Silent Meditation

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Speech, Power and Social Justice

The AAA Committee for Human Rights Task Group/Society for Linguistic Anthropology Committee on Language & Social Justice is committed to collaborating with one another to provide a unique, linguistic anthropological perspective on relevant issues of the day. We believe that a merging of voices allows for greater depth of reflection, listening, and revision. In this way our process in the Task Group is symbolic of our greater ideals—a collective voice demonstrates shared responsibility for social justice.


“When I think about the claim that silence is complicity, I always think of Martin Niemoller. I’ve been taught since a very young age that we all shoulder the responsibility to speak up for others. But I wonder what our obligation is—how much speech is enough? Is speech alone enough?”

“In the weeks after the killings of Michael Brown and Eric Garner, I sat in front of my Facebook feed, fingers poised over the keyboard, ultimately typing nothing. Who was I, an upper middle-class white woman, to say anything? I should let the people who really know what’s going on talk about this, I thought. My voice would be inauthentic and thus unimportant.”

“Am I really the person whose voice needs to be heard at historical moments like these, when the voices of particular communities have been
silenced for so long? Shouldn’t those be the voices we hear now? My silence sometimes comes from not knowing what to say/how to say it/when to say it/to whom. What makes silence so powerful? Its counterpart of deep, collective and/or individual reflection."

"After the UIUC firing last year, I have become more sensitive about speaking up and potential fallout. As a Muslim-American academic, I stand at a unique position regarding my political stance and decision to be silent or not on issues of social justice. And yet, I did share regarding the Brown shooting, non-indictment of Wilson, the Tamir Rice shooting. Why is it that I feel compelled to articulate my support for the Black Lives Matter movement but feel silenced when I consider, for example, how no one at the last State of the Union cheered at Obama’s rejection of offensive Muslim stereotypes or countless Muslim-American lawyers, journalists, and academics were asked to apologize for the terrorist activities in Paris just a few weeks ago."

These personal reflections, while diverse, illustrate some shared conceptual concerns regarding speech, silence, power and race. In both scholarly writings and political discourse, silence is often equated with “passivity and powerlessness” (Susan Gal, “Between Speech and Silence: The Problematics of Research on Language and Gender” in IPrA Papers in Pragmatics, 1989 [3: 1-38]). Many social justice movements assume that not speaking up in light of injustice, especially given that the internet allows more voices than ever to travel instantaneously to countless audiences, is being complicit.

Some of us remain wary of the supposed power of online voices, however. Is it enough to speak out using only social media, for instance? After all, complaints against slacktivism are potentially as ubiquitous as those about the complicity of silence. Given the inundation of voices on the internet, is the power of speech waning? If writing a Facebook post or blog feels like action, does it keep people from engaging in more effectual types of action? And sometimes listening, rather than joining the conversation, allows one to better understand the complexity of a situation from another’s perspective, thus allowing space for thought and the expression of deep care for others. Perhaps racial allyship is performed not only through a shared hashtag, but also through shared listening.

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The perspective that silence is complicity comes from a long and important history of democratic participation and protest in the US. But it isn’t the whole story. The complicity perspective assumes that silence is the absence of speech. As one of our many communicative tools, however, silence is itself a performative speech act. Take, for example, the recent emergence of die-ins as a protest strategy. Whether carefully orchestrated in Harvard Square and the AAA Meetings or impromptu on street corners across the US, the moment that the bodies go down has a performative impact that resonates with the original moment of silencing (after the shot, after the last breath). In a scene from the recent film Selma, a large mass of African-American people kneels silently in front of the courthouse. In the space of a movie, usually filled with sounds of all types, this is incredibly powerful.

Just as speech has multiple referential and indexical meanings, acts of silence are also polysemous, embodying different, sometimes paradoxical, forms of power (Gal 1989). Silence can be symbolic of both oppression and resistance. In analyses of turn-by-turn talk, conversation analysts often ask who “owns” a particular interactional moment of silence. This insight is important in determining the power of silence in political terms. For example, upon being read their Miranda rights, arrested offenders are informed of their institutional right to silence. It is often assumed that silence, at this point, is an indicator of guilt. An arrestee’s choice to be silent can therefore be questioned, their failure to respond in turn reinforcing their relative lack of power.

Silence as erasure can also be a mode of oppression. That is, when something is said, there are always related somethings that are not said. Embracing a hashtag such as #blacklivesmatter led to debates about the erasure of other oppressed people through this verbal act. And, when the deaths of Michael Brown and Eric Garner were increasingly referred to as “Ferguson” and “Staten Island,” did this unjustly pull focus from the personal identities of the victims?

By contrast, when people are compelled to speak, silence can symbolize their resistance to domination. A rape victim’s refusal to answer a defense attorney’s questions about what she wore, for example, can be a powerful denial of this accusatory stance. According to Keith Basso, Apaches used silence to exclude White men from discourse about their lands and people and thus resist their domination (Keith Basso, “To Give up on Words”: Silence in Western Apache Culture in Southwestern Journal of Anthropology, 1970 [26.3: 213-230]). Similarly, the die-ins and silent moments portrayed in Selma act as powerful forms of resistance against structural racism and violence.

What underlies this whole discussion is that acts of speaking—and not speaking—are never solely individual endeavors. Any act of communication entails multiple speakers, appeals to multiple audiences, and evokes multiple utterances that have already been or may yet be said. It is the connections brought about through speaking and listening, the directed intertextuality of a hashtag, and the recirculation of ideas through diverse social media communities that enable progress. Silence is not necessarily a lack of action—it may arise as an act of meditation, response, and/or resistance in the unfolding process of activist engagement.

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