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Silence that speaks: The local inferences of withholding a response in intercultural couples' conflicts

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ABSTRACT

Conversation analysts commonly agree that speakers tend to minimize gaps between adjacency pairs, and that silence in this position is likely to indicate trouble. However, there are surprisingly few sequential analyses that investigate what kinds of trouble silences indicate, particularly in conflict interactions and in intercultural contexts. This paper examines the practice of withholding a response as an interactionally meaningful device in domestic disputes among couples who use English as their common lingua franca (ELF). By investigating the ways in which these speakers orient to transition-relevance place silences in the subsequent turns, it is concluded that noticeable silences in domestic ELF conflict talk are treated by the interlocutors as marking the following: 1) avoiding self-incriminating second pair-parts, 2) resisting laughable-initiated changes of footing, 3) sustained disagreement, 4) taking offence, or 5) unsuccessful persuasion. The most common ways in which the speakers then orient to such silences are also reviewed. The analysis shows that turn-by-turn micro-analysis is an efficient methodology for examining the situational inferences of silence-in-interaction.

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1. Introduction

People are generally adept at evaluating whether a silence is poignant or sulking, or whether it has no special meaning except perhaps “I have nothing more to add”. Conversation analysts have engaged in explorations of silence in ordinary conversations (e.g., [Schegloff, 1968](#); [Pomerantz, 1984](#)) and commonly agree that speakers tend to minimize silences between turns.¹ Although sulking and resentful silences are phenomena that can be expected in conflict talk rather than in friendly chatter, surprisingly few sequential analyses² pay specific attention to silences in verbal disputes, which is of main focus in this paper.

The current paper explores silences in conflict talk in lingua franca contexts. Although cross-cultural differences are commonly found in the meanings and functions that silences have in human interaction (see, e.g., the chapters in [Tannen and Saville-Troike, 1985](#)), and in discourse norms regarding disputes – when they should take place and how they should be carried out (see [Grimshaw, 1990:298](#)) – these differences may not be as significant as previously thought. A recent cross-

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¹ It has to be noted that these early studies focused on telephone conversations, not face-to-face interactions, which has obvious effects on the speakers' orientation toward silence in the absence of visual clues.

² [Pomerantz \(1975\)](#) explores gaps before disagreement turns, but the nature of her data seems amicable without any strong disagreements, whereas [Vuchinich \(1990\)](#) studies family dispute endings and mentions that long pauses allow for shifting away from the issue of conflict.

linguistic study (Stivers et al., 2009) revealed that speakers of ten languages across the world tended to minimize gaps and overlaps between question-answer adjacency pairs, thus corroborating Schegloff's and Pomerantz's theories on silence minimization between adjacency pairs as discourse universals. A logical consequence of this would then be that if a long silence appears between adjacency pair-parts, even speakers from differing language backgrounds should recognize such a silence as an indication of some kind of a problem.

This article explores silences within conflict sequences in couple talk where the partners use a common lingua franca. The analysis is not constrained to particular types of adjacency pairs but uses the theory of turn-construction organization (Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson, 1978) as a starting point. It focuses on silences at transition relevance places followed by first-speaker self-selection. I follow Hammer's (2005:676) definition of conflict interaction as a substantive disagreement among the speakers combined with an emotional reaction, typically of antagonistic type, from one or both interlocutors.³ In the conflict sequences examined below, one or both participants display emotional upset that manifests itself in an exasperated tone-of-voice and/or shouting while actually disagreeing on some matter.

This paper is organized as follows: In Section 2, previous studies on interpersonal conflict and silence are reviewed, after which a brief description on lingua franca research concerning conflict interaction and/or silence is provided. Section 3 explains the conversation analytic account of units of talk and the ways in which they are organized in adjacency pairs in naturally occurring interaction. This section provides the reader with a foundation of the relevant theories within conversation analysis (CA) that have guided the analysis in Section 5. Before the analysis, however, details on the data and the methodology applied in this paper are given in Section 4. Finally, Section 6 concludes the findings.

2. Background

Conflicts, arguments, disputes, quarrels and other kinds of disagreements have attracted researchers studying social interaction in, e.g., children (Maynard, 1985; Corsaro and Rizzo, 1990; Harness Goodwin, 2007), families (Vuchinich, 1990) and mediation (Greatbatch and Dingwall, 1997; Garcia, 1991), to mention a few. Vuchinich (1990) focuses on the different types of endings of family disputes, most of which do not end in consensus, whereas Dersley and Wootton (2001) scrutinize three heated exchanges that end with one party exiting the scene. However, none of these studies focus on the uses of silence, although Vuchinich (1990) does note that silence occurs in connection with submission, withdrawal, or topic shift that enables the participants to exit the conflict. Tannen (1990) examines the uses of silence in Harold Pinter's play *Betrayal* and Alice Mattison's short story *Great Wits* and shows that silences mark conflict climaxes and are used in managing conflicts so that the relationship is not destroyed. These conclusions should, however, be taken with a pinch of salt, as the data are not drawn from naturally occurring interaction.

Silences, or gaps in talk, have been investigated as impositions of mind (Bruneau, 1973) or as active agents in various hypothetical interpersonal communication situations (Jensen, 1973). Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985) offer a volume of empirical investigations of silence in psychology, law, cross-cultural communication and nonverbal communication. In that volume, George R. Saunders' chapter on anthropological fieldwork of families in an Italian village mentions that withholding a response is used in conflict management. Saunders argues that the families use silence to avoid confrontation when satisfactory outcomes are unlikely: "In arguments, when one of the participants ceases to respond, observers are quick to urge the others to drop the matter" (Saunders, 1985: 178). A more recent undertaking by Oduro-Frimpong (2007, 2011) investigates silence in the conflict management of married couples. Oduro-Frimpong reports that silences are used 1) in withdrawing from the conflict, i.e., in stopping oneself before one goes too far or says something one might regret, and 2) for pressuring the partner to give in, e.g., to coerce "the wife to later accede to [the husband's] sexual demands" (2011: 2333). However, this study is only informed by married partners' perceptions in interviews, and thus does not give reliable insights into how couples actually use silence in their naturally occurring interactions.

2.1. Silence and conflict in lingua franca interactions

In crosslinguistic contexts, speakers are compelled to resort to a lingua franca (LF), a contact language, if they do not share a common first/native language. Often this contact language is English, and, in fact, the majority of current sociolinguistic LF research revolves around English as a lingua franca (ELF). Conflict and silence are, however, distinctly under-researched areas in (E)LF communication. Apart from very few undertakings, ELF disputes have not been studied at all, which is likely due to the fact that such data are difficult to gather.

ELF interactions are commonly considered cooperative (e.g., Cogo, 2010; Kaur, 2010, 2011; Mauranen, 2006; Seidlhofer, 2009). Disagreements do occur in ELF talk, but in the genre of academia, for example, Björkman (2016) finds that speakers do not perceive expressing disagreement as confrontational in PhD supervision meetings. Bjørge (2010, 2012), on the other hand, concludes that although expressing disagreement is a necessary skill in business negotiations, the ELF speakers in her (simulated) study avoided face-threatening language and were unwilling to directly confront their opponents. However, in negotiations where there was a clear conflict of interest, she notes, the speakers used considerably fewer backchannels than in other types of talk.

³ The terms "conflict" and "dispute" are used interchangeably in this paper.

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