

# Silence as Discourse Marker in Multilingual Classrooms in India

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## **Introduction**

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. More importantly, the discourse of silence can also be studied in multilingual contexts. In this study, I will concentrate on silence in primary school classrooms in India, which are almost always multilingual. Since this is a new approach to studying the sociolinguistics of an Indian classroom, this study (which is an extension of my Ph.D. thesis) can be classified as an exploratory work. Here, different forms of silence have been used as

variables to study the relation between the various 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, have also been considered and questioned in this study.

An examination of the multilingual and multicultural Indian classroom in this study shows that the main cause that contributes towards a culture of silence in such a classroom is ...the lack of insight as far as determining the language of instruction is concerned. Be it Hindi or English, the medium of instruction in school is sometimes entirely different from the language spoken by the children in their homes and their neighbourhood. 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 the language policy as well as its implementation within basic educational institutions.

In the present study, the paradigm of language use and the medium of instruction in some Indian classrooms has been questioned and examined. The data for the study has been collected from Kendriya Vidyalayas in Delhi where majority of the children are Hindi speakers, whereas the

medium of instruction is predominantly English. In this case, English is not likely to be the first language (L1) but for a very small percentage of students, may be the second language (L2).

In this study, I will focus on talk-in-interaction between the participants—the teacher and the students—in a natural and non-obtrusive real world social setting of a multicultural Indian classroom. I have applied the method of conversation analysis to analyse the data, and this is an ethnographic method for investigating the micro-details of the structure and process of social interaction. 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 proven to be a highly productive exercise in this ongoing research work, yielding many rewarding research insights. My attempt here is to explore the different forms of silence by positioning them as variables in the data, and understanding the functions of silence in the process.

### **Theoretical Paradigm**

The methodology adopted in this work is both ethnographic and interpretative in nature which, when combined with qualitative and analytic methods, provides a holistic picture of first language classrooms in India. In ethnomethodological studies, the field is fertile and ever-changing, with new forms of recording and recoding being developed; therefore there is no one method which will give optimum results on investigation and the existing

methods are revised and modified to cater to the dynamic field of conversation analysis (Nakane, 2007). I have also somewhat modified the participant structure of the research design to suit my data, and have not allotted any length of time to the gaps, laps and pauses (which is usually done in CA), owing to problems with the quality of the “noisy” primary school data I was dealing with. I have therefore used and relied on my own supplementary field notes and observations on the actual occurrence of the variables.

Before going further, it is imperative to explain the participant structure of the classroom conversations I have used as data. The orientation of a verbal participation depends on how a communicative interaction is organized and how much contribution is expected to be allocated to the interlocutors. In this study, structurally speaking, there are two main participants, the teacher and the students, and the conversation between them always privileges the teacher as having the authority to speak, nominate and elicit responses. However, very often the entire class, functioning as the second interlocutor speaks in chorus, and there is a great deal of noise and chaos as far as their talk-in-interaction goes. Therefore, the quantitative dominance in terms of speech appears to belong to the teacher rather than the students.

### **Conversation Analysis of Audio Recorded Data of Classroom Interactions**

The variables that I have chosen to test the audio recorded data are: pause, gap, lapse/lull, silent response, repair (Goffman 1971, 1972, 1983; Sacks et al., 1974;

Sacks, 1987), intentionality of silence (Kurzon, 1997), and underelaboration (Nakane, 2007). In the next sections, a detailed analysis of two excerpts each of the classroom interaction in English and Hindi have been presented. The first is a transcription of a lecture from an English class in which the story of Bamboo Curry is taught using the text. It must be pointed out that the teacher here uses Hindi quite liberally in excerpts 1 and 2. The names of the students have been changed to protect their identity.

### Analysis

#### Classroom Interaction I: English class

##### *Excerpt 1/I*

Teacher: We have already completed this chapter. [1]  
 Student: Yes ma'am. [2]  
 Teacher: And take out the lesson "Bamboo Curry" now. [3]  
           Take out. [4]  
           *aap kitaab nikaal lijiye.*  
           (You take out the book.) [5]  
           *nikaal liya?* (You took it out?) [6]  
           *kitaab nikaal lijiye.* (Take the book out.) [7]  
           *theek.* (Okay.) [8]  
           Pin drop silence. [9]  
           This is the last time I am warning you, otherwise I will punish you now. [10]  
           Once I have given you chance, second time I will punish you. [11]

This excerpt represents the first five minutes of the class, which is usually very

chaotic. There is a lot of noise and the students take time to settle down. In [9], it can be seen that the teacher is so irritated with the noise and chaos of the class that she issues a warning to maintain a pin-drop silence and also warns of some punishment if the class does not obey her. This is how a class usually starts: with shouting, noise and total disruption for the first few minutes. After this issuance of warning to be silent, some discipline is seen to be maintained.

##### *Excerpt 2/I*

Teacher: So, have already completed this. [13]  
           Yesterday I gave you dictation. [14]  
           Copies are neat. [15]  
           Now we are starting with this chapter "Bamboo Curry". [16]  
           Today is first and we are taking this lesson Bamboo Curry before the school starts for the summer vacation. [17]  
           All right. [18]  
           Page thirty. [19]  
           Yes, *khade ho jaa.* (Yes, stand up.) [20]  
           And before that I will give you summer vacation homework also. [21]  
           So, the name of the lesson is "Bamboo Curry". [22]  
           Has everybody... anybody seen the bamboo? [23]

*kisi ne bamboo dekha hai?*  
(Has anybody seen a bamboo?) [24]

Students: Yes ma'am. [25]

Teacher: *accha* one minute. (Okay, one minute.) [26]  
*bolo kahan dekha hai ye?*  
(Tell me, where have you seen?) [27]  
*haan ji?* (Yes?) [28]  
[Student answers in low voice] [29]

Teacher: Loudly. [30]

Student: [Indistinct voice] [31]

Teacher: *gaon me dekha hai?* (Have you seen it in the village?) [32]  
*gaon me kahan dekha hai?*  
(Where have you seen it in the village?) [33]

Student: Ma'am \*\*\* *me hamara gaaon hai.* (Ma'am, we have village in \*\*\*) [34]

Teacher: *accha, gaaon me kya kis tarah se use hua hai bamboo?* (Okay, how is bamboo used in the village?) [35]

Student: *ghar banana ke liye.* (To build homes.) [36]

Teacher: *ghar banana ke liye use hua?* (Is it used to build homes?) [37]  
*accha.* (Okay.) [38]  
Anybody else? [39]  
Yes? [40]  
[Student answers. Voice

indistinct...constant  
murmuring] [41]

In this excerpt, it is clear that the students are responsive when the teacher asks them to **bid for the floor** [23] [24] [27] [28], but an overall silence is palpable. In [29], an **underelaborated** response is seen, as a correct response would possibly have made the teacher to ask another question. Unable to get a proper response, the teacher asks the students to speak loudly [30], but still the response is not audible [31]. In [32] and [33], the teacher gives a clue to the students to elicit a response from them, or more plausibly, repeats an indistinct answer from one of the students who takes the floor [31]. The students immediately pick up the clue and **repair** their answer [34]. Enthused by the response in [36], the teacher goes on to ask another question, expecting that someone would **bid** and **claim the floor**, but [41] shows that no one takes the responsibility of answering the question. One reason for this could be that the students fear that if they reply once, the teacher might ask them another question, or worse, ask them to reply in English (as has been the case many times before).

Following is an excerpt from the Hindi class in which the teacher is teaching grammar.

## Classroom Interaction II: Hindi Class

### Excerpt 1/II

Teacher: *jo shabd kisi vyakti ya insan ki visheshta batate hain use visheshan kahte hain ...* (Words that

describe the qualities of any person or human are called adjectives...) [1]

Students: *use visheshan kahte hain* (they are called adjectives...) [2]

Teacher: *kitne bacchon ko samajh aya hai visheshan?* (how many children understood what adjectives are?) [3]

*ab aap ke samne book khuli hogi, usme underline kijiye* ... (now underline in your book open in front of you) [4]

In this sequence of events, the usual energy with which a lecture begins is palpable. Also, there is a lot of noise and murmuring. In fact, the first few minutes of the recording are almost impossible to hear and transcribe. Finally, the teacher **takes the floor** and starts teaching the chapter and the students start participating from the second turn onwards. They are absolutely alert and responsive and almost repeat along with the teacher [2].

### **Excerpt 2/II**

Teacher: *ab mai puchhu to tumhe batana hai kaun sa shabd sangya hai aur kaun sa viseshan* ... ( Now when I ask, you have to identify the nouns and the adjectives...) [5]

*yahan pahla vakya maine likha* ... (I have written the first sentence here...) [6]

*“lal phool mat todo”*...(Do not pluck the red flower...) [7]

Students: *phool –phool...* (flower...flower...) [8]

Teacher: *han thik hai aj Hindi me puri class phool bol rahi hai* ... (Yes that is right. The entire class is saying “flower” in Hindi ...) [9]

*ye phool shabd hai sangya* ... (The word “flower” is a noun...) [10]

Students: *lal visheshan* (Red is an adjective) [11]

Teacher: *bagh ke andar safed phool bhi hai* ... (The garden has a white flower too...) [12]

*peela phool bhi hai* ... (There is a yellow flower as well...) [13]

*neela hai lekin aapko instruction diya gaya hai lal phool mat todo* ... (There is a blue one too, but you have been given instructions not to pluck the red flower only...) [24]

*ye kiski visheshta bata raha hai?* (What does it describe?) [15]

*phool ki* ... (of the flower...) [16]

*ye hai visheshan* ... (This is an adjective...) [17]

*ab apko samajh aya?* (Did you understand now?) [18]

*kitne bachhon ko samajh*

*aya?* (How many children have understood?) [19]

*ab hum ye dekhenge ...*  
(We will see...) [20]

*puri class ko samajh aya?*  
(Has the entire class understood?) [21]

*achchha....* (ok...) [22]

*ek minute Tanya aap khade ho jayiye ...* (Now, Tanya, you stand up...) [23]

*batao isme beta phool kya hai?* (Tell me what is the flower in this sentence, child?) [24]

*sangya hai ya visheshan hai?* (Is it a noun or an adjective?) [25]

Students: *madam sangya...* (Ma'am noun...) [26]

In this sequence, when the teacher explains nouns and adjectives and gives a sentence to the children to identify the nouns and adjectives in it, the students do not even wait for the teacher to ask the question [7]. They are ready with their reply and start shouting out the answers in chorus the moment question is asked [8]. Again, when the teacher is explaining a concept [10], the students almost jump onto the next topic with their response [11]. This is when the teacher has not even explained the next topic and hence not asked the question. The participation from the students' side is robust and the entire class shouts the answers in chorus whenever a response is elicited. Tanya [23] is a new student, so she

is a little shy and is taking her time to adjust to the new surroundings of the school. The teacher makes an extra effort to ensure that Tanya is able to understand the lessons. In fact she almost interrupts the class in between the lecture to ask Tanya a question [23] and encourages her to **claim the floor**. Tanya immediately comes up with a reply, even though it is somewhat guarded, and in a low voice.

These are the representative data of the analysis which was done for thirty hours of the audio recorded classroom interactions. On the basis of this analysis, certain themes have emerged. These themes are summarized as follows:

## Recurrent Features

### English classrooms

The general trend which dominates in the English class is that students do not **volunteer** to read from the text (as part of the classroom activities), or show the interest and commitment that they show in a Hindi class. The overall occurrence of **bidding** and **claiming the floor** in the class is low. In an English class, the teacher ensures full participation of the students through nomination, as volunteering is rarely observed. When a student is nominated, she/he does not use this as an opportunity to exhibit her knowledge or freely participate in the classroom interaction. Rather students employ different skills to get away from speaking in the class. The data is densely scattered with **under elaborated responses** as they do participate if they are nominated, to save their face, but they resist giving proper answers so as to escape further questioning



by the teacher. They know that giving proper responses would lead to more questions and they do not want to do that lest the teacher nominates them again.

Some of the enterprising students attempt to answer in English, but they have to abort the sentence for lack of adequate registers while the others abandon the effort to be active and attentive in class. The data from the English classroom is scattered, with **pauses, gaps** and **lapses**. These three variables form a chain in their participation as on **nomination** or at the time of **turn-taking**, a long **pause** becomes a **gap** and a **gap** becomes a **lapse**. In terms of **volubility** and **class participation**, the English class presents a dark and slow picture. The other kinds of silence found in the English class are **intentional** and **unintentional silence**. Intentional silence was found only when the student wanted to steer away from an embarrassing situation to save her face. **Unintentional silence** and **underelaboration** is somehow connected, as in both the cases, due to unavailability of proper and adequate L2 registers, the student has to abandon or abort a sentence.

However, one of the most encouraging aspects here is the students' ability to **repair** their answers. They show tremendous understanding when the teacher drops a **clue** (including, prompts like repeating their answers) and they immediately repair their answers. They not only exhibit **self-repair** but they also repair others' responses and sometimes the entire class drops clues to help repair the answer of a student. So here, repair emerges as the most productive tool in the classroom interaction.

### **Hindi classrooms**

The most distinctive feature of the Hindi classroom is its sheer **volubility**. Student participation in the classroom proceedings is robust and wholesome. They are enthusiastic and loud. They do not wait for their **turn** to make their bid and want to **claim the floor** right away. The teacher frequently issues mild warnings to maintain order and silence in the class. Individual **nomination** does not work here as they are ready with their reply in chorus, as soon as the question is asked. In one instance, the teacher had not even finished explaining the topic, and the students were ready with their answers. They had anticipated the questions from the text. During the Hindi classroom transaction, selected variables such as **pause** and **gaps** or missing a **turn** and **lapse** are rarely observed. **Under-elaborated response** and **unintentional silence** are sometimes present, but this is found only in those chapters in the text where the students are not able to connect with the cultural background of the story. When it is explained properly, they are immediately able to make connections.

### **Conclusion**

In the present work, I have made an attempt to examine the discourse of silence through the narrative of education and classroom interactions. The aim was to understand the different forms and functions of silence in a primary school classroom as this is one of the basic arenas for language development. This work contends that if the medium of instruction for a child is not in her home or

neighbourhood languages, she may not only lag behind in cognitive development, but also becomes silent in the class. Therefore, it highlights the gaps in the educational policy, planning and implementation or we can say theory and practice through empirical analysis of the classroom interaction between teachers and students.

A classroom is not a place to be silent, so the child learns different strategies to negotiate nomination or turn-taking and the resultant structured silence emanating from the classroom interactions. Empirical analysis of data supports the fact that the academic performance of a child is best protected when she/he is encouraged to learn a new language with and in relation to her own language and nothing is thrust on her. This study also emphasizes the fact that a child comes to school with a flourishing linguistic competence in more than one language, but when the lecture in the classroom does not relate to her/his language, and she/he is not free to use her own language, then it brings about a culture of silence in the classroom.

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