretations into play, into a field of action, in a specific here and now. It is a way of making sense of life experiences in a certain situation (Schiff 2012: 13). Such a contextual storytelling event may function as an important tool for identity formation. In a religious community, narration ritually creates and shapes social relation-

ships; a narrator can establish his or her identity as a believer by telling a story of a personally meaningful religious experience that follows the traditional patterns in a credible way (cf. Hydén 2010: 44–46).

In Pentecostal-Charismatic Christianity with the emphasis on personal spiritual developing or “growing in faith”, narration has a special role as “witnessing”. The tradition of witnessing functions as a ritual for carrying and transmitting this tacit knowledge within a group, not only by dealing with testimonies of conversion but also by narrating faith-affirming experiences of providence or receiving answers to the prayers. Believers are supposed, encouraged and expected to tell both each other and outsiders about their conviction and its developments (see also Piret Koosa’s article in this issue). In the Bible, the true believers are instructed to be prepared to witness “in season and out of season” (2 Tim 4:2), in other words, to use every opportunity to spread the message, to evangelise. It is, as an elderly Pentecostal woman once clarified to me, a “chance for a lay person to speak like a pastor.” Witnessing and preaching are, indeed, the two traditional speech acts for believers to speak the gospel most intensely (Harding 2000: 36). As the believers’ personal experience is expected to match and be compatible with the doctrine and the community-specific tradition of interpretation, there exists an inescapable social pressure for talking about the personal faith. By witnessing, the believers attempt to convince both the co-believers and the outsiders – the potential converts – of their true faith and the right choice to make (cf. McGuire 1979). Thus, personal narratives as a formulaic genre of witnessing are not only reflections of faith, but they function as catalysts for religious experience as well; the relationship between narration and experience is inseparable.

As it is typical in social life, narratives emerge through interaction in a certain situation for certain purposes. A story about receiving an answer to a prayer told in an interview situation is, thus, built on different terms than a testimony in a revival meeting even though the topic of the story is the same; it is obvious above all in lexical choices and in the need for explaining the biblical rhetoric to an out-

sider (Hovi 1997: 330–331, 2007: 92–93). Despite the fact that my interviews were carried out for a non-religious purpose (i.e. academic research) in a documented situation, there were also situations where interviewees had a chance to talk about their faith to an outsider as it is proper according to the revivalist Christian traditions. Like Susan F. Harding has pointed out, witnesses are, of course, aware of this difference in understanding, but still, they aim at making their reality real also to a listener (Harding 2000: 37–38). The discussions during the interviews may thus be a kind of everyday speech, personal narrative that occasionally, however, moves to the register of witnessing.

Instead of being read as mere texts, personal narratives are meant to be interpreted holistically, by also taking into account the speech situation (the interaction in an interview), the Charismatic Christian speech culture and negotiation of subject positions (cf. Phoenix 2013: 73). Analysing interview speech as a situated narrative process, I want to point out how an individual expression of commitment to the doctrine and rituals maintains both collectivity among the believers and an individual's belief system. I have approached narration as *performative speech* that is used for creating or keeping up the desired situation. To summarise John L. Austin's idea of performative power of speech, the action that the sentence describes is, in explicit cases, performed by the utterance of the sentence itself. In his own words: "by saying something, we *do* something" (Austin 1978: 5–6).

The utterance changes the state of affairs when it is spoken out in a certain situation, by a certain person with a certain intention. Good examples of such performative power of the spoken word within religious contexts are ritual formulas, such as spells, incantations, blessings and absolutions. In the case of Faith believers, their formulaic narratives, like witness stories (or "testimonies"), are used for maintaining the desired states of affair, to establish the bonds between co-believers and the bonds between a believer and God. Witnessing has performative power to shape the identity and make a believer part of a religious community. Simultaneously, the pur-

pose of witness stories may be to change something in another person when they are told, with the hope of awakening the listener(s) (cf. Harding 2000: 57).

However, also a meaningful silence can have performative power. Expressions and silences may have such a function in a conversation with the intention of reproducing and maintaining the biblical truth in everyday life of believers. In her study of Catholic women who negotiate their unsatisfactory position as bystanders in the church, Laura Leming (2007) has investigated how the women use language to shift their positions in relation to the church authorities. In their "church talk", she points out the role of the strategic silence in certain situations while criticising the hierarchical policy. However, instead of not saying anything at all, the women used euphemisms and insinuation, and distanced themselves by referring to the church authorities as "others". Simultaneously, they included themselves as an elementary part of the church. According to Leming, they speak poly-vocally to negotiate the multiple positionalities of their identity as church persons. This agentic use of language allows them to give flexible expression to their dilemma of membership and the positions they claim, and gives voice to their opposition (Leming 2007: 84).

At the turn of the twenty-first century, the Word of Life was regarded as unusually radical and probably the most controversial group among the Christian communities in Finland because of its prosperity teaching and action-packed congregational life. However, as a new independent congregation ambitiously aiming at "conquering the world" it undoubtedly offered inspiring activities and meaningful personal and collective agency for every member regardless of gender or age. Thus, rather than expressing wishes for changing something in the policy of the community, like Leming's interviewees did in a hierarchical Catholic community, the adherents of the Word of Faith rather positioned themselves as democratic supporters of the "biblical order". When keeping silent or avoiding certain themes the interviewees in the Word of Faith did it mostly in order to maintain the ideal social dynamics within the congregation and strengthen their own faith and

believer's identity. In the following section, I will examine how noncommunication indicates norms, values and wishes in the Neo-charismatic rhetoric used in the interviews.

Narrative Silence: Speechlessness and Evasive Speech

In the interviews of active Word of Life members, I have traced the themes that are covered by silence or passed over as less important or irrelevant matters, or perhaps even dangerous for the believer's identity. I have also looked for cultural models by which their faith is built up, and studied how those models can be verbalised at the individual level. The starting point is the hypothesis according to which the social interaction and communication construct and maintain the plausibility structure for faith at an individual level as well as at the social level. The religious interpretation of perceptions and experiences is supported by verbalisation that follows the traditional models of "canonic discourse", as Peter Stromberg (1993) argues. Speaking of conversion narratives, Stromberg has pointed out how a conversion narrative that is based on both referential and constitutive aspects⁴ of canonic discourse facilitates the self-transformation of the narrator. Further on, for a believer in a religious community, the learned discourse has a significant role, not only in verbalising things but also in knowing what is supposed to remain unsaid. It is not always appropriate and relevant to say out loud everything that is meaningful for an individual's personal faith. In many cases, faith can rather be said to be based on noncommunication (Vesala et al. 2002: 21).

In the Faith believers' narration, there are meaningful aspects for the faith construction also when those aspects are not addressed explicitly, when they are avoided or when they are expressed through negation. I have found the social-psychologist Vilma Hänninen's concept of "inner story" useful while talking about personal narrative as means for faith developing. A person's inner story has been structured not only according to his or her personal experiences and memories but also according to the models of the cultural collective narrative tradition.

A person is never able or perhaps not even willing to put into words the inner story in its entirety. For instance, shameful experiences easily remain untold.⁵ Furthermore, as Hänninen presuppose, among other things, the most sensitive memories or the most sacred experiences are protected by keeping them private (Hänninen 1999: 57). After all, a person's inner story is always fragmented and situationally constructed and, thus, can never be completed; instead, it is to be understood as a dynamic identification process.

Speaking about sensitive topics and ways of communicating them is a complex and multi-levelled theme. In a very illuminating way, Margareta Hydén has brought up the issue of sensitive topics in an interview conversation by pointing out how *any* topic can be a sensitive one depending on relational circumstances, namely relations between the teller and the listener (Hydén 2013: 226). Situational and contextual aspects are not without meaning either. Hydén has also pointed out how the circulation of narratives may cause harm by being reinterpreted afterwards in another context as well as the importance of the physical and discursive space of the narrative event (ibid.: 232–234). The themes that I discussed with the Word of Life people did not include traumatic experiences in the first place. On the contrary, religious conversion and "growing in faith" were described as constructive and empowering experiences as well as a means of overcoming personal obstacles such as accidents or emotional turmoil. Rather than seeing challenging experiences and difficult situations as unfortunate random events, the Charismatics take them as parts of "God's plan" that lead them, eventually, to positive changes (cf. Moberg 2013: 142). After all, what could and could not be told was dependent on relational circumstances and the space, both physical and discursive, that the interview situation presented to the participants.

Remaining silent may serve different purposes in social interaction. Depending on context, it may even have constitutive power in certain rhetoric. Following Bateson's thinking, protection, preservation and enablement can be identified as functions

of noncommunication. Contextualisation is an essential factor in recognising what has not been said. In other words, we need to focus on the situation where the message is not transmitted as well as on the topic and the interlocutors (Ketola, Knuuttila & Mattila 2002: 8–9). While interviewing the believers I occasionally tried deliberately to chase after the things that were not expressed explicitly. As an outsider without the tacit knowledge of the right way to share the experience of faith, I had a good reason to ask for elaboration, to learn more about specific situations of not following God's will, for instance. This method did not necessarily generate exhaustive explanations concerning the themes that the interviewees did not spontaneously talk about. Nevertheless, there were some outcomes of negotiations, for example, explicit comments concerning the topics which should be avoided and the damaging effects of talking out loud about them. Considering those topics, it is obvious that noncommunication maintains and constructs social and cultural reality by being discussed – the significance of noncommunication was constantly contested and negotiated in the Word of Life. This aspect was not exactly taken into account in the first place by Bateson (cf. Ketola, Knuuttila & Mattila 2002: 9). In an interview situation, noncommunication does not actually mean speechless silence but in various ways non-committal and reserved speech.

In the following, I demonstrate how noncommunication becomes constitutive in the discussion between a born-again narrator and an outsider interviewer in the way that can be understood as both constructing and expressing reality of the believer. I address four such aspects of noncommunication that emerge in the interviews.

Avoided Topics

When using the concept noncommunication in the context of Faith believers' narration, I mean basically saying nothing about negative things, or veiling and belittling them. I have tried to understand what has been veiled in silence or passed over as being less important or irrelevant, or even tabooed. In the speech of Word of Life members, noncommunica-

tion hides above all misfortunes and failures as well as difficulties in faith. They are themes that may be skipped over quickly or explicitly said to be "useless topics" as they are not supporting the personal spiritual development. In such a way, silence labels them as topics that are detrimental to faith. It goes without saying that misfortune, failure or doubts and scepticism do not fit the discourse of positive confession. Thus, noncommunication has performative power through negation. In certain situations, it is silence that protects the reality that a believer wants to live in or is actively aiming at by hiding undesired situations and emotions and excluding their negative influences, at least, at the rhetoric level.

The themes that definitely did not inspire the interviewees to produce long detailed narratives were failure, uncertainty in faith as well as the acts of Satan who is understood by the Word of Faith believers as a personified evil and the active antagonist of the benevolent God. Often, the interviewees used also other names denoting Satan, such as the Devil and the Enemy (of Soul). As a rule, these themes faded very quickly. However, there were significant differences in the precision and extent of narration between individuals. These differences were the most obvious in talking about Satan's impact on life. Three interviewees of the group of fifteen refused to discuss it at all, while the others referred to it in various manners. In the following excerpt, Linda⁶, the 40-year-old female interviewee, who had accidentally crashed into a pavement and hurt herself badly while she was cycling, insinuates by negation what is the origin of all evil, including her accident. Only after my definite question she indicates what she believes is the reason for misfortune – although she does so without spelling out the actual name – ending her story with the normative utterance of trust in God:

Linda: I know it so clearly that it is not God who sends this kind of accident and other things like it. ...

Tuija: Do you think it was a situation like Satan's intervention?

Linda: Yes, yes. It always tries to harm people and God's work. And so on. You see it so clearly. It is

self-evident. You just have to trust God, and everything will be all right. (TKU/A/99/31:11)

As Bateson argues, noncommunication has the effect of altering the nature of ideas, maintaining sacredness (Bateson & Bateson 1987: 80). Thus, an attempt to avoid speaking about damaging themes is an attempt to control the surrounding world and strengthen a feeling of safety. In this way, noncommunication functions as a means of supporting the idea of positive confession in maintaining the Neocharismatic reality (Hovi 2014). Accordingly, Linda, cited above, aimed at emphasising God's goodness throughout the interview as well as pointing out the positive sides of the incident. However, for the actual cause of the accident, she accepted what I, as an interviewer, brought into focus. The theodicy, it is to say the dilemma of iniquity existing in the world despite of God's omnipotent benevolence, was negotiated in the interview situation while I seized the opportunity to interpret the accident by a theological assumption to complete the picture. Even though her answer confirmed the interpretation that I offered, the interviewee herself did not want to name the cause of the unfortunate event on her own initiative. Linda merely made a generalised notion about "it" always working in a harmful and damaging way and encircled the unspoken malevolent agent with her positive confession of God's impact on human life.

Silence as a Confirming Act

The interviewee cited above evaded my question on personal uncertainty and difficulties in upholding the faith. Her answer was made of a principled explanation at a fairly general level on how the Devil can "cause spiritual pressure" and "send demons" to harass the believers. However, if there was any personal experience of such things, it remained unanswered while she decisively adhered to the canonical teachings of the movement:

Tuija: What kind of situations have been the most difficult for you [to keep up the faith]?

Linda: Well, I actually talk about the situation that

has lasted a little longer, perhaps some months or so ... Like ... and it is like I said, in some situations it is possible that you really have done something wrong, that you just have not, if God has said that leave it, leave this and that, and you don't do so, then you have committed a sin if it is a wrong thing. I don't want to be more specific about it, but anyway, it is something that you know that it's wrong, you shouldn't do it but you just have not given it up, left it. So, it creates a barrier between you and God so that the contact is not quite open, because it is your fault, you have done wrong, but immediately when you give it up you can ask for forgiveness of sins and the blood of Jesus purifies you from all wrongdoing. It is said there [in the Bible], and it really is so. (TKU/A/99/31:34)

The hardships in maintaining the faith and developing it are intertwined with the concept of sin, in awareness of norm violation or, in other words, in the awareness of "actions against God's will." Linda explicitly refuses to reveal more specific details about her experience which she refers to, and instead, explains such hardships at a very general level. The negative connotation of doubts or unbelief becomes visible in the example above only through doctrinal principles, not as personal experiences. Linda expresses it by speaking in the second person equal to the generalising passive voice distancing herself as an active subject. The personal level in the form of the confessional "I" in narration is changed to speaking at the general level while the interviewee emphasises the positively charged power of normative repentance. The above example can be interpreted as an expression of commitment through noncommunication following the rule that the believers are not supposed to pinpoint their failures by reporting their former sins. Instead, the interviewee relies indicatively on the norm of grace and the authority of the Bible by pointing out how "it is said there" that the "blood of Jesus purifies the sinner." She holds onto the positive future orientation rather than trying to keep in mind what went wrong earlier.

Gregory Bateson's concept of *premise* corresponds to the concepts of worldview and self-image. It is a

basic assumption that includes what people think of themselves, the environment and their relation to it. The creation of premises is necessary for all learning. Once the premises have been internalised they become self-fulfilling and confirming (Vesala et al. 2002: 23, interpreting Gregory Bateson 1972, *Steps to an Ecology of Mind*). For instance, the believers' premises of faith are the authority of the Bible and the necessity of following God's will, as well as offering in the form of giving money for the congregational activities and to fellow believers in need. In return, a believer can expect to receive God's blessings, for example, receiving money for a certain purpose or some other kind of help. The interplay of offerings and blessings is a typical motive in the healing and guidance stories. Thus, speaking out loud and normatively repeating these premises can be presupposed to strengthen the faith. Simultaneously, there is the tendency of turning away from the issues that may threaten "living in faith". As an essential part of positive confession, keeping silent about the personal norm violations refers to the principle, expressed by interviewees, of an unnecessary need to cling to the "bad things". The example above of narrating difficulties in keeping up the faith reveals how linking the confessional and normative speech to an avoided theme creates the faith performatively. By seeing such noncommunication as a faith-strengthening act, I return to the basic idea of speech and thinking as being self-fulfilling. In the context of the Faith Movement, it is a fundamental way of thinking – what is not said aloud is not given a right to exist.

Protection

The idea of the protective power of noncommunication also has much in common with the idea of the self-fulfilling speech and thinking. By avoiding harmful themes or by attributing them as external, perhaps even caused by the Enemy of the Soul, and thus wrong, a believer protects the reality that he or she wants to live in. By talking about their experiences, the interviewees also communicated their need for understanding what has happened as well as explaining it in a larger – biblical – explanatory system. For instance, a sudden and inexplicable ac-

cident finds its place in a plausible explanatory pattern when it is interpreted as an "attack", which can be attributed by a believer as being caused by an external malevolent agent. An attempt of a believer to protect the faith by avoiding speaking about harmful themes is simultaneously an attempt to control the environment and create the feeling of safety, which is an outcome of predictability of events, and to strengthen the positive self-esteem. It may give the sense of active agency instead of being a victim or only a passive receiver of grace.

While explaining to me the doctrinal principles, the pastor of the Word of Life congregation explicitly denied the Faith teaching being based on positive thinking. However, the idea of positive thinking becomes preferable for a believer in reverse as a definition of bad ways of thinking and speaking, and as withdrawal from such things. As the norm of the right way of thinking the pastor (male, 51 years) emphasised the importance of thinking according to "God's word", no matter what the circumstances are:

Pastor: We don't talk about positive thinking, but God is really a positive God, and his thoughts are positive but, but we don't talk about these human things, like a person being positive or to think positively. It is very good if a person does so, but it is not what is lasting and what helps a person in the end. Instead, it is God's word, the faith that God has given to you. And a very typical argument that describes it well... I have quite aggressively attacked the saying "I am a miserable sinner" ["*minä vaivainen syntinen*"; a typical expression in the old Finnish revivalist hymns].

Tuija: Mm.

Pastor: Because if I am a born-again God's child, so the Bible says, I am a completely new creation, all old things have passed away. But if this born-again person goes on and confesses that I am the worst sinner, so look, he will be what he says. (TKU/A/99/32b:11)

The pastor's instructive teaching strongly indicates that characteristics that are not explicitly expressed

do not exist, or they are seemingly controlled and easier to be put aside in order to maintain and protect the desired identity of the believer. Uncertainty, giving up in the face of obstacles and inferiority are not characteristics that, according to the pastor, help a believer to succeed in his or her spiritual growth and earthly life. Simultaneously, by dissociating oneself from the idea of being an incurable sinner, it is possible to make a distinction between the image of dynamic and spiritually growing Faith believers and that of passive and surrendering traditional Pietism, of which the latter is a more common attitude in the Finnish revivalist scene.

Discussing noncommunication as hushed-up secrets in a Finnish folk ballad, folklorist Seppo Knuutila has claimed that when certain communicative channels are closed, the informative dimensions of those propositions that still can be heard or seen will become more powerful (cf. Knuutila 2002: 128). In the Faith rhetoric, the questionable “channels” that should be closed are expressions of inferiority, failure, and the instances where one is unable to give more space to the expressions of success and well-being as signs of God’s care. Thus, noncommunication functions as protection for the stability of being a born-again believer by providing more space for the positive perspective.

Meta-Speech on Noncommunication

While interviewing the believers, I tried to approach the themes that they did not necessarily speak about with each other or the themes that are so self-evident that there is no need to explicate them within the inner circle of co-believers. Such conversations, which dealt with believers’ personal views about issues that are usually silenced in the congregation, can be identified as a meta-speech of noncommunication. The interview situation was a frame for such a meta-level of communication (cf. Vesala et al. 2002: 25). The pastor’s definition of the self-fulfilling character of speech in the excerpt above is a good example of the meta-communication that took place in the interview. It has an important role in the language of his sermons. The pastor had also determinately taught the “right thinking” according to the guidelines of

the Faith Movement by criticising the submissive attitude of the traditional Christian revival movements in Finland.

As a communication process, an interview defines the relationship between the interlocutors by giving the believers as interviewees an opportunity to talk to an outsider in another way than they would do among the co-believers while explaining their choices and experiences. Correspondingly, due to this frame, the allusive language of the inner circle does not work between a believer and an outsider in the same manner as it does within the community of believers. For example, success was a theme that the interviewees interpreted in a contradictory way. It is, after all, a concept that has a profoundly different significance for the members of the congregation than it does for the outsiders. Basically, instead of getting wealthier, success was defined by the Word of Life believers primarily in terms of harmonious domestic life, well-functioning social relations, health, adequate incomes and, above all, dynamic spiritual life, at both the personal and the congregational level (Hovi 2007: 178–179). For that reason, clarifying the concept of success to me was a relevant and motivating thing to do for the interviewees even though there was no point discussing it in the congregational context. With this respect, another female interviewee’s comment on the unspoken rules in the congregation can be understood as meta-speech on noncommunication. Nora in her early thirties pondered situations that seemed as if the teaching about offering, blessings and success had been turned upside down in a community of believers. She wondered if she speaks about congregational attitude towards the idea of success in another way than her co-believers and she explains it with something she had realised while working temporarily abroad and thus got some distance from her home congregation:

I don’t know really how to reify it. [...] This is, well, I don’t know if anyone of other interviewees has talked like this (a laughter) but well... but for instance, one sees things like this in all communities, be they work communities, student communities, congregations, whatever, especially if

one comes from outside. [...] How should I say? But many times in the congregation... well, this is said really pointedly, and it's not exactly what I mean but, well, perhaps generally speaking, in a way, weakness is favoured like [...] If we talk about this success, okay, we talk about economic success, we talk about success in work, so why are you more accepted in the congregation if you are unemployed? (TKU/A/99/49:19)

According to the teaching of the Faith Movement, believers can ask God for whatever they want or need, and they can expect to be privileged to get it. Furthermore, mundane success is regarded as a blessing for being a true believer. Nora continued on her personal experiences of being disapproved in the congregation because she dedicated too much time to her academic studies and her challenging new job instead of investing all that time in congregational work:

[In the congregation] they criticise you awfully easily like, just as I said, and they warn you like “don't look for your own pleasure” and blablabla, and like “studies can become a god for you.” And when someone unemployed comes in, then everybody prays like “please, God, give this person a job,” but no-one asks “what's going on, have you started to look for wrong things because there is no more blessing in your life and you have no work?” Nobody asks like this, but good heavens, if you have studies to do or a good and demanding job, it is criticised immediately. It is a little bit like a sign of being a half-renegade. (TKU/A/99/49:19)

The interviewee seems to question the Pauline logic of “sowing and reaping”⁷ that was frequently referred to in sermons in the Word of Life meetings. However, the teaching about the economic success seems, in her reasoning, to be the other way around as the actual situation when the lack of blessings, for instance unemployment, is left without an interpretation within the community of believers because the interpretation would be far too negative.

It would rather communicate apostasy or committing a sin, getting away from “God's plan” because of not being ideally successful. The conceptual lens or a premise concerning the basic rights of a believer to make interpretations of reality actually defines what remains silent in a community. Following Bateson's thinking, it can be said that Nora had courage to enter a zone where the “angels fear to go.” She put into words some silent premises in the congregation, but only in the company of an outsider.

Conclusions

Quietness as a sensory experience is, of course, the most obvious way of defining silence. In this article, however, I have approached the theme of silence from another perspective by discussing it as a certain absence of information in narration of interviewees who were committed adherents of the Neo-charismatic Word of Faith congregation. Neo-charismatic Christianity is typically well-known for its vivid and noisy worship culture and salient narrative tradition of witnessing as well as intensive preaching. In the Word of Life, the so-called positive confession is an essential aspect of the speech culture being based on the idea of spoken words as being self-fulfilling. Following this principle, members of the movement are advised to pay special attention to how they think and talk in order to promote their personal spiritual development. Accordingly, in her study on the Don Evangelicals, Piret Koosa shows how the converts' “proper talk” indicates their “proper deeds” and “proper emotions” as well (cf. Piret Koosa in this issue). By the right rhetorical choices the believers can make themselves credible in front of their faith community, but also draw the line between the “saved” and the “lost”. The discussions regarding the lived religion with the members of the Word of Life revealed that there were certain situations and topics that required the believers to remain silent or to look for substitutive and euphemistic expressions. Such narrative choices appeared to be important for maintaining the reality they wanted to live in. I have approached such silences in the narration of the interviewees as *noncommunication*. In principle, noncommunication means saying nothing about

negative, frightening or in some other ways undesired things that threaten in one way or another the prevailing equilibrium. However, contextual silence can be more than just speechlessness as it is revealed in the above analysis of the narration of the believers.

In the narration of the Faith believers, it is possible to recognise noncommunication in the form of certain narrative silences, such as veiling and belittling issues and situations which are, for one reason or another, considered inappropriate for a believer. Evasive speech occurs typically in the context of situations and topics that are regarded as negative for an individual's personal spiritual growth or for the public image of the congregation, such as personal failure or experiences interpreted as "Satan's harassment". Words and thoughts being self-fulfilling as they are in the world of the Faith believers, failures, sins and demonic interventions are, indeed, topics not to be touched upon. They do not fit the rhetoric of positive confession. However, it is obvious that what is regarded as a "sensitive topic" depends on the relationship between the discussants, on how familiar or distant they are to each other and what they expect from each other, for instance. While certain topics are, in practice, avoided or even considered taboo regarding the image of a born-again believer in the congregational context, they may sometimes be outspoken without hesitation in the company of an outsider. That is how an unspoken truth about the mind-set in the congregation could be spoken out loud in an interview situation, in another physical and discursive space where neither the credibility and status of a believer nor the prestige of the congregation was threatened.

As Bateson argued in his study of the nature and meaning of the sacred, whereas explicit communication would alter the nature of ideas, noncommunication works by keeping up sacredness. For a Faith believer, the decision of not addressing certain topics is an attempt to control the surrounding world and strengthen the feeling of safety and success as well as confirming the social cohesion within the community, keeping up the borderline between the saved and the unsaved. Thus, noncommunication is,

indeed, a functional aspect of religious communication. It is a performative practice that supports the Neo-charismatic reality.

Notes

- 1 I am referring to the historical development of Pentecostal and Charismatic Christianity often defined as three waves (e.g. Hunt 1997: 82; Poloma & Hoelzer 1998: 258–259).
- 2 The general idea of the mind-cure doctrine of the nineteenth century was that a human individual should think "God's thoughts". The difference between mind cure and co-existent Puritanism lied in the idea of God's will. While the Puritans emphasised the significance of God's will, the mind-cure thinkers did not accept the idea of God's arbitrary will. Instead, all people were seen as able to get everything they need from God already during this life, here and now. However, the idea of God fulfilling people's hopes requires the people having only pure and virtuous wishes. It was an individualistic aim at personal spiritual development (e.g. Meyer [1965]1980).
- 3 These themes were dealt with in the spiritualisms which emerged in the nineteenth century, such as the New Thought by Phineas P. Quimby and the Christian Science by Mary Baker Eddy. The ideal of the New Thought was the "art of (authentic) living." According to Quimby, the reasons for illness were wrong beliefs and fear, which can be cured mentally. People are to themselves exactly what they think they are (Teinonen 1965: 76). Mary Baker Eddy, for her part, developed the idea of "malicious animal magnetism" which she claimed to prove that in case distant mental healing was possible, a human being was correspondingly susceptible to the influence of evil (Teinonen 1965: 84).
- 4 Referential communicative behaviour is based on a general consensus concerning the meaning of the expression in a certain social reference group, while constitutive aspects in discourse, rather, find their specific meanings in the (situational) contexts in which they occur (Popp-Baier 2001: 3; Stromberg 1993: 10).
- 5 Folklorist Elaine J. Lawless has pointed out that the physical pain experienced in the role of a victim is not easily told about by the battered women. Instead, the narrators whom she interviewed avoided the topic or refused to talk about it at all. Apparently, while talking about it, the narrator would be forced to live through the shameful situation again (Lawless 2001: 59–61).
- 6 The names of the interviewees are pseudonyms.
- 7 Apostle Paul's metaphor in the Bible (Cor 9:6) deals with the meaning and importance of offering for the congregational activities and spiritual work as "sowing" and receiving benefits of such investments as

“reaping the harvest.” It is the principle that is frequently referred to in the Word of Life teaching about money; one receives the same thing in return that has been given, often even with interest (Hovi 2009: 163).

References

Archived material

Taped interviews by the author are archived in TKU-Archive of the School of Cultural Studies at the University of Turku:

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