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There are major and significant differences in the meanings of the words *silence*, *silenc(es)*, and *silencing*. Silence concerns nonlinear brain processes; silences concern sequential linguistics and interactions; and silencing concerns restricting the speech and expressions of our selves and/or others. This entry defines and discusses these three kinds of communication, all of which are more important than previously thought.

Compared to studies of spoken communication, silence, silences, and silencing have received relatively little study. This may be because silence is often considered to be the ground in Western societies and spoken language the figure. Silences are [p. 881 ↓] like the white of this paper, while this print is like spoken language. From some Asian perspectives, silence can be sometimes considered a figure, and spoken language can be the ground, a yin-yang balancing. Our first focus is on silence, a very general and elusive concept and process sometimes mixed up with the idea of silenc(es).

**Silence**

For thousands of years, wise people have commented on the virtues and negativities about shutting up or talking. There have been hundreds of quotations, sayings, and maxims about what was considered silence over the years. For example, around 280 B.C. we find Epicurus the Stoic saying that God gave people two ears, but only one mouth, that they may hear twice as much as they speak. Around 53 B.C., we find Cicero, the Roman statesman-rhetorician, commenting that there is an eloquence of silence to be found in conversations, and around 42 B.C., we find Publius Syrus noting that a person who does not know when to speak does not know when to be silent. We find similar statements about silence in Asian historical documents and in Hebraic and Biblical documents. Also, much of wisdom discussed in theological and mythical circles concerns many beliefs about the silent worlds of a higher order: eternity is silent, infinity is silent, nothingness is silent, death is silent, the night is silent, and our unconsciousness is often silent.

Almost all writers on silence have only dealt with linguistic and interactive silenc(es) and refer to any one of them as a silence, a confusing approach. Current brain studies show
that silence does indeed exist as processes of traditional and religious practice and belief, as well as intrapersonal aspects of spirituality, contemplation, and meditation. Such processes have been largely neglected or even negated in much of behavioral communication research as unimportant simply because silence seems elusive and measures are not apparent or are difficult. Silence will be shown in this entry to concern valid neurological processes, metaphorical narratives, and aesthetics. More importantly, silence concerns synchronous psychological temporalities, or various temporary psychological states occurring together, and the nonlinear brain processes necessary for creating spiritual aspects of consciousness. To believe in deep silence, then, is to believe in spirituality.

Seldom are people from Westernized cultural groupings conscious of their silence because it is hidden from consideration as a nothing and often is invisible or is out of awareness to them. This seems to be the case where speeded environments, haste into the future, and instantaneous cellular and Internet communications are common; the past (memories) disappears as fast as so-called modern progression will allow. The faster an environment, the less silence. This seems so because all sound concerns a friction caused by movements. Faster human conduct means more friction; more friction means more noise and less silence.

The late John Cage, an experimental music composer and artist, discussed silence as not existing in the physical absolute because something always happens that makes a sound. This idea should awaken us to a world of sounds that are below our abilities to detect them—butterfly wings flapping, bacteria chortling, the gracefulness of slow wind, the clicking of ants, the roar of the tiny creatures of the sea. Slowing of one’s motion and stilling our selves are sometimes related to falling silent. Stillness is highly related to silence in that, in the view of Aristotle in his *Physica*, death is the extinction of heat. Without heat there are no kinesics or movements and therefore, no friction. No friction means no possible human sound. It follows that an absolute physical silence can occur only at death, and only the dead or deities could possibly be witnesses to this silence. Much of religious thought and experiences are related to the idea of an absolute silence.

Silence can concern not only beauty, peacefulness, and happy endings, but also beliefs about hellish deaths, nothingness, timelessness, and the unknown. Silence is deep and
profund, whereas silenc(es) are more shallow and connected to the profane worlds of everyday life. Silence concerns a sacredness of place and of temporality, a space and time far different from the space-time sequences and linearity of the profane worlds of everyday life, scientific thinking, and the time keeping of objective consciousness. Anyone who cannot escape from a standpoint of temporal succession to be able to see all things in his or her simultaneity is probably not capable of understanding anything about the metaphysical order of the world. The [p. 882 ↓] image of harmony or peaceful silence is connected to contemplative processes and transformational brain processes. Two of these processes are termed narrative and transcendental kinds of consciousness by Karl Pribram, founder of holonomic brain theory and a leader in brain studies. The third kind of consciousness outlined by Pribram is called objective consciousness and is used in our everyday lives of order, structure, rationality, habits, and the like. Places and spaces of harmony appear to be created as after images of narrative and/or transcendental consciousness. These quasi-linear and nonlinear brain-energy transformations often seem to concern the motifs of light, radiance, illumination, brilliance, pure wisdom, and deities as light and love. In this definition, we have a neuro-scientific description of brain-mind as spiritually metaphorical and descriptive of silence that is very congruent with a number of contemplative and meditative traditions in psychology, as well as religious philosophy or theology.

Silence concerns that which is solitudinal to an extreme. One creates a sacred space in order to create a congruent temporal experience. Clock time and any sense of sequence must disappear, and one must become unconscious of an exterior reality, or what Pribram discusses as exformation as opposed to information or formation within. Solitude is an act of absenting one's self and others. Significantly, one must become absent from one's own verbal thoughts. Self-consciousness is a distraction to achieving a deeper and rewarding silence. One attempts to create a lengthy peacefulness in a social vacuity. To be transfixed in a synchronous oneness, to be absolutely alone, can seem frightening to those habitually glancing at and watching their watches so watchfully and being busy as bees (business). A carefully planned solitudinal environment, eliminating all possible distractions, appears to be necessary to achieving a deeper silence.

Mystical experiences are also the stuff of silence, a feeling of timelessness and liberation from the self, where words no long have a place. Mysticism involves a denial
of time in experience and nature, declares them both as illusory and unreal. Myth works in a similar manner. Myth carries us back to a sacred time, an atemporal world, beyond profane or everyday objective time, timing, and tempos. Both mystical and mythic experiences involve an escape from words and spoken language. The concept of unconsciousness also concerns a kind of silence. We can fall into a deep, unconscious world of sleep or daydreaming when we absent or void ourselves from everyday life.

We often hide memories from ourselves, revising them slightly, every time we recall them. Soon the memories are changed and become other than what we originally remembered. They become the stuff of daydreams and mental wanderings. Upon reentry into our everyday lives, we often do not know where we were or what we were thinking in our daydream journeys. We remember a silence, and sometimes, important insights can result. We not only repress our memories and revise them; the past disappears into silence. Even hypnosis cannot revive most memories lost forever. These lost memories can be said to be another kind of silence. The elderly know of lost memories only too well as dementia and Alzheimer's disease. That which is forgotten is a huge storehouse of silence.

Important to understand is that some silence does occur that is not as hypnotic, as is the case with deep silence. Narrative silence is abundant in terms of life experiences, traditional beliefs, superstitions, traditional stories, life rehearsals, and many kinds of psychic experiences common in different socio-cultural groupings. These more metaphorical, or narrative kinds of consciousness, concern an art of silence, an aesthetics of silence. Day dreaming is a flight, a personal escape, from everyday experience. Day dreamings concern nostalgic wanderings, heroic ventures, psychic fugues, relational and sexual fantasies, obsessive-compulsive reveries, and so on. There are many poetic or narrative statements that point to narrative consciousness, such as the Arabic proverb: the dog barks, the caravan passes.

Silences

The literature on silenc(es) is voluminous and complex. There are entire traditions in linguistics and psycholinguistics about the study of pausing, studied by certain auditory experts. Pausing includes silences, hesitations during speaking, listener
distractions from the spoken word, and breaks and shifts of many kinds in taking turns in interactions. Hesitations are made by public speakers, as well as by persons during interpersonal and group interactions; the scope of the functions of silences during communication cannot be covered fully in this entry. The study of silences has really just begun in terms of the history of communication studies. When alone and quiet, there occur longer kinds of silence; but when we are with others, we are involved in shorter silences.

Unlike silence, silences are related to linguistic and interactive sequences and a linear objective time. Silences can be both individualized as well as common to the linguistic regularities of particular groupings of people sharing similar spoken and interactive mannerisms. These regularities are called the functions of silences. Silences not only are breaks in spoken continuity, but also are the lengthening or shortening of vowels. These vowel alterations seem to create informational effects that indicate emotional tones and attitudes of speakers. Slowing speech rate often concerns a kind of pausing for attitudinal and affective effect. Of course, there are lengthy silences because of fear of speaking, reticence, autism, and a number of social and psychological pathologies.

There are many kinds of filled or vocalized pauses—indicating indecision, thinking about what to say, revisions while talking, hesitations, uncertainties, and so on. The degree of complexity of information is involved in blending propositioned inner speech with actual spoken constructions. These activities can result in conversational and group silences of some significance. Inexperience in conversing with others, especially strangers from unfamiliar cultural groupings, can produce lengthy puzzlements, silences or kinds of hesitations during momentary, here-and-now, interactions. Kinds of uncertainty seem to have high correlations with what can be called interactive silences, as they imply actual communication contacts and momentary perceptions taking place. There seem to be silences that sometimes indicate a wide range of feelings about certain topics by interactants, about sharing private information about difficult problems, or about difficulties in speaking with valued others. Many pausings seek to control or foster revelations of emotional meanings in our expressions. During interactions, shared silent pauses, hesitant speech, or vowels that are lengthened to slow down the rate of speech, are often indicative of emotional changes taking place in a speaker's voice that are valuable for developing listener understanding and empathy.
Silences are also breaks in communication interactions between people, providing many different kinds of dyadic, turn-taking signals, as shown by the work of Starkey Duncan and his students. The study of turn taking can be and has been innovative in understanding communicative interactions. Turn taking involves the psychology of control or being granted the freedom to speak by one or more participants. Turn taking also involves uncertainties or delayed responses during interactions as well as acts of dominance and submission by focal participants. Many of these interactive silences are common, but need further study. There are occasions where finding words or a voice to speak is extremely difficult, such as at sad or traumatic events, in hospital waiting rooms, during great losses, at funerals, and so on. Topics or subjects of conversation that are sensitive or taboo are often avoided by longer pausal or interactive silences by participants. Obvious, too, is that one can create longer silences with others by avoiding them as much as possible, or avoiding them completely.

**Silencing**

One way in which people often use silencing that is obvious, but seldom mentioned, is for the purpose of concealing the nature of one's self and one's mental abilities or knowledge. Concealment by silencing one's self is a major American characteristic and common to many other cultural groupings, too. Many people, especially in some Asian societies, feel that Americans talk too much, clarifying and explaining and trying to make their meanings more and more certain. But such talk often happens because these Americans feel that it is only through talk that meanings are conveyed, and silences do not imply communication for them. Small talk among Americans can act like silences for them to avoid more intimate sharing. In this regard, Jean-Paul Sartre, the existential philosopher, once humored that, if anything, silence is good conversation!

Silencing is a method of persuasion to restrict talk, motion, behavior, and the muting of many forms of communicative expression. Silencing occurs in all sociocultural groupings. Silencing is a mode of acculturation in the rearing of children and in the maintaining of social norms and order and can be used to control others and create status hierarchies. Many of the statements about how people use silence and silences under other sections [p. 884 ↓] of this entry are really about how they restrict the
speech of themselves and others. We are reminded of Seneca’s famous statement, to silence another, first be silent yourself.

Muted group theory is all about silencing, about how certain groups, especially women and minorities, are politically and repressively kept out of public view by restricting their voices or participation. It has important implications in the study of fair access to public media. There are groups that are shunned for one reason or another—gender, inequality, poverty, racism, ethnicity—by other groups everywhere in the world.

Silences toward another can be a double-edged sword. Grudges, stereotypes held, interpersonal judgments, ignoring, zoning laws, prejudices, and so on are all ways in which people can be silent toward others and therefore beget silence in response. Negatively held silences are reciprocated with a blade that cuts in both directions interactively. Americans do, in fact, practice the silencing of others as much as, if not sometimes more than, many other sociocultural groupings. There are many silences in many cultures of the world, where infrequent talk is understood as important to maintaining normative relations. Unfortunately, in some countries of the world, to speak out in opposition to oppressive controls is to be punished severely, imprisoned, or killed.

Michael Taussig discussed the idea of public secrets as those that everyone seems to know, but for various reasons people cannot and will not talk about. He shows that many lengthy silences are actually taboos against talking about sensitive subjects held by many people. Of course, there are many kinds of repressed expressions or silencing in situations of moral, social, and political taboos.

Perhaps the most powerful discussion of the repression of speech as a major function of silences is that offered in 2006 by Eviatar Zerubavel. He discusses the idea of an elephant in the room, one that no one can see because people do not want to see it or have been simply blinded by a shared secrecy from seeing or noticing the elephant. The elephant represents a big issue, major secrecy from seeing or noticing the elephant. The elephant represents a big issue, major secrecy from seeing or noticing the elephant. The elephant represents a big issue, major secrecy from seeing or noticing the elephant. The elephant represents a big issue, major secrecy from seeing or noticing the elephant. Zerubavel notes that these are conspiracies of silence(s). They are what Zerubavel views as the heavy sound of silence, rules of denial, learning to ignore, and rules of irrelevance. They also include taboos, ideas about what is tactful, the politics of denial, the social structure of denial, and problems of those brave enough to break these conspiracies of silence.
Persons who break the conspiracies of silence are often rebels who are resisted and often anger those who maintain the conspiracies.

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See also

- Chronemics
- Cognitive Theories
- Muted Group Theory
- Nonverbal Communication Theories
- Paralanguage
- Spiral of Silence

Further Readings


