Abstract

Silence is a complex phenomenon and interpreting it even in a trivial conversation exposes us to an entirely new dimension of language study. It is therefore surprising that silence, which forms an essential part of spoken communication, has been relatively under-researched in the domain of linguistic studies. Language and silence are in fact so dependent on each other that silence can be thought of as a complement to speech. Speech cannot find an identity without silence, and silence cannot find an identity without speech. Moreover, silence in communication is not silent; it communicates specific messages. Such a multifaceted and ambiguous phenomenon is an exciting challenge to study.

In everyday conversation, silence occurs in a complex and structured form and its interpretation exposes us to an insightful and revealing world of talk-in-interaction. For any conversation to be meaningful, it must have two essential components, verbal and non-verbal. The composite meaning of a conversation is derived from examining both components in context. For a conversation to continue, one not only listens to words and sentences but also derives and constructs meanings. These meanings are derived consciously or unconsciously from a number of non-verbal cues, one of the most important of which is silence. Silence thus contributes significantly towards the semantic interpretation of a conversation.

Models of silence in social space usually relate to the contexts and dimensions of community attitude, social organization and normative functions such as the expression and modulation of group identities. These contexts may be as diverse as the performance of rituals or covert as well as overt endorsement of gender roles. It has also been shown that silence in intercultural communication also often plays a subtle, understated and important role.

Importantly, the discourse of silence can also be studied in multilingual contexts. This thesis concentrates on silence in primary school classrooms in India, which are almost always multilingual. Since this is a new approach to the studying the sociolinguistics of the Indian classroom, this thesis can
be classified as an exploratory work. Here, different forms of silence such as conversational gaps, lulls and pauses are used as variables to study the relation between aspects of multilingualism and their social and communicative functions. Theoretical paradigms of language use and the stipulated medium of instruction in Indian classrooms as laid out in state language policies are also considered and questioned in this thesis.

The examination of the multilingual and multicultural Indian classroom in this thesis shows that a main cause that contributes towards a culture of silence in such a classroom is a lack of linguistic facility. Be it Hindi or English, the medium of instruction in school is sometimes entirely different from the language spoken by the children in their home and neighbourhood. After joining school, children often find themselves in an alien environment where strict regimens and the norm of using a particular language in class inhibit them from participating in class activities and thus they tend to dissociate themselves from the school environment. This analysis of silence in the Indian primary school classroom thus reveals the structuring of social roles from childhood onwards and points towards a larger critique of language policy as well as its implementation within basic educational institutions such as government school classrooms.

This study focusses on talk-in-interaction between participants – the teacher and her students - in the natural and non-obtrusive real-world social setting of a multicultural Indian classroom. The method applied to the analysis of the data is conversation analysis which is an ethnographic method for investigating micro-details of the structure and process of social interaction. In this case, these are the details and dimensions, the forms and functions, and the iterations and implications of conversational silence in the classroom.

Mapping silence, which has thus far gone entirely unnoticed, in the very vibrant, noisy, dynamic, layered and often ambiguous space of the multilingual Indian primary school classroom has therefore proven to be a highly productive exercise in this thesis, yeilding many rewarding research insights.

**Key Words:** silence, communication, multilingualism, talk-in-interaction, conversation analysis.