

Małgorzata Winiarczyk

Silence as a "currency of power" in inter-sex communication

Acta Humana nr 2, 53-65

2011

Artykuł został opracowany do udostępnienia w internecie przez Muzeum Historii Polski w ramach prac podejmowanych na rzecz zapewnienia otwartego, powszechnego i trwałego dostępu do polskiego dorobku naukowego i kulturalnego. Artykuł jest umieszczony w kolekcji cyfrowej bazhum.muzhp.pl, gromadzącej zawartość polskich czasopism humanistycznych i społecznych.

Tekst jest udostępniony do wykorzystania w ramach dozwolonego użytku.

Mgr Małgorzata Winiarczyk

UMCS Lublin

Silence as a “Currency of Power” in Inter-Sex Communication

This paper sets itself two major goals. First and foremost it aims at showing that silence is a meaningful sociolinguistic behaviour that has multiple functions in communication. Secondly, the article attempts to examine the use of silence in inter-sex speech in order to dissect how females and males exploit silence to assert their position within society.

Silence as linguistic behaviour

Silence in communication is conventionally deemed to be the absence of speech, which either delays the production of successive utterances or leads to the breakdown of verbal interaction. For that reason silence has long been dismissed as an extraneous subject of language and communication studies. As Saville-Troike points out “within linguistics silence has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary marking function, delimiting the beginning and end of utterances. The tradition has been to define it negatively – as merely the absence of speech”¹.

However, in modern linguistics the concept of silence as a lack, failure or inaction is no longer valid. In recent years the role of silence in communication has been redefined and its status in conversation reaches far beyond the stereotypical ‘lack-of-noise’ construct. Linguists argue that despite its opposition to speech, silence does not have to be the one that invariably indicates non-behaviour. For instance, Eckert and McConnel-Ginet claim that “silence is not always or only an absence of expression. Speech is, among other things, an absence of silence, and in the interplay between speech and silence, each frames the other. Silence in social situations is never neutral. We talk about awkward silences, ominous silences, stunned,

¹ M. Saville-Troike, *The place of silence in an integrated theory of communication*, [In:] *Perspectives on Silence*, ed. D. Tannen, M. Saville-Troike, Norwood: Ablex Publishing Corporation 1995, p. 3–4.

strained, awed, reverent, and respectful silences”². Similarly, Saville-Troike rejects the ‘silence as inaction’ concept stating that “a distinction should be made between the absence of sound when no communication is going on, and silence which is part of communication”³. Sobkowiak argues that the distinction between acoustic silence and communicative silence is even grounded in the lexicons of several European languages; for example “Russian and Polish make a systematic distinction between *молчание*, *milczenie* (‘silence’ as ‘refraining from speaking’) on the one hand, *тишина*, *cisza* (‘quiet,’ ‘keeping silent’), on the other”⁴. Thus, modern views on silence allow us to conclude that “refraining from speaking” is undoubtedly a form of linguistic behaviour, which, as will be presented in the following sections, can become as meaningful as the actual use of words.

Forms of communicative silence

That silence is one of the communicative strategies is now beyond question. Yet, it is a highly problematic concept as its complex and multifaceted nature is difficult to define. Innumerable taxonomies approach silence from different angles and classify its types to all sorts of subcategories. Saville-Troike talks about silence that structures communication, verbal silence, nonverbal silence, silences that carry meanings and silent communicative acts. Sobkowiak mentions “*formulaic* and *non-formulaic* silence [...] *interactive* and *sociocultural* [...], *gaps*, *lapses* and *attributable* silences”⁵ observing that “the subcategorization schemes are usually subjective, non-exhaustive and overlapping”⁶. A fairly comprehensive classification is provided by Nakane⁷, who distinguishes between seven forms of silence placing them on a continuum ranging from micro to macro units.

Nakane argues that the smallest units of silence within an utterance are intra- and inter-turn pauses, both related to the pragmatic features of a speech act. While intra-turn pauses occur in the utterance of a single speaker and usually mark speech processing, inter-turn pauses, or gaps take place at the end of one speaker’s utterance, when another person takes the conversational turn. Another form of silence in Nakane’s taxonomy, also linked to the pragmatic features of communication, is “a turn-

² P. Eckert, S. McConnel-Ginet, *Language and Gender*, New York: Cambridge University Press 2003, p.119.

³ M. Saville-Troike, op. cit., p. 4.

⁴ W. Sobkowiak, *Silence and markedness theory*, [In:] *Silence. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, ed. A. Jaworski, Berlin: Mouton de Gruyter, 1997, p. 44.

⁵ Ibidem.

⁶ Ibidem.

⁷ I. Nakane, *Silence in Intercultural Communication*, Amsterdam/Philadelphia: John Benjamins Publishing Company, 2007.

constituting silence with illocutionary force”⁸. This type of silence in communication occurs when an elongated gap is “interpreted or intended as a ‘silent response’, which itself can perform a speech act in an indirect manner”⁹. The silent response, recognized as a meaningful utterance, gains illocutionary force and becomes a legitimate turn. Silence in a conversation may also take the form of “a temporary silence of individuals who do not hold the floor in interaction”¹⁰. This usually happens when an elongated gap becomes a natural breakdown of the conversation “which occurs when participants in conversation do not have anything more to say”¹¹.

However, silence does not have to be exclusively related to the pragmatic features of a speech act. Nakane discusses types of silence that constitute a form of social behaviour and “involve a total withdrawal of speech at a communicative event”¹². Such a “withdrawal of speech” can take place when in a certain speech event a participant considers speaking against the generally accepted rules of social interaction or can be motivated merely by the individual’s reluctance to contribute. It can also become “a constituent of social/religious events”¹³. Silence that represents social, rather than linguistic behaviour, is exemplified by rituals and religious events “in American Indian or African tribal communities”¹⁴. Similarly, Saville-Troike notices that “in Catholic and Quaker worship, [...] silence creates space within which God may work”¹⁵. Finally, silence can be an outcome of “a discourse suppressed by a dominant force at various levels of social organisation”¹⁶. Nakane calls it “hidden silence” which can, for example, take the form of censorship.

Functions and meanings of silence

Apart from specifying the forms of silence, Nakane also attempts to define its functions, distinguishing between four major roles silence can play in conversation. According to her, “the functions of silence investigated in existing literature can be grouped under the headings cognitive, discursive, social and affective”¹⁷. Table 1 presents this classification of silence functions¹⁸ with their detailed descriptions.

⁸ Ibidem, p. 7.

⁹ Ibidem, p. 6.

¹⁰ Ibidem, p. 7.

¹¹ Ibidem, p. 6.

¹² Ibidem, p. 5.

¹³ Ibidem, p. 7.

¹⁴ Ibidem, p. 5.

¹⁵ M. Saville-Troike, *op. cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁶ Ibidem, p. 6.

¹⁷ I. Nakane, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

¹⁸ Saville-Troike mentions yet another function of silence that Nakane fails to notice, namely that silence can replace a grammatical or indexical units in sentences. Such sentences usually have

Table 1. Silence functions distinguished by Nakane

COGNITIVE	✓ pauses, hesitations for cognitive/language processing
DISCURSIVE	✓ marking boundaries of discourse
SOCIAL	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ✓ negotiating and maintaining social distance; ✓ impression management through pause length, frequency and speed of talk; ✓ conversational styles through pause length, frequency, speed of talk and overlapping; ✓ means of social control through avoiding verbal interaction with specific individuals; ✓ means of maintaining power through avoiding certain content of verbal expressions; ✓ means of maintaining and reinforcing power relationship; ✓ means of negotiating power; ✓ politeness strategies (negative, positive, off-record, Don't do FTA¹⁹).
AFFECTIVE	✓ means of emotion management

Every form of silence has its functions and can convey different meanings. At times, the function is devoid of meaning, for example when the intra-turn pause only indicates the process of speech perception and/or production, having a purely cognitive role, or when the inter-turn pause merely marks the boundary of an utterance. A specific form of silence might as well present a multiplicity of functions and meanings. For example, a total withdrawal of speech at a communicative event may have a social function when a person wishes to be polite and remains silent while others are speaking, or an affective function when silence serves as a way of dealing with emotions. Furthermore, the role of silence does not have to be determined by the speaker as it is also the listener who can decide which function is performed. This may be the case as far as inter-turn pauses are concerned; the listener who will wait patiently for the speaker to take turn interprets the lack of immediate response as a pause, and silence operates as a discourse marker. And conversely, the listener may conclude that the inter-turn pause is too long to be a gap and by taking another turn gives the silence the social function selecting its meaning according to his or her own judgement.

Interestingly, the affective function exposes several characteristics of silent communication. The fact that silence can be a way of dealing with unverbali-

“a-fill-in-the-blank structure” and can be used for example “in conversational contexts when one speaker asks someone he or she has just met ‘And your name is ...?’” (M. Saville-Troike, op. cit., p. 7). Other uses of this type of silence perform the already mentioned functions, e.g. social, when the indexical silence replaces a taboo word, or cognitive, when the speaker is lost for words.

¹⁹ Face-threatening (speech) acts.

emotions indicates that it is a conscious and deliberate practice rather than a form of non-behaviour. Acheson argues that “since suppressing verbal, paralinguistic, and kinesthetic expressions of emotion requires effort [...] one could argue that people who remain silent through strong emotions possess some degree of agency”²⁰. Another remark made by Acheson is that the silence which indicates a suppression of a strong surge of emotion indeed becomes a social behaviour since in many cultures “the expression of emotion with silence is socially prescribed rather than linguistically impossible; for those peoples, strong emotion constitutes a private matter whose public verbal acknowledgement is culturally inappropriate”²¹.

Nakane’s taxonomy makes two more characteristics of silence particularly conspicuous. First, it seems apparent that the micro units, i.e. intra- and inter-turn pauses, can correspond to the concept of silence as a linguistic behaviour, which has either cognitive or discursive function. Consequently, the macro units can be related to the view of silence as a social behaviour, where various social and affective functions are performed. Yet, the linguistic and social dimensions cannot be entirely separated as these two often merge to represent sociolinguistic behaviour in which, the ‘verbal silence’ becomes an expression of whatever the listener wishes it to be. This brings us to the other observation, namely that silence is one of the most complex and ambiguous forms of expression and in being so poses problems for efficient and cooperative communication.

Problems with interpreting silence

Silence is perplexing not only because it is difficult to define and classify. One of the major problems with silent communication is its lack of explicitness. Though the articulate nature of silence remains unquestionable, to extract its one specific meaning borders on the impossible. As Eckert and McConnel-Ginet point out, silence, presumably the one that disrupts conversation, may express awkwardness, foreboding, astonishment, tension, anxiety, reverence or respect. Silence can signal inhibition. It can also result from anger, frustration, disregard or ignorance. Besides, it expresses paradoxical messages; it can imply agreement with the majority, yet when used as a refusal to give information, it means boycott and dissent. When occurring in the middle of a conversation so that it does not disrupt the flow of exchange, silence can mean nothing more than a gap, pause or hesitation. It can signal contemplating a response to a question, decision making or consideration for the interlocutor (i.e. politeness). Yet, when the speaker avoids verbal interaction with certain individuals or does

²⁰ K. Acheson, *Silence in Dispute*, [In:] *Communication Yearbook 31*, ed. C.S. Beck, New York: Taylor and Francis Group LLC 2009, p. 26.

²¹ *Ibidem*, p. 25.

not use minimal responses, which by certain participants are indicative of attentive listening, silence can be interpreted as a sign of disrespect.

According to Dendrinis and Ribeiro-Pedro, the very interpretation of the meaning silence conveys proves highly problematic since “comprehending a spoken text can be a very demanding task; however, trying to capture what is meant by an unspoken text involves the recipient not merely in an effort to infer what is being communicated through the absence of words, but also in perceiving the social meaning of the use of silence in the specific communicative instance”²². Its ambiguity, polysemy and paradoxical nature make silence a form of communication that is more than others subject to misinterpretation. Moreover, the enigmatic nature of silent communication can further be escalated. As Saville-Troike points out “silence can have similar truth value to speech, and thus can intentionally be used to deceive and mislead”²³.

For communication to be effective, certain rules must be followed. One of the most famous theories of logical and efficient communication developed by Grice specifies these rules. Grice argues that “our exchanges [...] are characteristically, to some degree at least, cooperative efforts and each participant recognizes in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction”²⁴. On the basis of this claim Grice formulates the Cooperative Principle which states what a contribution that leads to the accomplishment of speakers’ common purpose(s) should be like: “[m]ake your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged”²⁵. Then Grice distinguishes four conversational maxims that when at work with the Cooperative Principle produce efficient communication: The Maxim of Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner.

If we analyse silence as a form of communication within Grice’s framework, we will notice that due to the frequent need for interpreting silent responses, they can rarely stand for an entirely informative contribution. Additionally, it is exceedingly difficult to determine silence’s relevance. Finally, silence, even if brief and orderly, embodies obscure and ambiguous meanings. Thus, silence seems to violate the majority of the maxims as well as the Cooperative Principle (when ambiguous, silence is neither a required contribution nor does it serve to fulfill the common goal of the exchange) which condition effective communication, proving a poor means of conversational style in efficiency-oriented speech acts.

²² B. Dendrinis, E. Ribeiro Pedro, *Giving street directions: The silent role of women*, [In:] *Silence. Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, op. cit., p. 215.

²³ M. Saville-Troike, op. cit., p.7.

²⁴ H.P. Grice, *Logic and Conversation*, accessed online: <http://www.mystfx.ca/academic/philosophy/Cook/2008-09/Grice-Logic.pdf>, p. 45.

²⁵ *Ibidem*.

Therefore, it can be concluded that a speaker who frequently resorts to silent contributions either lacks communicative competence and needs more time for language processing or rejects the role of conversation in human interaction. Ultimately, an excessive and intentional use of silence and the subsequent violation of the above mentioned principles can also suggest that the speaker establishes their social position within the conversation, seeking silent domination rather than voluble cooperation.

Silence as “the currency of power”

A brief analysis of Nakane’s classification of silence functions as well as typical rationale behind the extravagant use of silent contributions suggest that silence can be a potent sociolinguistic tool for regulating the distribution of power between speech act participants. The acquisition of status can operate on two levels; one may manipulate the use of silence to assert their dominant (or at least secure) position in a given conversation or to establish their status within a broader sociopolitical context. The latter can be achieved when silence is realised through linguistic taboo, most commonly defined as “a linguistic prohibition of a sacred or inviolable nature”²⁶.

Acheson argues that the unique status of silence in establishing power relations results from its conspicuousness and tendency to stand out in the babble of voices. Summarising the views proposed by other scholars, Acheson points out that silent discourse can regulate power relations as “deliberate silence often becomes quite noticeable, especially when marginalized voices refuse to ‘echo’ those in power”²⁷.

Many scholars attribute the power of silence to its inexplicitness. Achino-Loeb, who has called silence “the currency of power,” argues that “[c]onfusion – purposeful or otherwise – among the referential domains of silence is a direct result of its connection to power as currency for its exercise [...] the power of silence resides in its inherent ambiguity”²⁸. Although ambiguity offers the listener a rich choice of meanings, it leaves the ultimate decision on its actual significance on the side of the speaker. It means that the silent contributor can control the conversation according to the interlocutor’s reactions to and interpretation of the silent periods. Thus, the inexplicit nature of silence, which hinders efficient communication and limits communicative cooperation, proves a valuable tool of manipulating the interlocutor and staying in control of the course of conversation.

The multiplicity of meanings that are hidden behind the veil of silence is reflected in fixed expressions and collocations of the noun *silence* and its derivatives.

²⁶ K. Acheson, op. cit., p. 17.

²⁷ Ibidem, p. 23.

²⁸ M.L. Achino-Loeb, *Silence. The Currency of Power*, Berghahn Books 2006, p. 1–2.

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet mention numerous English collocates of the word *silence*²⁹. In Polish the noun *milczenie* is described by similar adjectives: *niezręczne* ‘awkward’, *zakłopotane* ‘embarrassing’, *powściągliwe* ‘restrained’³⁰ etc. Interestingly, there is also a collocation which straightforwardly indicates that silence carries a meaning: *wymowne milczenie* ‘meaningful/significant silence.’ Additionally, Polish phraseology is rich in such expressions as *milczeć w trwodze* ‘silent fright’, *cierpieć w milczeniu* ‘to suffer in silence’, *śłuchać w milczeniu* ‘to listen silently’, *milcząca większość* ‘silent majority’, *milcząca zgoda* ‘silent consent’, or *nakazać milczenie* ‘to order silence’³¹, which explicitly show that the concept of silence, though polysemous, is inextricably linked to the issues of power, domination, subjugation and reverence.

Silence in inter-sex communication

If silence is so rich in meanings and creates such a wide spectrum of functions, it is undoubtedly worth investigating from the perspective of inter-sex communication. At the micro level, where silence functions as a communicative strategy, its use becomes yet another category³² that can expose differences in male and female conversational styles. At the macro level, the study of silence can lay bare the nature of power distribution in inter-sex speech, that is to say whether any sex, and if so which, uses silence to hold power not only in conversation but also in other spheres of social activity. Finally, measuring the extent to which the sexes reasonably use silence can reflect if female and male speakers present similar levels of aptitude for effective communication.

Silent power – gender differences in the use of selected silence functions

Early feminist studies that analysed feminine and masculine speaking styles invariably indicated that silence was males’ tool of maintaining power in mixed-sex conversations. For example, in his paper written 1986, Sattel claims that the use of silence to yield power is intrinsic to men’s speech style. He discusses “male inexpressiveness” as a general model for masculine emotional and linguistic behaviour

²⁹ See Section 2.

³⁰ *Korpus Języka Polskiego Wydawnictwa Naukowego PWN*, accessed online: <http://korpus.pwn.pl>.

³¹ *Ibidem*.

³² The core subject of gender studies in language, and specifically of the difference between feminine and masculine conversational styles, is speech. To examine the nature of both intra- and inter-sex communication, linguists research such domains as lexical, syntactic, morphological, phonological as well as dialectological differences between the language used by women and that of men.

and suggests that “[m]ale inexpressiveness empirically emerges as an intentional manipulation of a situation when threats to the male position occur”³³. Sattel cites a conversation in which the man, by refraining from speaking and ignoring every question the woman asks gives her the message that “the battle we are engaged in is to be fought on my rules and when I choose to fight”³⁴. Thus, in early gender and language research men were claimed to deliberately use silence in order to secure their sociopolitical status.

Similarly, Dendrinós and Ribeiro-Pedro suggest that “[m]en’s usurpation of power has led to silencing women for centuries. At various stages women have been denied access to education, literary expression, and public speaking”³⁵. Indeed, the scale of silencing women can be massive. Coates discusses an extreme example of the use of silence in female language that is strictly controlled by masculine society:

In Mongolia [...] women are absolutely forbidden to use the names of their husband’s older brothers, father, father’s brother or grandfather. This taboo extends beyond the names of the husband’s male relatives: women are not allowed to use any word or syllable which is the same as, or sounds like, any of the forbidden names³⁶.

Establishing a taboo on masculine names puts the male in the position of power. According to Acheson, “linguistic taboos then act as a demonstration of force – a show of power – because language creation and prohibition constitute privileges of the powerful. Only authorities possess the right to decide what may be said – what can or cannot be uttered”³⁷. Furthermore, assuming that the signified of a taboo, as defined by Acheson, is “sacred or inviolable in nature”³⁸, masculine names are given a unique status being protected from women-generated linguistic profanity.

Acheson argues that “in many parts of the world women have fewer choices in whom they may address, words that they may use, topics that they may discuss, and when and where they may speak”³⁹. This claim is supported by Gal, who summarising a study of Malagasy in Madagascar, notices that in this particular community women cannot verbally participate in political events as political discourse requires a language that avoids overt argument. The Malagasy society views female speech as too direct to be suitable for politics. Additionally, Malagasy men “avoid a series

³³ J.W. Sattel, *The Inexpressive Male: Tragedy or Sexual Politics?*, 1986, Accessed online: <http://www.uah.edu/colleges/liberal/sociology/Finley/gender/Sattel.html>.

³⁴ Ibidem.

³⁵ B. Dendrinós, E. Ribeiro Pedro, op. cit., p. 219.

³⁶ J. Coates, *Women, Men and Language. A sociolinguistic account of gender differences in language*, New York: Longman Group UK Limited 1993, p. 43.

³⁷ K. Acheson, op. cit., p. 30.

³⁸ Ibidem, p. 17.

³⁹ Ibidem, p. 31.

of speech activities that women engage in such as accusations, market haggling and gossip⁴⁰. According to Gal, men silencing women in some contexts and refraining from speech in others control both feminine and masculine discourse.

However, the usurpation of power in communication is far from being restricted to men hushing women when the former feel the need to assert their sociopolitical position. Silence in relationships is often a post-argument state when both sides first take time to calm down and later on escalate the conflict by refusing to talk to each other. This phenomenon has been given a name in Polish being frequently referred to as *ciche dni* 'silent days', and it indeed emerges when the partners are not on speaking terms for longer than a day. Interestingly, 'silent days' are not only an aftermath of a serious fight. They may also be a form of punishing the partner who has misbehaved. The silent partner demonstrates power, defiance and indifference to cooperative conflict management while the one who breaks the silence presents submission. As both women and men can initiate 'silent days', silence is not only the masculine tool of controlling females, as one can execute punishment only if s/he is in the position of power.

The use of silence in mixed-sex conversation is also problematic because women and men hold disparate views on its role in communication. One of the differences between male and female conversational styles that has been confirmed by numerous empirical studies is the use of minimal responses. Linguists argue that it is typical of women to respond to the co-speaker's utterance by contributing phrases such as *mhm, yeah* etc. Men, on the other hand, are claimed to favour silent, instead of minimal responses. This opposition in feminine and masculine speech styles has serious consequences for maintaining efficiency and power balance in a mixed-sex speech event.

First, the fact that women opt for minimal responses and men avoid them exposes different expectations of how a collaborative speech act should proceed. Apparently, silence that is used by men as a politeness strategy gains a reverse meaning and becomes interpreted by women as lack of interest and attention. Tannen suggests that "men [...] more often give silent attention. Women who expect a stream of listener noise interpret silent attention as no attention at all. [...] Men who expect silent attention interpret a stream of listener noise as overreaction or impatience"⁴¹. Women will therefore treat silence as a sign of disrespect. Men tend to hold the traditional view that power resides in the one who speaks and in remaining silent take a reverent attitude towards the female speaker. Though

⁴⁰ S. Gal, *Between Speech and Silence. The Problematics of Research on Language and Gender*, [In:] *The Women and Language Debate*, ed. C. Roman, S. Juhasz, C. Miller, Rutgers University Press 1994, p. 410.

⁴¹ D. Tannen, *Sex, lies and conversation*. Accessed online: <http://www.smccd.net/accounts/sullivant/836/ho/SexLies.pdf>, p. 3.

these divergent attitudes towards the role of silence in communication seem to support the difference, rather than dominance approach⁴², refusing to adjust one’s speech style and minimise misunderstanding can also be seen as a way of asserting hegemony in a conversational event. For instance, DeFrancisco claims that “violations of one’s communication expectations and preferences in intimate relations may actually be covert dominance strategies”⁴³. Here, women’s excessive use of minimal responses becomes a dominance strategy as much as men’s silence does.

The conflict that arises from women’s expectation of minimal responses and men’s preference for silence grows even more serious when men use minimal responses, yet delay their production. According to Coates, the use of delayed minimal responses can be a way of maintaining conversational dominance. Coates points out that “[j]ust as a well-placed minimal response demonstrates active attention on the part of the listener and support for the speaker’s topic, so a delayed minimal response signals a lack of interest and lack of support for the speaker’s topic”⁴⁴. If men, either consciously or unwittingly, choose delayed minimal responses, they seem to display disregard for female speakers and by refusing to continue the conversation take control of its course. However, men’s attempts at reducing silent periods cannot be viewed only through the prism of the struggle for power. Men can employ minimal responses to express solidarity with female speakers, yet delay them as this type of linguistic behaviour does not come naturally to men.

As it has been pointed out, women and men’s different views on the role of silence in conversation can lead to misunderstanding one’s intentions behind particular linguistic behaviour. However, there are such elements of conversational style whose purpose is strictly related to achieving dominance in a given speech event and can hardly be mistaken for a politeness strategy. For example, taking advantage of a speaker’s intra-turn pause to interrupt and take the floor is strictly a clear sign of the interrupter’s wish to hold power. Coates, who has analysed turn-taking patterns among male and female speakers also notices that if a turn-taking procedure is violated (usually through interruption) some speakers force a rapid reversal of turns while others are silenced. Coates claims that interruptions are more common in inter- rather than intra-sex communication and since most of them “are produced by men in mixed-sex conversations, the speaker who falls silent is

⁴² While *the dominance approach* is based on the assumption that linguistic differences in feminine and masculine speech subjugate women and put men in the position of power, *the difference approach* relies on the assumption that men and women belong to separate subcultures and so do their languages.

⁴³ V.L. DeFrancisco, *The Sounds of Silence: How Men Silence Women in Marital Relations*, [In:] *Language and Gender. A reader*, ed. J. Coates, Oxford: Wiley-Blackwell 1998, p. 182.

⁴⁴ J. Coates, op. cit.

usually a woman⁷⁴⁵. This means that by silencing women men do not perform their conversational habits (if they were, interruptions would also occur in single-sex, male groups) but can use interruptions to exercise control over the opposite sex.

It can be noticed that whether silence equates with power is highly context dependent. DeFrancisco, who analysed the use of silence in marital conversation, claims that the men in her study “seemed to have more control in defining day-to-day reality of these couples’ communication styles, and the women did more adapting⁷⁴⁶. Although she found women talking more and introducing more subjects, in DeFrancisco’s experiment it was men who invariably decided which topics were relevant by giving them proper attention. If the man remained silent the woman received the message that she should drop the subject. Thus, the man used silence to silence the woman but while masculine non-talking was powerful, feminine non-talking turned out to be submissive. Dendrinis and Ribeiro-Pedro provide an interesting explanation of why females’ and males’ silences have such divergent meanings, claiming that “verbal and non-verbal behaviour, speech and silence can be used as tools of domination only by those who are empowered to use them. Used by the powerless, the same resources can become tools of subordination⁷⁴⁷.

Modern linguistics warns us against perceiving communicative silence as non-behaviour. Though only defined in relation to speech, silence cannot be viewed as its polar opposite. Silence has its own status in conversation and presents multiplicity of meanings; it can signify language processing, express emotions or stand for social behaviour. It can also become a powerful tool of manipulating both the very discourse and the interlocutor as its ambiguity and polysemous nature leave speakers considerable freedom with interpreting and conveying meanings. Yet, the paradoxical nature of silent communication is best reflected in the fact that though having the power to control and manipulate, silence is a poor tool of cooperative communication.

Silence is an intriguing subject of studies in gender linguistics as it can reveal how sexes use this particular type of linguistic behaviour to hold power in a given speech event. Early studies showed that it is men who more often exercise power over women in conversations. The form of power varies from a fairly insignificant one (e.g. interruption, no-response) to a particularly serious instance of delimiting feminine language (taboo). Silencing the other sex can be used both to control domestic conversation and the public speech.

⁴⁵ J. Coates, *op. cit.*, p.111.

⁴⁶ V.L. DeFrancisco, *op. cit.* p. 121.

⁴⁷ B. Dendrinis, E. Ribeiro Pedro, *op. cit.*, p. 219.

Research proves that silence gains divergent meanings when used by men and women. Men tend to exploit silent communication to take control of the topics discussed. When females fall silent it is most often because men provoke this behaviour. However, using silence as "the currency of power" is not an exclusively masculine strategy and we are far from concluding that it is men who invariably exercise silent power over women. The concept of *silent days*, recognised by Polish couples shows that both females and males can punish their partners by refraining from speaking. Moreover, women's use of minimal responses can be seen as an attack on men's preference for silent attention, which proves that women can pursue conversational domination as much as men can.

Streszczenie

Milczenie jako narzędzie dominacji w komunikacji między płciami

W perspektywie socjolingwistycznej milczenie stanowi integralną oraz niezwykle istotną część komunikacji międzyludzkiej. Celem artykułu jest analiza różnych rodzajów i funkcji milczenia w akcie mowy, a także zbadanie jego najważniejszych znaczeń. Zwięzła charakterystyka roli milczenia w komunikacji pozwala wywnioskować, że ze względu na wielość znaczeń, nieprecyzyjność i podatność na błędną interpretację, milczenie okazuje się nieocenionym narzędziem w kształtowaniu struktury władzy, zarówno w sferze prywatnej, jak i publicznej. To spostrzeżenie staje się kluczowe dla dalszej części artykułu, której celem jest zbadanie, w jaki sposób milczenie może stać się istotnym instrumentem budowania i umacniania dominującej pozycji w interakcji między obiema płciami. Autorka wskazuje również na kulturowe uwarunkowanie omawianych zjawisk.

Summary

Silence as a "Currency of Power" in Inter-Sex Communication

From a sociolinguistic perspective silence is inseparable and important part of the process of communication. The aim of this article is to analyse various types and functions of silence in a speech act, and to scrutinise its most important meanings. A brief characteristic of the function of silence in communication allows to conclude that due to the multiplicity of meanings, inexactness and susceptibility to a wrong interpretation, silence turns out to be invaluable tool in creating the structure of power, both in the private and public sphere. This conclusion is crucial for the following part of the article, in which the author analyses how silence may become a significant tool in building and reinforcing a dominant role in the interactions between men and women. The author also indicates the cultural factors of the described phenomena.