

## BEYOND SILENCE. A CROSS-CULTURAL COMPARISON BETWEEN FINNISH 'QUIETUDE' AND JAPANESE 'TRANQUILITY'

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**ABSTRACT**— *Silence has been studied in relation to basic cultural parameters, such as high/low context, collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, high/low power distance. Thus, silence in Japan has often been attributed to the high context, collectivism, masculinity and high power distance in the Japanese society. However, in the cross-cultural comparison between Finland and Japan it becomes clear that Finland is an individualist culture with low power distance, low context of culture and high femininity. Yet, there are similarities in the way silence is perceived, used and appreciated in the two countries. Thus, this paper claims that no dichotomies, as the above mentioned characteristics, can comprehend such a complex phenomenon as silence. This is why the paper proposes three main hypotheses. According to the first one, silence can dawn in societies, where a special emphasis is put on listening. According to the second hypothesis, the preference for silence might be generated by the high value attributed to privacy in Finland and Japan. The choice of privacy might also be related to a special sensitivity to communication feedbacks, 'face saving' and communication apprehension in certain communication situations. And according to the third hypothesis, silence can also be triggered by emotions, which are both individual and universal and which are not necessarily culture specific. This is the way silence has been used by various religious and spiritual traditions. This is the case also of the Japanese Zen Buddhism where silence is perceived as an existential and transcendental phenomenon. The latter can only be attained and realized experientially.*

**Keywords:** cross-cultural study, communication, Finland, Japan, silence, Zen Buddhism

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### SILENCE AND TALK AS CULTURAL PHENOMENA

Silence has been studied from the perspectives of anthropology (Malinowski 1989; Basso 1970) communication (Jaworski 1992), linguistics and psychoanalysis (Sifianou 1997), cultural psychology (Sajavara & Lehtonen 1997), philosophy (Palmquist 2006) and religion (Szuchewycz 1997). Malinowski (1989) is the first to coin the term 'small talk', indicating with it the effort of speakers to keep conversation alive in certain communication settings. However, while in some cultures conversation and 'small talk' are valued, other societies and cultural communities put the accent on 'listening', thus showing more respect for silence than for speech.

Basso (1970: 213) is one of the first to investigate 'the fierce reluctance of the American Indians to speak except when absolutely necessary'. In the culture of the Western Apache silence is encouraged and deemed appropriate. Social settings in which the Apache people keep silence are, for example: meeting strangers; courting; children coming home; showing anger; being with people who are sad; and curing ceremonials (Basso 1970). In another recent study of the Blackfeet Americans Carbaugh (2005) dwells on their practice of 'listening' to places. This usually occurs when a Native American sits in silence in an isolated place and 'listens' to nature.

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The Native Americans are not the only ones who prefer silence. In some other cultures 'less talking' is considered 'normal' and 'appropriate' too. For example, Northern Europeans have been studied for their 'shyness' and avoidance of talk. In Europe there are some stereotypes that Northern Europeans are silent, reserved and taciturn, while the South Europeans, in the opposite, are more open, talkative and noisy. Dwelling on these stereotypical assumptions, Sajavaara and Lehtonen (1997) show that the myth of the silent Finn is both exaggerated and real. In Finland, more than in any other European countries, silence is tolerated and in certain social scenes it is preferred to idle or small talk. Moreover, psycholinguistic studies confirm that Finns talk less and do longer pauses than other Europeans (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1997).

However, according to the research of Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) there are some cultural differences in the way silence is used in the different parts and regions of Finland. It is believed that the residents of Karelia in the South Eastern part of Finland are fast speakers, while the inhabitants of the Southwest Finland (or the Häme land) are often negatively portrayed as 'slowly speaking, taciturn and clumsy' (Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1985). These stereotypes are also confirmed by the many jokes that the Finns tell about the supposed rigidity and clumsiness of the Häme people. In this relation Tannen (1985) states that negative stereotypes related to silence/ speech are found in country after country. According to the author those who want to establish friendships by talking find the silent ones to be uncooperative, cold and taciturn. Vice versa, those who prefer silence consider the more talkative group as pushy and aggressive.

Through an empirical investigation a cross-cultural study conducted in Bulgaria and Finland (Petkova & Lehtonen 2005) also shows that the self-image of the Finnish people is based on the perception of their 'silence', 'calmness' and 'quietude', while in comparison the Bulgarian respondents, as part of the South Europeans, emphasize on their 'openness' and 'talkativeness', thought to be typical of the Southern cultures. 200 Bulgarians and 200 Finns have been interviewed in this study. When asked what according to them the other nations think about them, the Bulgarian respondents suppose that the others think the Bulgarians are 'sociable' and 'loud', while the Finns believe the others find them to be 'Nordic', 'silent' and 'quiet'. Such a question does not really intend to reveal what the others think of the Bulgarians or Finns. The answers reflect the so called 'projected stereotypes, which in fact reveal what the Bulgarians and the Finns think of themselves. (Petkova & Lehtonen 2005). This means that for the Finns being silent is both hetero- and auto-stereotype. Thus, 'silence' and 'quietude' become important ingredients of the Finnish individual and collective self-concepts.

However, despite the existing negative stereotypes of the Finns, most of the researchers associate the Finnish 'quietude' with positive characteristics. For instance, Carbaugh et al. (2006) define silence as 'a Finnish natural way of being'. According to the authors being alone does not mean loneliness but a withdrawal into one's chosen place. Similarly, Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) use the term 'positive silence' proposed by Baker (1955). It designates the merits of silence as a tool of non-verbal communication. In other words, members of 'silent' cultures do not need to put everything in words to understand each other. Thus, silence is believed to represent 'the cultural richness' (Berry 2011) of the Finnish communication style.

A considerable amount of literature has also been dedicated to the cross-cultural study of the communication practices in Japan and the USA. The researchers often underline the Americans' belief that it is polite to talk and to fill the communication gaps with a 'small talk', while, on the contrary, Japanese can feel comfortable in keeping silence. Most often also silence is associated with the high context of Japanese culture. Hall (1976) is the first who defines Japan as a high-context culture. A word or an expression in Japanese can be given different and even opposing meanings and are thus to be always understood in relation to the particular context. In this respect Lebra (1976:123) states that 'anticipatory communication' is common for the Japanese people. In it the speakers,

instead of asking directly what the other communicator wants or needs, guess and accommodate their needs and thus spare the embarrassment in case that verbally expressed requests cannot be met.

According to Yum (1994: 83) silence is considered a very important communication skill in Japan. It is also associated with politeness and accommodation of others' needs. Thus, silence in Japan is often attributed to two basic characteristics - the high context of the Japanese culture and the collectivist approach in it (Hall 1976; Yum 1994; Ishii & Bruneau 1994, Hofstede et. al 2010). According to Kim et al. (1998) the most typical features of the high context are collectivism, social hierarchy and cohesion, distinction between insiders and outsiders and lifelong expectations from the group. In these cultures speech is internalized in the individual, politeness is to be maintained and people avoid saying direct 'no'. In such a way, in the high context of culture more important is how something is said, rather than what is said. This means that there is less information on a verbal than on a non-verbal level. Usually Japan, China and South Korea are thought to be the countries with the highest context of culture. In contrast, according to Kim et al. (1998), the low context of culture is characterized by individualism, network society rather than hierarchy, higher permissiveness of outsiders, change and mobility. Also, speech is externalized in individuals and they can confront each other and say direct 'no'. The USA and the Western European countries belong to the low context of culture. Thus, on the grounds of Hall's model (1976) silence has often been associated with the high context of culture.

Ishii and Bruneau (1994: 250) state that the differences in the use of speech and silence are evident in Japan and in the USA. According to them in the USA there is a high need of explicit communication. The US low context of culture presupposes the extensive use of talk, while the Japanese high context of culture is characterized by much higher acceptance of silence. This is how silence has often been automatically referred to the high context of culture. However, such a statement is debatable. Finland has all the characteristics of the low context culture – it is an individualistic and network society with low power distance and social hierarchy. Moreover, communication in Finland is explicit and Finns are known to be straightforward and honest (Salo-Lee 1993; Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1997). Thus, Finland belongs to the low context of culture. Yet, there are some characteristics of the Finnish communication style, which are similar to the Japanese way of communicating: Finns value silence and they put special emphasis on the non-verbal signs. This also means that cultural models and dichotomies, such as high/low context or collectivism/individualism can only be general guidelines for the social structure and cultural behavior in different countries but they do not exhaust, nor fully comprehend all the cultural specificities of these countries. Although Japan is portrayed as a high-context culture, and Finland – as a low-context culture, the first – as a collectivist society, and the second – as an individualist one, they both have many similarities in the way silence is used, perceived, understood and preferred in different communication settings.

Most of the existing studies compare the communication styles in the USA and Japan, on the one hand, and in the USA and Finland, on the other hand. Very rare is the research dedicated to the cross-cultural comparison of silences in Finland and Japan. The author of this paper has lived and worked in the two countries and the present analysis dwells upon academic studies conducted in Finland and Japan as well as on real personal experiences in the two countries. Also, this paper claims that no dichotomy, such as high/low-context or individualism/collectivism, can be used as a model in the comparison between Japanese and Finnish silence. This is why it proposes three main hypotheses in order to outline some other dimensions of culture, which can trigger silence in different communication settings.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF LISTENING

The first hypothesis of this paper is that silence can dawn in societies where the emphasis is put on listening as a social practice and a special communication skill. Both in Finland and in Japan listening is given priority in various social scenes. For example, in a cross-cultural study of doctor-patient encounters in the USA and Japan it was discovered that US physicians spend relatively more time on treatment, follow-up talk and social talk, whereas the Japanese had longer physical examinations and diagnoses. Japanese doctor-patient conversations included more silence (30%) than those in the USA (8,2%) (Ohtaki et al. 2003). In certain social settings in Japan, such as the doctor-patient communication, silence might be equivalent to intense concentration, careful work and attention paid to special needs of individuals.

In the science of communication listening relates to the so-called 'backchanneling'. The speech is the primary channel, while the backchannel indicates what takes place in the person to whom the words are directed. The listener can show their attentiveness to the speech of others through head nods, face mimics or through vocal signals, such as 'mmm', 'yeah', 'I see', 'right', etc. Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) claim that although backchannel signals exist in Finnish (e.g. 'yo', 'niim', 'kylla'), they are used mostly in informal and enthusiastic discourses, but too frequent use of them is considered intrusive or typical of drunken people. The scholars maintain that Finns backchannel primarily by nonverbal means, such as head nods, eyebrow raising, on and off eye contact with the speaker. Thus, Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) conclude that the typical Finn is a silent listener.

Similarly, backchanneling is considered important in the Japanese communication style. The Japanese 'aizuchi' clearly indicates the importance of the speaker and their speech for the listener in any conversation. 'Aizuchi' is the Japanese term for backchannel signals and shows the active involvement of listeners manifested by short words, such as: 'hai' (yes), 'ee', 'so desu ka' (is that so), 'so desu ne' (I see) or simply nodding. According to Kita and Ide (2007) in Japan head nods and aizuchis, roughly equivalent to the English 'uh huh' and 'yeah' are so frequent that they might be misinterpreted by speakers of languages, such as English and Mandarin. The researchers maintain that the extensive use of 'aizuchi' in the Japanese language is indicative of the high value that Japanese people place on social relationships.

This also means that there are some nuances in the Finnish and Japanese silence. While Japanese can feel comfortable in backchanneling with both nonverbal and verbal signals to show their respect for speakers, Finnish communicators rely mostly on non-verbal signals. However, in the two cases prolonged silence and non-verbal signals underline the importance of interpersonal connections in communication. This is why also interruptions of speech are normally not tolerated in the two countries. Both in Finland and in Japan it is considered impolite to interrupt speakers. By comparison in some regions of the USA or in South Europe interruptions of speech are more frequent and it is not an exception to witness several people in a group talking simultaneously. Thus, careful listening might sometimes be incorrectly interpreted by speakers from more 'talkative' cultures. During negotiations and formal meetings the silence of Japanese or Finnish people can be inferred incorrect meanings.

The personal experiences of the author in the Häme land of Finland confirm these observations. For example, during the sessions at a business conference in Tampere the participants were eagerly discussing the topics of the panels. However, in the coffee break that followed the first working session several colleagues, mostly Finns and Americans, were sitting in the cafeteria, sipping coffee and keeping silence. Such scenes are not rare to witness in Finland. People can eat or have coffee together without necessarily talking to each other. However, for the Americans this is an unusual situation and most often they would soon be engaged in a 'small talk' to overcome the

embarrassing feeling of keeping silence in a social setting. Americans feel obliged to initiate conversation in order to show involvement in the social scene and to underline their interest in the other communicators. However, despite the sincere efforts of the American participants to keep the conversation alive during the break, all the Finns at the table remained silent listeners. After this event special explanations had to be given to the American guests about the Finn's habit to keep silence at public places. There are two possible reasons for the Finns' preference to remain quiet in social gatherings. For a Finn silence in public places can be comfortable and it is not related to any negative meanings or feelings. Thus, the first explanation is that Finns prefer to listen, rather than to talk. And the second reason is related to the Finns' unwillingness to engage in small talks. If something is considered by them important, they would come directly to the point and speak out their word, but if they perceive the topic as insignificant, they would rather not engage in any discussion.

Both in Finland and in Japan there are many proverbs dwelling on the importance of silence. A well-known Finnish proverb says: 'Even a stupid one seems wise, if he keeps his mouth shut'. Similarly, according to the Japanese beliefs, 'A silent man is the best one to listen to' and, 'A powerful man has big ears'. These proverbs reflect certain attitudes to extensive talk and explicitly underline the high social value that is attributed to silence. Silence is associated with wisdom, while small talk and chattering are considered superficial and even inconsistent with the 'good behavior' in the two countries. Thus, both in Japan and in Finland listening is emphasized as a very important communication skill. However, the preference to listening, rather than to talking, is not necessarily dependent on the particular context of culture. Just the opposite, listening can be given equal priority both in the high and in the low context of culture, as it is in the case of Finland and Japan. In the two cultures careful listening is indicative of the special attention paid to the other communicators' needs. Simultaneously it inevitably presupposes the dominance of silence.

### **PRIVACY, FACE SAVING AND COMMUNICATION APPREHENSION**

The second hypothesis of this paper relates silence to the importance of privacy in certain societies. Both in Japan and in Finland privacy is underlined as a special norm in social life. In the two countries the 'personal space' of individuals is highly respected and this social rule is reflected also in communication. In studying the self in Japan and the USA Barnlund (1989) shows that the American private self is restricted to a much smaller personal area than in Japan. Themes that can be discussed openly in America and may belong to the public space are part of the Japanese private self only and are not considered to be topics of public conversation in the Far Eastern country. These are, for example, partners' relations, money and sexual issues. In such a way, the private self in Japan tends to embrace much bigger personal space of individuals and includes more themes and topics than in other countries.

Similarly, in Finland privacy is emphasized as a norm of social conduct and a communication rule. As Salo-Lee (1993) points out, Finnish people believe that it is polite to leave a person alone. If 'talking American' (Carbaugh 1988) means to be open and to talk on all possible topics, including intimate matters, 'talking Finnish' or 'talking Japanese' would mean to keep silence for delicate issues concerning the personal lives of individuals. Moreover, both in Finland and in Japan the physical distance between communicators is strictly observed and when speaking people usually refrain from gestures.

A lot of research has been dedicated to the study of emotional regulation in different cultures. While human emotions, such as happiness/ unhappiness, sadness or anger, are universal, the expressions of these emotions can vary in different societies. In other words, while in some cultures it is 'normal' to express emotions, in other societies and groups it is considered more appropriate to hide or suppress feelings. For example, Matsumoto et al. (2008) claim that Japanese people have

been trained from early childhood by their mothers to suppress their anger. According to the study of Araki and Wiseman (1996) the Americans' level of expression of anger is significantly higher than the Japanese's level of expression. Another study, conducted by Safdar et al. (2009), compare the emotional display rules for Canadians, US Americans and Japanese. The results indicate that Japanese display rules permit the expression of powerful emotions, such as anger, contempt and disgust significantly less than those of the two North American samples. According to the same study Japanese think that they should express positive emotions (happiness, surprise) significantly less than the North American samples too.

Thus, while in some cultures, such as the USA, Latin America or Southern Europe for example, people can freely display emotions, in some other societies it is believed that emotional expression should be controlled and practically it is down-regulated. This includes the suppression of feelings as well as the down-regulation of verbal and non-verbal signals, such as face mimics and gestures. There are different explanations given by researchers for this phenomenon. Most often they relate it to the basic principle of collectivism/individualism in society. In this respect Mesquita and Albert (2007) state that feelings of cheerfulness and happiness are conceived as 'good' and 'desirable' in European American culture, because they signal that a person has successfully managed. Although they might seem 'natural' for Americans, in other cultures they might be interpreted as 'disturbing' and 'intrusive'. Also, the researchers maintain that if for Americans it is normal to underline pride (consistent with the beliefs in person's autonomy and uniqueness), pride may be considered 'dangerous' in other societies and cultural groups. Conversely, quilt may be desirable from the point of view of East Asian cultural models (Mesquita and Albert 2007). In another study North (2000) compares the cultures of complaints in Japan and the USA. He discovers that Americans are inclined to complain directly and openly to those they think can do something about their problems. According to North this type is so common that it has achieved the status of a communication ritual. The researcher claims that Japanese, by comparison, are stereotypically wary of too much speech and have a weak tradition of dissent. According to North, empathy, harmony and reserve are the watchwords of Japan's cultural code (North (2000)). Thus, suppressing emotions, gestures and verbal expressions becomes an important ingredient of Japanese cultural behavior.

In this respect it is believed that cultural differences in behavior are functions of the prevailing cultural model. According to Soto et al. (2005) behaviors that realize the cultural models are the most prevalent, whereas behaviors that obstruct the cultural models are rare. For example, doing nothing in response to an offence is the functional and most prevalent behavior in Japan because it helps to realize the central cultural model of preserving harmony in relationships (Soto et al. 2005). Regulation of emotions is thus associated by scholars to cultural adjustment of individuals. However, the latter in the most cases is perceived as a function of the basic principle of collectivism/individualism in society. For example, if free emotional expression is consistent with the Western belief in the autonomy of the self, suppression of emotions is associated with the Eastern concern in others' feelings and needs, as well as with the necessity to maintain harmony in relationships. East Asian cultural models stress relational harmony and discourage individuals from occupying too much space in the relationship, both figuratively and literally. Thus, expansive behavior, such as longer speeches or too many gestures, is a signal that the individual is taking more than their 'proper' space.

In such a way, the dichotomy collectivism/ individualism is most often used as a basic argument to explain the prevalence of silence or talk in different societies. Another argument in the debate for the emotional suppression is proposed by Fernandez et al. (2000). According to the researchers in order to predict lower emotional and non-verbal expression the most important cultural dimension is masculinity. The scholars maintain that high power distance cultures and masculine cultures foster emotional reactions that respect and legitimize status differences. This dimension according to them predicts a lower verbal expression of emotions. For example, in Japan

it is often considered for a person of lower social status that it is 'not suitable' to make eye contact with persons who have higher social status than them. In masculine cultures individuals need to be assertive and to show strength and courage. In terms of emotions any showing of weakness is discouraged. In many masculine societies it is also believed that "Men never cry". In other words, suppression of emotions is thought to be 'normal' and 'right' in various social settings.

Hence, high power distance, collectivism, masculinity and high context of culture have been considered the reasons for the Japanese to restrict themselves from verbal and emotional expressions. All these cultural characteristics are believed to be decisive factors for the practice of silence in the Far Eastern country. However, if this is valid for the Japanese case, none of these characteristics are applicable to Finland. The Scandinavian country is an individualist society with low power distance, low context of culture and underlined femininity. Yet, both verbal and non-verbal down-regulation are typical of the Finnish people. Suppression of emotions is an important ingredient of the Finnish communication style too. This once again shows that none of these dimensions – high/low context, collectivism/individualism, masculinity/femininity, high/low power distance – can be considered a sufficient argument in the comparative analysis of silences in Finland and Japan.

The Finnish emotional down-regulation and silence can only be related to the high value attributed to privacy and discreteness in the Scandinavian country. Expansive behavior, loud and emotional speech disturb privacy. This is why they are to be avoided by the Finnish communicators. Moreover, if the Japanese usually do not complain or speak directly, the Finns can be straightforward and direct in complaining. For example, at least several times the author and her Italian friend were asked in different cafeterias and restaurants in Tampere to be 'less noisy' and 'to speak in a lower voice' by people from the surrounding tables. In South Europe the table is a social space where people meet to talk and to discuss different topics. Having meal is an activity, which stays on the background and it is usually used as a reason for people to gather. This is why also lunches and dinners can sometimes be prolonged with hours in South Europe. However, long conversations at the table may not be valued so much by the Finns. Also, for them loud speech and noise can be annoying. Even longer talks can be considered 'disrespectful' by many Finnish people because with them privacy is disturbed. For the same reason, keeping short distance between communicators and doing too many non-verbal signals can be perceived as 'impolite' and 'intrusive' in the Scandinavian country.

Thus, despite being very different cultures, both Finland and Japan nurture high respect for silence. Another important reason to keep silence, especially for the Japanese, might be the importance of 'face saving', often related to the principle of collectivism. Politeness is vital for the Japanese communication and because of this fact the speech of a Japanese can be considered by foreigners as 'vague' and 'unclear'. Losing one's face is to be avoided at all costs and it can be triggered by many factors, including speaking too loud, expansive behavior with too many non-verbal signals and display of one's emotions. So, silence can also function as a tool of 'face-saving'. In some communication settings silence can also express patience, which is perceived as an important value and strength of character by the Japanese people. For example, the Japanese 'hai' ('yes'), which is often used as *aizuchi* in verbal communication, might have various meanings: the communicator can say with it: 'I am listening carefully to you', 'go ahead', 'I am patient to hear all your arguments', 'I agree with you', "I sympathize with you", 'I understand you', etc. and can function as an important mechanism of 'face saving' for both the speaker and the listener.

Although Finns are individualistic and straightforward, some studies show that they are quite sensitive to the feedback of other communicators too. According to Salo-Lee (1993) indirectness, hanging back, vagueness, self-irony, and the difficulty of saying 'no' can sometimes become part of the Finnish social behavior too. Indirectness and avoiding 'no' are significant ingredients of the Japanese communication style as well, often related to the principle of 'face saving'. This shows that in the two countries silence is equally respected and that it can serve the same functions. Both in

Finland and in Japan silence can be triggered by the high level of privacy and discreteness in human relationships. It can also be used as a powerful tool of promoting mutualness and understanding in communication.

Another possibility to analyze silence in some societies is to relate this phenomenon to communication apprehension. Although communication apprehension might be individual and universal response to certain communication situations, such as speaking in front of big audiences, for example, it can be more dominant in particular cultures too. Several studies confirm this observation. Klopff (1984) underlines the communication apprehension of the Japanese within their own culture. Actually, it is an often reported problem of the Japanese to communicate with foreigners. Most often the reason for this tendency is attributed to the Japanese's difficulty to speak in English. Matsuoka (2008) claims, too, that communication apprehension is common and typical of the Japanese college students. According to the collected data by Matsuoka (2008) Japanese mental ideas and constructs, such as 'perfectionism', 'good student' and 'face-saving', may generate communication apprehension in various social settings. All these concepts, according to the author, can contribute to the avoidance of speech, anxiety and uncertainty of Japanese during initial encounters with strangers of the same and different cultures. Thus, the scholars focus their attention on the shyness (*hazukashisa*) of Japanese people.

Similar data exist for Finland too. In the study of Petkova and Lehtonen (2005) the most common words used by the Finnish respondents in order to describe themselves are: 'silent', 'quiet' and 'shy'. So, there is a close connection between the Finnish 'silence' and 'quietude' on the one hand, and the perceived communication 'shyness', on the other. According to a previous study conducted by Sallinen and Kuparinen (1991) Finns are prone to initiate conversations mostly with friends and can feel uncomfortable with strangers. The personal experience of the author in Finland confirms to a great extent these observations. Some Finns from the institution where she worked needed one academic year in order to initiate conversations and to feel comfortable when approached by her. Although there might be various cases in Finland and generalizations should not be made, Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) claim that there are already widely held stereotypes that Finns are silent, timid, shy and introverted. Salo-Lee (1993) states that Finns avoid conflicts and dispute by keeping silent, and that the indirectness in conflict situations belongs to the Finnish rules of politeness. Rusanen (1993) believes that Finns are afraid to stand out from the rest and that in certain social scenes this fact can provoke communication fears. Although the face-saving is not such an important principle in Finland as in Japan, this characteristic, too, can explain the unwillingness of Finns to engage in longer conversations or in small talks. It can also trigger high level of communication anxiety and apprehension in certain communication situations.

Thus, despite the differences in the general cultural model, such as collectivism/individualism, high/low power distance and masculinity/femininity, both in Finland and in Japan there is an underlined preference for silence in various social scenes. According to the second hypothesis of this paper the choice of silence might be dependent on the high social value, placed on privacy, discreteness, 'face saving' and communication feedback. Silence can also be related to a high level of anxiety and communication apprehension in certain social contexts. However, silences of this type are clearly culture specific.

And a third hypothesis of this paper is that silence can be used as a communication tool to express and convey feelings, emotions and sensations, which are both universal and individual, and which do not necessarily depend on any particular culture. These are, for example: empathy, friendship, acceptance, compassion, love, sympathy, anger, hatred, pain, frustration, sadness, joy and happiness, etc. In this relation Oduro-Frimpong (2007, 2011) proves that married couples can use silence as a conflict management tactic. Thus, although in different cultures the functional uses of silence in close relationships may vary, refraining from talk can also be connected with the expression of universal human emotions in intimate communication settings.



Another particular universal way, in which silence has been practiced in different cultures throughout centuries, is the communication with the supernatural. Both in religion and in philosophy the deepest existential phenomena can be investigated by means of silence. Exploring the philosophical quests of Wittgenstein and Kant, Palmquist (2006) claims that even though the analysis of words is the proper method of doing philosophy, philosophy's ultimate aim may be to experience silence. Both Wittgenstein and Kant, according to Palmquist, show that philosophical quest can be ultimately fulfilled only in a deep experience of reality that is most adequately expressed in silence.

However, even in the philosophical quest some cultures and spiritual traditions can be more inclined to observing silence than others. This is obviously the case of Japan.

## SILENCE IN JAPANESE SPIRITUAL TRADITIONS

Silence has a strong impact on the Japanese spiritual traditions. Although the practice of silence is well known in all the religions in the world, Buddhism puts special accent on directing the attention of practitioners inward and on observing silence. The author of this paper conducted ethnographical interviews registered on tapes with 27 Japanese informants in the Kansai region of Japan. Among the questions, posed to the interviewees were: how often they go to temples and shrines and why they go there.

Here are some of the answers:

*Informant 1: Not all the temples and shrines, but most of them have such an atmosphere, such tranquility. I love to simply sit there, especially when I am stressed out. I feel good, I feel calm and blessed.*

*Informant 6: I think it [going to temples] is very soothing. I think it is important to appreciate, to be grateful [.....] That's why I started going to Shinto shrines. It soothes and calms my mind.*

*Informant 12: I prefer to be alone and meditate, and contemplate and become reflective.*

*Informant 15: In temples we can see beautiful places like sakura [cherry trees] places, you know, they are beautiful in April. We can go to the temple and see the beautiful trees and scenes, and sightseeings and contemplate [.....] I don't believe that prayer has some influence but with it I feel refreshed. I like the silence in temples and shrines. It makes me feel good.*

*Informant 26: Praying doesn't really make me happy but it helps me to clear my mind. It makes me calm and relaxed.*

These are only some of the many similar answers received in the ethnographical study. The informants clearly indicate their preference for silence in certain social settings. Although not all of the interviewees refer directly to 'silence' and 'being silent', the observation of silence is suggested by the particular context: the informants talk about 'sitting still', 'being calm', 'being tranquil', 'reflecting' or 'observing nature', 'praying without words', 'contemplating', 'directing the attention inwards', 'meditating', and 'being alone with oneself'. Thus, in the Japanese spiritual context silence can also be used as a functional equivalent of prayer.

Observing silence and 'being tranquil' has a great value in Japanese Buddhist traditions and rituals. Why silence is so important for the Zen Buddhist practitioners, for example, can be learned from Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai (2007), or 'The Teaching of Buddha', considered to be the 'Bible' of the Rinzai school of the Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition. In a social experiment, done by the author of this paper, when she lived and practiced with Japanese Zen Buddhist monks and practitioners in Hosenji temple near Kyoto, Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai was read aloud after each session of zazen (Zen meditation). Among other teachings it pays special attention to silence:

*Those who seek the way of Enlightenment must always bear in mind the necessity of constantly keeping their body, speech and mind pure. [.....]To keep speech pure one must refrain from lie and idle talk. (Bukkyo Dendo Kyokai: 242)*

*A disturbed mind is forever active, jumping hither and thither, and is hard to control; but a tranquil mind is peaceful; therefore it is wise to keep the mind under control. (Ibid: 364)*

*Individually each should: 1). Maintain a pure spirit and not ask for too many things; 2). Maintain integrity and remove all greed; 3). Be patient and not argue; 4.) Be silent and not talk idly; 5) Submit to the regulations and not be overbearing; 6) Maintain an even mind and not follow different teachings; and 7). Be thrifty and frugal in daily living. If its members follow these rules, the Sangha [the Buddhist community] will endure and never decline. (Ibid: 456)*

In the Zen Buddhist tradition expansive behavior and longer speech is equated to a disturbed and impure mind. Also, small or idle talk is viewed as an unnecessary distraction for practitioners on their path to enlightenment and is thus advised to be fully avoided. Moreover, idle talk is perceived as a real shortcoming of character and behavior. Thus, a true follower of the Zen Buddhist school must overcome their tendencies of the chattering mind. So, the most important goal to be achieved by practitioners is the purity of mind, which can only be attained in refraining from useless speech. The seven rules for a good conduct, presented above, include also the practice of silence. Although only rule four deals explicitly with silence, most of the other rules, too, implicitly refer to its semantics. Not asking for too many things; maintaining integrity; being patient and not arguing; submitting to the regulations and not be overbearing; maintaining an even mind; and being thrifty and frugal in daily living might also indicate in certain social settings the observation of silence. In such a way, in the Japanese Zen Buddhist tradition silence becomes a moral norm and a precept for a good conduct.

Silence can also be a central topic in koans. The spiritual practice of the Rinzai Zen Buddhist school is even nowadays based on koans. A koan can be a phrase, a sentence or a short story, often viewed as a riddle. It is believed that koans are used to provoke or challenge disciples in their Zen practice (Abe 1989). Most often they are also based on paradoxical statements. For example, a famous koan often cited in literature, and still used in the Rinsai Zen Buddhist sect by masters, is 'Does a dog have a Buddha nature?'. Thus, koans are not only difficult to answer. They can be used as rhetoric questions to provoke practitioners to ponder on existential questions in search for untraditional answers. The first koan, presented by Ekai, called Mumon (2009) in his book collection of koans speculates on the importance of silence:

*A philosopher asked Buddha: 'Without words, without the wordless, will you tell me truth?'*

*The Buddha kept silence.*

*The philosopher bowed and thanked Buddha, saying 'With your loving kindness I have cleared away my delusions and entered the true path'*

*After the philosopher had gone, Ananda asked the Buddha what he had attained.*

*The Buddha replied, 'A good horse runs even at the shadow of the whip'.*

According to this story words are unnecessary in the quest of the ultimate. In fact the entire spiritual practice in Zen Buddhism: zazen (sitting meditation), walking meditation, chanting mantras and sutras and storytelling of koans are aimed at achieving mental freedom from concepts beyond the intellectual reasoning, which can only be attained in silence. Silence is a state of mind, which is considered the desired outcome of the spiritual discipline. Thus, silence represents both the goal (enlightenment) and the means to achieve it (meditation). In such a way, it becomes an all-inclusive and all-pervasive existential phenomenon in the Japanese spiritual context. This is why also, all the specific techniques, used in zazen, are tools for the individual to get free from the chattering in the

mind: sitting motionless and still, concentrating the eyes on a single spot in front of oneself and observing and gradually subsiding the breath are done in order to achieve relaxation and to empty the mind of pondering thoughts. Thus, outer lack of speech is being translated into inner peace and tranquility.

Actually all meditative techniques are meant to diving deep in inner silence. Even the production of different sounds in meditation, such as mantras, or the uses of gongs and bells are aimed at cutting disturbing thoughts and arriving in the present moment. In some Japanese Buddhist temples listening to falling water drops in small fountains has also been practiced with the same aim. Different sounds may help to arrive in 'now and here' and to achieve a total freedom of mind. Short words (mantras), sounds of gongs and bells and even the whip of the stick on the back of the practitioners interrupt silence only to invoke it again.

Even the well-known in Japan koan of clapping hands can be used in the same context too. A disciple asks a question and the master claps his hands in answer. Usually in literature this koan is considered to serve as a challenge to the traditional and stereotypical reasoning, to which human mind is often subjected. It is believed that with the use of it masters aim at destroying existing mental concepts of disciples. However, the author experienced this koan in a slightly different way. She asked Kokugon-san master, the head of the Hosenji temple, 'Why are you keeping silence all the time?', and Kokugon-san clapped his hands to answer the question. After the question was repeated, the master clapped his hands again and continued observing silence. The two communicators shared the same room for a certain period of time not talking at all. Thus, in the personal experience of this koan the question actually does not matter. Nor does the answer. What is important is that the mind is cleared out of unnecessary thoughts. In such a way, clapping hands can be used as a strategic tool in the same way as sounds of bells, gongs or whips are being used in the Zen Buddhist tradition: it can serve as a technique to free the mind and to plunge it into a deeper silence.

So, silence in the Japanese spiritual context is equal to supernatural reality. Observing silence is not only a state of consciousness and a purity of mind. In the Zen Buddhist tradition, similarly to the philosophy of Plato and Kant, the ultimate is not an outward reality, it exists within one's mind. Hence, it can be achieved by special tuning of the mind itself. This technique is silence. Thus, silence is everything: it is an existential reality, a state of mind, a goal, a technique, an insight and enlightenment. This is why also talking about silence seem to be paradoxical. Since this is an existential phenomenon, silence can be perceived, experienced and understood only by silence. The ultimate, seen as 'emptiness of mind' and 'nothingness', is beyond words, logic and reasoning, and can only be reached on an experiential level.

## CONCLUSIONS

In the social sciences silence has been studied in relation to basic cultural parameters, such as collectivism/individualism, high/low context of culture, high/low power distance and masculinity/femininity. Thus, silence in Japan has often been attached to collectivism, high context of culture, high power distance and high masculinity. All these characteristics are thought to be decisive for the preference of silence in various social scenes in the Far Eastern country. However, if these characteristics are valid for the culture of Japan, none of them are applicable to Finland. The Scandinavian country is an individualist and network society with low power distance, low context of culture and underlined femininity. Although the two countries represent very different cultures, they share many similarities in the way silence is perceived, used and preferred in different communication settings. Also, both in Japan and in Finland there is a down-regulation of emotional expression and of verbal and non-verbal signals. This also means that the above mentioned dimensions of cultures cannot fully comprehend, nor explain such a complex social and cultural phenomenon as silence.

This is why this paper proposes three main hypotheses. According to the first one silence can thrive in societies, where the emphasis is put on listening as a communication skill and social behavior. Careful listening underlines the importance of speakers and the listeners' solidarity with them and may thus inevitably include silence. According to the second hypothesis silence may also be due to the high value attributed to privacy both in Finland and in Japan. The importance of the personal space of individuals may also be connected to 'face saving' and communication apprehension in certain social scenes in the two countries. And the third hypothesis relates silence to inner psychological experiences and human emotions, which are both individual and universal and which do not necessarily depend on any particular culture, such as friendship, support, love, hatred and anger, etc. Similarly, all the religious traditions in the world value silence as a tool of communication with the supernatural. However, some spiritual traditions show more inclinations to incorporate silence in daily lives and spiritual activities. This is the case of the Japanese Buddhism, where the ultimate goal is the achieving of 'emptiness' and inner silence. The Rinzaï Zen Buddhist school puts the accent on the personal experience of the transcendental which can be achieved neither in philosophical argumentations, nor in inner speculative thoughts. Rather, it can be attained only in the realm of silence. Thus, silence is both the aim and the means and becomes an all-inclusive and all-pervasive existential phenomenon. Also, by means of it Zen is aiming at transcending human consciousness and reasoning. In such a way, silence becomes a universal language of the highest human existence. The latter can only be attained experientially.

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