Determining the Perception of Silence in Casual Conversations among the Native Speakers of Rimi in Singida, Tanzania

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Abstract

This paper provides an empirically grounded examination of the perception of silence in casual conversation among the Rimi native speakers in Singida. Four casual conversations of Rimi native speakers were examined. Silence in conversation was determined using the turn-taking framework in Conversation Analysis. The findings indicate that, in Rimi, silence is mainly perceived negatively; it is used to express, among others, anger, conceit and terror. However, there is a tendency to give it a positive value. Some positive uses of silence include a cognitive function and social discretion. The interviews and focus group discussions reveal individuals evaluating their own silences positively. These results suggest that silence can either foster or stifle conversation and that interpreting silence in the Rimi community remains complex.

Keywords: *Conversation Analysis, Rimi, Singida, silence, Tanzania*

Introduction

Sociolinguistics view language as a social and cultural phenomenon. They observe how humans, during their social interaction, utilize language in real, everyday life situations and in their naturalistic settings. Human interaction is by large surrounded by conversations. People converse for various purposes such as conveying information, expressing opinions or influencing others. Conversation comprises various sounds of words and non-verbal

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elements, including silence - the absence of words with meaning, which is the focus of this article. In this paper, we examine between-turn silences in casual conversation. Because silence is a pervasive and normative component in conversation in different cultures, it has attracted the attention of researchers, particularly linguists. Some of the intriguing questions are how silence in conversation is organized and how interpretation of silence makes a conversation successful or faulty.

Literature Review

The conception of silence in terms of what it does in talk constitutes a previously underspecified and un-explicated component of turn-taking organization. Silence enables parties to a conversation to manage transition from one speaker to another at possible completion points, also referred to as Transition Relevance Places (TRPs) of the first turn-constructional unit or when the current speaker selects someone to talk next. As Enninger (1991:3) states, silence can signify turn-planning, turn-relinquishing, hesitation before taking a turn, ratification of the previous turn's content, disagreement, non-committal, prevarication and embarrassment. Despite the communicative value of silence across cultures, there are cultural differences regarding the normal length of silence at the exchange of speakership. Jefferson (1989) states that the maximum standard of silence is only one second before the speakers start feeling uncomfortable and try to terminate it. It is not uncommon however during conversation to find conversation partners 'making' longer silences at speakers exchange than their normal standard. Speakers opt to make these silences purposely to communicate certain intentions and convey information. As Lebra (2009:1) contends, silence is communicative in all cultures.

Despite its null phonetic realization, silence is understood because "people hear language but not sound" (Pinker, 1994:158). Ephratt (2008) says that communicative silence is a means chosen by the speaker for particular verbal communication. This silence is different from the silence of a listener (when is not their turn) or silencing of the more powerful. Eades (2007: 285) observes that

although "silence sounds the same in any dialect it can have different meaning, functions, and interpretations". Gundlach (2010) states that silence as an act of non-verbal communication transmits many kinds of meanings depending on cultural norms of interpretation. There is a number of studies on silence such as Ephratt (2008), Chowdhury et al. (2017), and Tannen and Saville-Trioke (1985) which indicate that silence has a communicative role in conversations. Previously, Samarin (1965:115) suggested that silence can have meaning, like the zero in Mathematics, that is, it is an absence with a function.

More prolific studies on silence have been on Western against Eastern cultures, thereby creating a dichotomous valuation of silence between the two ends. Jandt (2004:116) reports that for the Western individualistic societies, silence is viewed more negatively as a lack of attention and initiative. Taciturn people are judged as incoherent, sullen, passive, unresponsive, uncooperative, lazy, stupid and do not make sense when you interact with them (Scollon, 1985). In this sense, a silent person risks his or her relationship with others.

On the contrary, in Eastern societies, also referred to as collective cultures, where relationship in group membership is more important than individual ability, silence is a reflection and circumspection rather than dissymmetry relationship. For Eastern societies, silence conveys interpersonal sensitivity, respect, truthfulness, wisdom, affirmation and personal dignity (Jandt, 2004:116). The Japanese, for instance, trust people with fewer words than those who speak too much (Lebra, 1987). Henceforth, most researchers on silence have categorized cultures into two main labels, 'silent East' cultures - Asia and Middle East and 'eloquent West' – Europe and America (Nakane, 2007:2). The dichotomy regarding silence practices between Western and Eastern creates a seemingly categorical statement that the Western dislike silence while for Asians, silence is valued and positively apprised. The findings from these studies imply that cultures are divided within this dichotomy.

Some of the studies done in Africa have indicated that silence has a positive connotation in the continent. For instance, the study by Oyinkan (2010) on Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba, languages of Nigeria, showed that silence is an integrative part of communication process and it expresses group philosophies. In Setswana silence in various contexts conveys peace, humility, subordination, and anger (Mmangaka, 2012). The converse appears among the !Kung a bush-dwelling people of South West Africa where silence is bad. They hold that silence increases friction and hostility within a group and between groups of people (Marshall in Wardhaugh, 2006: 242). For !Kung, silences build up pressures which find their release in aggression; the !Kung therefore recourse to talk to remove uncertainty in relationship. According to Marshall, conversation in !Kung is constant and as low and lapping and families talk late at night by fire. These findings indicate that part of African cultures the value of silence is congruent to that of Eastern cultures while some cultures feel weird with silence as with most Western societies.

Despite of this categorization, there are intra-cultural differences in the interpretation and use of silence among members of the same community. For instance, Lebra (2007) reports that for Japanese silence means truthfulness, social discretion, embarrassment and defiance. This means that one has to understand which meaning is intended in particular context. This points to another important aspect of silence - that silence is a context-bound phenomenon, making silence the most ambiguous and polysemous conversational component. Hence, to understand its message needs more energy than with verbal message (Jaworski, 1993:24). Silences therefore in both intra-cultural and inter-cultural exchanges are speech segments of high uncertainty (Enninger, 1991:3). As such, silence has potentials for miscommunication and pragmatic failures during conversation both across culture and within the same community. This paper examines perception of silence occurring at speaker change among the native speakers of Rimi because of its potential for misinterpretation and the resultant communication failures, particularly during conversations of in-group members. The kind of silence creates suspense to its recipient because it flouts the normal

verbal conversation expectations. Sacks et al. (1974) labeled this silence as lapses (extended silences between turns). A good example of this kind of silence is provided by Atkinson and Drew (1979:52).

> A: Is there something bothering you or not?
>
> B: (1.0)
>
> A: Yes or no
>
> B: (1.5)
>
> A: Eh?
>
> B: No.

In turn-taking norms, **A**, by asking a direct question to **B**, was selecting **B** for the next turn and **B** was responsible to respond. But **B** does not verbally reply. **A**, then reframes the utterance into a guiding question that needs only a yes/no response; **B** still does not choose any of the provided options. Finally, **A** uses a prompt, which succeeds to elicit a negative answer. This kind of silence that **A** kept on interacting with which does not conform to the expected norms of interaction, is not a void; rather, it has communicative significance. We will examine this kind of silence in casual conversation among the native speakers of Rimi in Singida Tanzania.

Methods and Theoretical Framework

This paper is grounded on Conversation Analysis (CA). Conversation Analysis is an ethno-methodology frame used for studying naturally occurring talk and talk-in-interaction. The theory is based on the notion that conversation has a natural organization that shows different features in different settings. Through this theory, one can analytically describe the way people organize their interaction using spontaneous data from situated and contextualized talk. It is argued that people's talk contains features that influence how subsequent speakers will react. CA therefore focuses on the relationship between the preceding utterances with the following ones, and the effect they have on each other (Arminen, 1999: 251). Given that silence lacks material substance, it is difficult to interpret it in isolation but through CA the interpretation is made possible because the meaning of silence is considered in terms of the preceding and subsequent units, particularly when the units are verbalized.

Since conversation is a situated event, we adopted Halliday's (1978) notion of context of situation to explain varied interpretation of silence. In order to understand the organization of conversation and how people perceive the meaning of utterances, it is important to consider the context where a particular conversation takes place. This is particularly important in understanding the meaning of silence because it is highly context bound (Sobkowiak, 1997). Halliday and Hassan (1985: 8) showed that "language can (better) be understood in its context of situation for every society".

Methods and Analysis

The data for this study was collected from eight participants through observation, interview and audio recording; out of the eight participants, six of them were involved in focus group discussion (FGD). We obtained the sample using purposive and random sampling. We targeted eight native Rimi participants from various social categories. Among these, three pairs of female friends and two familiar males who were distributed unevenly from the three villages in Singida. Four out of six female participants were of average age between 30-45 years and the other two were above 55 years; the two males were between 50-60 years. As we listened to the recorded conversations, we noted areas with silence that lasted for two or more seconds and convened the participants for an interview session and an FGD. We asked them questions on their use and perception of silence in conversations and on the cultural and social connotations that silence carries in their culture. One dyadic casual conversation was observed and recorded on each session that took about 30 minutes. All the participants, except for two old ladies, were close friends and met in different chat places at village centres where people usually meet for various purposes. The researchers recorded spontaneous idle chats about soccer, politics or about events that transpired in the village. Non -verbal cues, such as nodding and frowning were also noted as they contribute to the meaning of conversation in general. However, the study subjects were fewer in some villages because of the difficulties in getting them during chit chat time at village centres. Most of

them were making trips to town centre while others had to go the nearby forest to fetch firewood or charcoal making. Moreover, apart from being fewer in number-spreading only to 24 districts out of 184 districts across the country, most Rimi natives tend to speak Kiswahili language over their language, particularly at village centres, probably because Kiswahili is associated with literacy and modernism. The researchers therefore chose from a small sample of pure Rimi native speaking population. The conversations, FGDs and interview sessions were all done through Rimi language in Rimi cultural conversation norms. We transcribed the data using the Nvivo programme and manually. We transcribed the conversations and extracted relevant points where silence appeared. Several turns before and after the silence were included in the description to understand the role of silence in the conversation. Praat software and mobile phone Android Applications were used to detect and calculate the length of silence at each of the selected portions of conversation.

Findings and Discussion

In conversations generally and in casual conversations in particular, participants expect a relaxed harmonious exchange. This is meant to create a cordial conversation atmosphere and foster the participants' relationship. In a smooth exchange, it is expected that every utterance in a turn should be responded with verbal utterances as well. However, there are several occasions in conversations where turns are filled with silence instead of words. Some of these silences are too fleeting and are hardly given any attention while other silences are significant in conversations. According to Jefferson (1989), the maximum standard of silence is only one second before the speakers start feeling uncomfortable and try to terminate it. When this is not the case, participants put their conversation at risk or if positive attribution is inferred then the meaning of silence is usually sought. In both cases the conversation may either become disrupted or continue smoothly respectively. Although the quest of this study was not to determine the length of between-speaker silences, the data for this study showed that

the normal length of silence at TRPs in African societies and in Rimi in particular is longer than the standard length of one second suggested by Jefferson (ibid) for Western societies. This can be reflective of differences in speech tempo between the Western societies with higher speaking rate against African societies under similar contexts and psychological factors.

Following the turn taking rule, the meaning of an utterance in particular turn, including silence, is determined based on what precedes or what occurs after a particular utterance or silence. The data for this study show that participants used and perceived silence more negatively such as being rejected and superciliousness; however, there are also occasions where silence was accorded positive value.

Negative Attributions of Silence

Analysis of the data indicated that a conversational partner may use silence to indicate their disagreement with the previous contribution or use it to express tense emotions. The recipient of silence perceives silence in the meaning of the producer and beyond. In most cases, silence was perceived, among others, as a condescending attitude, pompousness, or arrogance and danger. These are negative qualities that none of the addressee condones.

In Excerpt 1, Okohi and Jabala are talking about their age in which Jabala claims to be older than Okohi. The conversation then focuses on the independence of Tanzania, the year in which Jabala claims to have been born. Okohi accused Jabala of being illiterate. After short exchanges Jabala defends himself that he was not illiterate. In a sarcastic tone Jabala asks Okohi where he comes from, meaning that he should have been aware of the issues around. Okohi, in line 130, keeps silent for 07seconds expressing his disagreement with Jabala.

> 129 Jabala: =Vee wewagofee tranjo ore?
> *Where are you from my dear? (Sarcastic question)*
> 130 Okohi: (0.7)˘˘ ogahaanya hee ogasokera ohanya.
> *ok say what you have just said, repeat what you said*

131 Jabala: ↓nagwera woo ohoro nena ojie nene afaa
ngosomaa afaa, mwakha sitini na ntoni, sitini na moja.
↓*I told you that during independence, I was schooling here, in the year sixty what, sixty-one.*

The apparent positive valuation of this kind of silence is that, because direct verbal disagreement may be considered rude, people would want to show their disagreement with communication partner through silence. Silence in the context of disagreement can be meant to prepare one for a more appropriate response for his or her disagreement. The emotional effect of direct verbal disagreement is thus mitigated. However, in its negative value, silence can indicate a bad relationship and a worsened communication. The negative valuation of silence in conversation, apart from providing clue about appalling relationship, it signals the same quality to the contents of talk and the agents in conversation. The recipient of silence in this context indicates that he interpreted silence negatively; in line 131 Okohi continued his turn in a very cold manner, with falling tone. Moreover, in an interview soon after recording the conversation, we asked Okohi about his perception of Jabala's silence during their conversation. He said that he was offended by his partner. He felt like he was speaking in solitude as the addressee was not fully paying attention to his talk. This perception corresponds to the Rimi belief that silence is bad, which is alluded in Rimi classic adage that "twe gaikhomiye njou gihaka" - *silence drove away elephants from the jungle.*

Another negatively perceived silence and problematic conversation occurred between Sie and Sikitu. In Excerpt 2 below, Sie and Sikitu are talking about their teacher who died in hospital where he was being hospitalized. They try to remember what had happened. Their chat is characterized by interruptions and criticism. Sikitu interprets Sie's silence (line 211 and 213) as a refusal to continue conversation. She is angered and wants to terminate the conversation (line 216). However, Sie's silence was not intended to stop the conversation but she was resisting interruption as utterance in line 215 indicates:

Excerpt 2

210 Sikitu: cho gwajogekhaa matriko atratru ndio gwajokhanewa wakuyaa

We stayed for three days before we were informed of his death

211 Sie: (0.7)

112 Sikitu: tri weleewa na?

  Have you understood?

213 Sie: (0.4) neelewa ntooni

214 = tir oreghetrie ((veve)) na

215 vee ja wakoonda ojolojie

 Understand what! Just go on talking ((to yourself)) you kept on bla bla

We asked Sikitu how she perceived Sie's silence: "ne nasogoona atrea walejooka, wahoora, sasa mweso atrikombokiwe alafu ohitrere, naamoa omoreeka tu" – *I thought she kind of ostracized me, displeased; she doesn't remember but she doesn't want to lose the argument. I decided to stop the conversation.* Silence widens disagreement and may result in terminating the conversation or initiating a new topic (Sacks et al., 1974). Sikitu therefore considered Sie's silence irrational and spiteful. In this exchange silence was used as an expression of speaker's annoyance because she was interrupted severally during her several turns. Sie's silence, in turn, triggered negative feelings and disrupted the conversation. Sie's silence therefore expresses simultaneously disagreement and negative emotions. It seems that Sie and Sikitu had different shared knowledge that resulted in disagreement. Additionally, as the conversation continued, the participants' sense of belonging among each other was deteriorating; hence their relationship. This is similar to the observation by Lestary et al. (2017:60) that there are two prominent problems that trigger the occurrences of silence: different shared knowledge and disagreement. High frequency of silence indicates disruptive and troubled conversations because silence is triggered by disagreement and confrontations prior to it (Lestary et al., 2017; Robert, Francis, & Morgan, 2006). Anolli (2002) also points that silence may be the clue of a very good relationship or an intense communication. Disruptive talk is also characterized by rapid change of topics, which is a reason that Sikitu terminated the talk.

The findings show that in most cases silence in casual conversation among the Rimi triggers negative emotions, indicates troubled conversation and deteriorating relationship between the participants. These results are in line with the Rimi belief that silence is bad as alluded in their classic axiom *"twe gaikhomiye njou gihaaka"* - *silence drove away elephants from the jungle.* A story behind this axiom is that a gathering of all animals wanted the biggest beast- the elephants off their jungle but every means failed to chase away the arrogant elephants. Lions had a plan; they decided to settle near the elephants' habitat in absolute silence. The elephants were scared by the lions' silence and took off at once out of jungle. Henceforth, silence for Rimi creates horror and signals danger. Rimi data are congruent with the Western general practices regarding the use and interpretation of silence as negative.

Positive Attributions of Silence

Silence may also represent positive feelings while other silences pass unheeded. Extract 3 below is an example of silence used and interpreted positively. The results revealed that silence has a cognitive function of organizing thoughts, selecting appropriate words, or assists the current speaker to look for a more suitable way to express the feeling or describe a situation (Tannen and Saville-Troike, 1985). Silence therefore provides time to evaluate the contents of the previous turn, remember what is pointed and also think about the appropriate contribution in one's turn.

In Excerpt 3 below Nyasingu is talking to Mokhikoo about the money belonging to the division's society-based association in which they are the key coordinators. Nyasingu, in line 58, reminds Mokhikoo of the money that they owe some people. She waits for Mokhikoo to respond but Mokhikoo is not forthcoming and after 04 seconds Nyasingu self selects and continues talking. She follows her question with the 'checks term' sawaa? *Is that right?* Mokhikoo again responds with silence (05). The fact that she is listening suggests that she uses her silence as a strategy to get more time to remember the facts of the preceding turn and plans to verbalize her response. Mokhikoo continues her silence for which the previous

speaker Nyasingu interprets as understanding of the preceding utterance and she therefore continues giving more information in line 60. Silence in this context is being positively appraised as the necessary time required to process what has been said and indication of effort to understand what has been said in the previous turn. Had this not been the case, the conversation would have been disrupted. This perception is similar to the findings reported in literature that silence increases with cognitive load, complex and unfamiliar tasks, reference mentioned in the conversation and eye contact between participants (Cappella, 1979; Beattie & Bradbury, 1979; and Bull & Aylett, 1998). Silence is one of the most important indicators of the cognitive processes of speech production in conversation (Zuo, 2002).

> Excerpt 3
> 57 Nyasingu: sasa sa weelewe ideni negodaiwa,
> 58   shilingi elfu kumi na taano (04) sawaa
>   *you have to understand how much we owe them,*
>   *fifteen thousand (04) right?*
> 59 Mokhikoo: (05)
> 60 Nyasingu: Halafu awoo nenaa vajorejeshaa trii ndio
>   vajo nanii na?
>   *So, when they pay back, then they will.*

Silence in the following extract represents another silence that is used and interpreted as face saving strategy or politeness.

> Excerpt 4
> 122 Rooje: Hivi reo ja zamu amwanyu oroogha gaatre.
>   *Whose cooking shift is it today?*
> 123 Bahati: (02) aane↓
>   *mine↓*
> 124 Rooje: cho trineenda oroogha
>   *but you haven't gone to cook*
> 125 Bahati: (0.6) Aaa kee mapema↓eoo mhuu haa euu,
>   reo na gwiinje otrembeanga
>   *(0.6) it is still early↓ Eoo mhuu euu, today we have to go for a walk*

The above participants are talking about cooking shifts. Rooje thinks that food should have already been prepared or at least someone should be in the kitchen. Rooje knows well that it is Bahati's turn to prepare food; but she decides to avoid negative face by asking a rhetorical question in line 22 as though she does not know who is responsible for cooking. Bahati is silent for 02 seconds before she responds: ane *—mine* in line 23. Bahati understands that her friend knows better that it is her shift, so the question is not intended to obtain new information but to blame or lament. She chooses to be silent as a polite strategy to avoid threatening Rooje's negative face. Rooje implicitly tells Bahati if she knew that she was responsible for cooking why had she not done so as they were then behind the time? Bahati agrees partially to the fact that she had not cooked yet but she disagrees with the implicit accusation. She keeps silent for (06) seconds indicating a downgraded agreement. This silence is intended to maintain social discretion; utilization of silence is a politeness strategy intended to save the positive face of the addressee. This indicates that interlocutors are conscious of group solidarity.

Bahati finally succeeds in disarming Rooje who drops her accusation. These findings are similar to the findings reported on Asian societies like Japan (Nakane, 2007). These cultures are placed on the extreme end of the silence dichotomy for which silence is desired and preferred over oratory skills. On pragmatic terms, Rooje said her silence provided her time to process what to say. This is in line with the observation that silence is one of the most important indicators of the cognitive processes of speech p roduction in conversation (Zuo, 2002).

However, Rooje's own experience on silence in conversation in their culture was different from what she used silence for. She said that in Rimi conversation norms a person who responds with silence despises the person he/she is talking with or ignores what the other person is saying. "No mwona ruvee getre wanzarau" - *It will mean that she looks down on me:* "Ugodharau ruvee into naja namoweya atrina reyanjaa" - *Maybe she disregards me or dislikes something I told her.*

On the contrary, Bahati interprets negatively her friend's silence: "wegekii nagitregheya goobe" - *she is arrogant, I felt bad.* She further states that silence is worse than saying something negative, even as offensive as an insult: "Bahu monto ne wagisoocha viive kamwe au agotrooke koliko ogokiera"- *it is better for someone to provide offensive response or even insulting you than remaining silent.* This means there is a mismatch between the silence producer's intention and the perception of the recipient of silence. Interview data indicate that several respondents perceive others' silence negatively, more frequently as arrogance and disrespect but they interpret their own silence positively. This discrepancy suggests that either the intention of the producer of silence is missed or the producers of the silence conceal their intentions. This may also underscore the complexity and ambiguous nature of silence in conversations that there can be misinterpretation in some occasions. The consequences of misinterpretation of silence range from minor annoyance to ferocious life destruction. For example, years back there was tension between Egypt and Greece. In one occasion Egyptian pilots radioed expressing their intention to land their plane at a Cypriot airbase; the Greek air traffic controllers responded with silence. While the Greeks intended their silence response to communicate refusal of the permission to land, the Egyptians interpreted the silence as assent. When the plane landed, the Greeks fired on the plane, resulting in the death of several people (Saville-Troike in Krieger, 2001: 233). Sifianou (1997) reports that, to the Greeks, silence means unfriendliness, bad character and that danger lurks in the silent person. This example underscores our observation that silence is a subtly ambiguous component of conversation that has potential for misinterpretation and it needs to be understood how it works in different cultures.

Nevertheless, the findings here show that Rimi native speakers perceive silence more negatively than positively. This usually happens when the participants have different opinions or when they disagree on issues in a topic of their conversation. As a result, the relationship between participants becomes erratic and problematic

as well as the conversation. According to Koudenburg et al. (2011), the participants in disrupted conversation will most likely feel rejected and experience negative emotions. These findings are similar to those reported on the Western culture and the Americas where silence is negatively perceived (Tannen, in Bratt &Tucker, 2003; Jaworski, 1993; Eggins & Slade, 1997; Scollon, 1985). However, in Rimi conversations, there are some situations where silence has positive appraisal. The findings show that silence serves cognitive function by providing time to the addressee to reflect on the previous turn content and to choose more appropriate response. Silence also represents, among others, politeness strategy, which means that it is used to avoid conflicts, disagreement, to show respect and to express psychological emotional states such as anger (Scollon & Scollon, 1983; Bratt &Turker, 2003; and Cruz, 2008). The appreciation of silence in conversation is similar to the findings by Lebra (2007) on Japanese where silence indicates conscious of in-group solidarity, truthfulness and improves one's social standing.

Conclusion

Most of the previous studies have emphasized the dichotomy of silence between cultures, in particular between the *silent* East and the more *talkative* West, which suggests that any particular culture may either treat silence as a virtue or as an undesirable conversational feature. However, silence presents a range of challenges to talk-in-interaction. As shown in this study, silence cannot definitely induce either solely negative or positive feelings. Such a predicament lies in silence's ambiguous nature, which practically makes it richer in meanings but easily misinterpreted. The results indicate that, among the Rimi, silence is perceived more negatively than positively and it is judged as pomposity, terror, and refusal. It also signals danger. However, in some cases, silence performed different functions such as gaining processing time, social discretion and expressing embarrassment. These findings, therefore, deny the possibility for absolute propositions regarding silence and the categorical positioning of cultures into the previous dichotomous cultural labels. This suggests that, in Rimi culture, and probably

in any culture, silence is variable and relative, and can hardly be stated in categorical terms. Additionally, because interactionists approach the act of conversing with certain volition and objectives - temporary or long-standing, the interviews ascertained the meaning and effect of silence from the participants' perspectives. Therefore, generalizations about perceptions of silence based either on the cultural norms embedded in axioms or in the reports of the previous research dichotomies may be superseded and not feasible. Given the importance of raising mutual awareness within and between cultures during both intra-cultural and intercultural communication contexts, it is important to understand how silence is used and perceived by interactants in any talk event.

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