

Explicit and Implicit Strategies of Silence

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ABSTRACT

This critical essay focuses on strategic silence as communicative silence – not when we talk about silence, but when we talk through silence. It proceeds in two steps. First, a definition of strategic silence, based on the discussion of explicit and implicit silence is suggested. Strategic silences are (1) intentional, directed at audiences, (2) mostly communicative and (3) discursive practices that take place in (4) situations of communication (5) at higher degrees of indirectness, which usually entail (6) a shift from speaking to actionable listening. Second, two major types of silence are discussed. Explicit and implicit strategies of silence are two different forms – and degrees – of indirectness. Explicit silence speaks for itself. What the speaker is silent about is what the listener is expected to understand. Implicit silence is more ambiguous. What is meant is different from what is said. Explicit silence appeals to the consciousness of the public. Implicit silence tries to slip under its radar. Implicit strategies of silence are more indirect than the implicit ones. Strategic communication is always indirect. Indirect communication always involves silence. The more indirect communication is, the more silent it becomes. Silence is most strategic when it is not seen as such.

Keywords: *Communicative silence; Strategic communication; Discourse; Indirect communication; Explicit silence; Implicit silence; Actionable listening*

INTRODUCTION

Although communication practitioners and journalists often use the idiom of strategic silence, they do it in a metaphorical and unreflective way. They do not trip over its meaning because they deem it self-explaining. Strategic or not, in Western cultures silence has a rather negative denotation – not even connotation. Silence as silencing is bad. Breaking silence is good. This is what communication academics declare in defence of practitioners who daily use silence but without announcing it.

Everyone seems to be against silence. Today, the saying goes that in the 24/7 media cycle silence is no option. Journalists use the stigma of silence to attack. They try to prevent their sources from falling silent when those sources want to protect their clients. Yet journalists fell silent when they protect their sources who are their clients. Both communicators and journalists are vocal about being vocal; and both are silent about being silent. This is an indelible part of the ideology of the communication professions: Sources and journalists are more

visible to each other than to their publics – at least more than they are ready to admit.

Not much in communication studies is published about strategic silence and virtually nothing in the realm of professional communication. There is the Barry Brummett's article, "Towards a Theory of Silence as a Political Strategy" (Brummett, 1980), which I will discuss below. There are two more notable titles, which deal with strategic silence in a more systematic way. One is Richard Lentz' "The Search for Strategic Silence: Discovering what Journalism Leaves Out" (Lentz, 1991). His eloquent historical analysis, however, focuses on strategic silences as editorial policies of the US legacy media. And Adam Jaworski, who has produced a seminal book on silence (Jaworski, 1993), and edited another one (Jaworski, 1997), returned once more to the topic to analyse, with Darrius Galasiński, "Strategies of silence: Omission and Ambiguity in the Black Book of Polish Censorship" (Jaworski & Galasiński, 2000).

The focus, however, in this paper will be on silence as medium, not as content – when we talk not about silence but *through* silence. In this

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regard, silence is neither bad nor good. It could be both, but so speech as well. Yes, communication can silence. But silence can also communicate. We have to be able to regard silence neutrally, ontologically – as a fact and power of being.

Strategic communication is *indirect communication*. There is no indirect communication without silence. Silence constitutes every fold and joint, which interrupt communication and make it non-linear – indirect that is. Niklas Luhmann, for example, suggests that in “communication as a paradox” silence secures the discontinuity in the unity of communication. Communication does not tell [mitteilen] the world; it divides [einteilen] it (Luhmann, 1994; pp. 26-27). Silence produces a cut – a caesura, and emphasis, a boundary. Silence lends clarity to speech by destroying continuity (Bruneau, 1973; pp. 18-19).

The more strategic communication is, the more indirect it becomes. The more indirect its use, the more silence it involves. Silence, however, is not only a form of indirectness. Silence *is* indirectness. We fold something and make it smaller, partly invisible. We take turns to keep a conversation going. Indirect communication – or mediation in a broader, material and semiotic sense – takes place when something or someone represents. Representations are folds. Representation silences the represented by assigning them a voice. It is an interruption that carries over. Even when we represent ourselves, we are both speaking and silent (in various modes – painting, playing, dancing, gesturing and so on) about us at the same time.

STRATEGIC SILENCES

There is no single, universal and abstract silence as such. Strategic silences can be defined only in plural. There are many strategic silences, always empirically unique and concrete – depending on their circumstances and context. Silence is meaningless outside its concrete and situational functions. A taxonomy of fixed strategic silences does not exist. The number of silences is infinite – as infinite practice is. Isolated silences do not exist. One cannot define a silence without its opposite – without what we consider non-silence – be it sound, voice, line, colour and so on. And vice versa.

I would like to suggest that strategic silences are (1) intentional, directed at audiences, (2) mostly communicative and (3) discursive practices that take place in (4) situations of communication (5)

at higher degrees of indirectness, which usually entail (6) a shift from speaking to actionable listening.

Intentional, Directed at Audiences

Strategic silence is an informed choice on purpose. It is not the opposite of agency. As strategy, it gives agency direction. As strategy, every silence is situational. It is a temporary means for solving a temporary problem. Strategic silence, however, is not just a means. As strategy, it includes various tactics. It is not like the linguistic techniques of pause, ellipsis and implicature, for example.

Strategies presuppose subjectivity and intention. But when strategy materialises, becomes practice, intentions also change and adapt. As strategies, silences are problem-solving practices. To the extent they act as *performatives* – where important is not what they mean but what they *do* by not saying it (Butler, 1997; Hall, 1999) – they lose authorship, collectivise and self-correct quasi-automatically. They become resources of useful, indirect, objectified discourse. The objective mechanisms of a society built on markets and profits determine the character of indirect discourse as collective memory and repository of successful practice (Bourdieu, 1977b).

Whether for the promotion of a new car or for our academic “promotion development” or for personal self-promotion on Facebook, we use depersonalised, repetitive, and automatized strategies of silence. We put our best foot forward. We do advertise not what does not sell but what sells best. What looks best should represent the rest (Lury, 2004). We pursue the “halo effect”, the essence of branding (Ries, 2006; Ries & Ries, 2002). We are strategically vocal about one thing and silent about many.

Communicative

Subject of this paper is strategic silence as *communicative silence*. It is silence that conveys meaning. As any other communication, such silence involves sense making, including speaking and listening, encoding and decoding. Of course, there are non-communicative silences, too. They may obstruct access to information and conversation. They may exclude possible communications as inappropriate or nonsensical. They may disengage, ostracise and isolate – if the power relations permit. Silence can purposefully prevent access to resources, including communicative ones. The fight of the telcos for

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a larger chunk of big data. He who controls the data controls the future (Fullerton, 2015). The struggle for monopoly over big data is strategic but non-communicative. One can read the faces of the water polo players to figure what is going on below the surface. The telcos' cannibalism is busyness strategy, not communication strategy.

Yet not always non-communicative silence – in diplomacy and secret negotiations, for example – is normatively bad. Non-communicative silence can also be a strategy – to deflect, for example, another strategy. Our strategic silences are often responses to someone else's strategies. He who targets is also targeted. The silence of disassociation: We publicly ignore those who try to engage us to prevent them from using the leverage of our publicity to promote their agenda. And this may not be our agenda. We engage some and, at the same time, we disengage many. The former is impossible without the latter. But we are vocal about the former and silent about the latter. Non-communicative strategies of silence are real, but we should not rush with their ethical verdict.

Discursive

Strategic communication may be discursive and non-discursive. There are various approaches to discourse. A broadly accepted distinction, however, marks discourse as a system of interrelated meanings, which are produced, distributed and interpreted in mediated communication – from text reading to personal conversation (Fairclough, 1992; Hardy, Palmer, & Phillips, 2000; Leitch & Neilson, 2001; Mickey, 2003; Motion & Weaver, 2005; Van Dijk, 2013).

The work of a discourse goes beyond argumentation and persuasion. A discourse shapes not only the superstructure of opinions. More importantly, it frames the base – the cognitive and thematic order, including issue priorities, upon which those opinions are built (Gerhards & Neidhardt, 1991). The circulation and hierarchy of themes and issues takes precedence to the circulation and hierarchy of opinions. Themes seem to be value-neutral and unbiased, but they are not. In a rather suggestive and sub-conscious way, certain themes tacitly lead to certain opinions (Fairclough & Wodak, 1997). An invitation to conversation about “the climate change”, for example, presupposes – not only through the word “change” but also through the definite article “the” – that global warming is real.

Discursive strategies circulate in establishing zones of meanings (Heath, 1993). Non-communicative strategies, in contrast, just delineate or terminate such zones of meaning. Only few of the themes – the most significant, urgent, repeating and entertaining issues – make a career form potential to leading issues – those on the cover pages and the first in the news (Hilgartner & Bosk, 1988). As choreographs of public attention, communicators not only attract and keep but also divert and deflect the attention of publics. Good professionals systemically feed the media cycle to serve the agenda of their clients. They do two different things. They persistently deliver colourful, curious and attractive materials that make news and give prominence to the topic-opinions favoured by their clients. But they also constantly supply off-colour, bland and dull content to keep on the last pages and out the news other topic-opinions, which do not chime with the agenda of their clients. Advertising and public relations scholars remain silent on the latter, although it goes hand in hand with the former – both aspects are two sides of the same coin.

Silence does not necessarily mean that practitioners do not talk to the media. No one can afford that today. (Not talking also speaks. In such case, they give up the control over the message – which may well be their strategic intent.) When practitioners speak, silence is in the implicitness of the meant – not of the said and of the omitted – not of the stated. Communicators ceaselessly talk to the media and saturate them with material that diffuses, trivialises and makes unquestionable certain discourses, issues and views. In other words, communicators use strategic silence to *frame the questions* rather than the answers in the public debate. Influencing the answers is a noisy battle. Influencing the questions is fought in (often verbose) silence.

In Situation of Communication

Communicative silences gain relevance in situations of communication. This is not a tautological statement. Situations of communication cannot be abstract and isolated. Their participants cannot co-construct meaning from scratch. One cannot produce sensible conversation from thin air. Situations of conversation are always concrete. Structures of power deceptively appear as communicative competences. But who is appropriate to participate and who not? Who is setting the rules and who not? What is deemed sensible and what not? (Bourdieu, 1977a, 1990). We have to

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reconstruct their conditions and fill in their context to make their silences relevant.

In situations of communication we have *expectations of communication*. Part of those expectations is what we consider communication and what not. People are very smart and flexible in that regard. When we use humour, sarcasm, irony and other indirect means of conversation, we flaunt the rules of serious, straight and exact talk. But people usually seem to understand the oblique relevance of those detours – often close to nonsense or silence or both – and appreciate them. Their expectations of verbal communication may be violated, but not of communication per se.

Michel Foucault has put *exhaustive representation* – a type of verbose silence front and centre in his *History of Sexuality*. The post-Victorians have managed to transform silence into discourse. The institutional and scientific talk about sexual desire was the new way to subjugate it. Indirect discourse has replaced direct repression (1990). For Foucault sexuality was an example of how silence has become a technology of reproduction power through discourse.

Degrees of Indirectness

There are many silences because they are many degrees of indirectness. Strategic silences present some of the highest degrees of indirectness. Indeed, silences are extreme forms of indirectness. But this does not mean those are rare or marginal or extremist forms. On the contrary. In global capitalism indirect, including silent communication has become a constitutive, central and irreplaceable means of connecting societies that are fragmented and in flux.

In France, the leader of the far-right National Front, Marine Le Pen, has rebranded the National Front. She has been at pains not to be seen as the political heir of her father, Jean-Marie Le Pen. Strategic silences, politics of unsaying have helped her to secure continuation of the ideology without the continuation of its ideologue. The logo of the National Front and even her family name are conspicuously absent from the documents of the party. A main field of reframing her image has been anti-Semitism. Her father was notorious with his direct assaults on Jews. He once referred to the Nazi gas chambers as a “detail of history” in a country that deported about 76,000 Jews during the World War II. Marine Le Pen, in contrast, publicly condemned anti-Semitism. When a

party official recently denied Holocaust on camera, she instantly sacked him (Willsher, 2017).

Yet anti-Semitism is still constitutive for the National Front – as it is for any nationalist right-wing movement. But it has become more indirect. Its strategy has shifted from the said to the unsaid. In her 2017 Presidential campaign, Marine Le Pen used the silent strategy of dog-whistle Anti-Semitism. She used, for example, hints and insinuations she did not have to explicitly define. She frequently evoked, for example, a Franco-Israeli telecommunications magnate, alluding to international financial conspiracies (of you know who). She also kept reminding the voters that her principle opponent, Emmanuel Macron, was a former investor banker at Rothschild, founded by the famous Jewish family. The new strategy was to attack not what Macron used to do but where he used to do it (McAuley, 2017). The more mainstream the National Front has grown, the more indirect – silent that is – its communication strategies have become. The more frequently it frames its messages not as outright denials but as implicit assertions.

Actionable Listening

In strategic silence, the emphasis of communication moves from the speaker to the listener (Crozier, 2008; Dutta, 2014; Glenn & Ratcliffe, 2011; Macnamara, 2016). The more indirect communication becomes, the more prominent listening becomes. In that sense, silence elevates listening as an equal, if not more important element of conversation and action. It assigns agency to heeding – to *actionable listening* (Kanter, 2010). As in Shakespeare’s open silences (McGuire, 1985), space opens not only for multiple interpretations of the script, but also for free improvisations outside it. Not only in theatre, the essence of staging lies in the play rather than the screenplay, in the performance rather than the text, in the publics rather than the actors – that is, in the silences that articulate the words.

There is no strategy without risk and surprise. Strategic silences take chances. They allow but also demand an unusually higher degree of engagement, for which the listeners may not be ready. Does the situation of communication really favour equal participation? What is the added value? Is it worth the interpretative effort? Is the content compelling enough? Is it both interesting and of interest for the public? Ambiguity is inherent to strategic silences. If

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successful, they engage a big deal. If not, they put off and alienate. This is one more reason to define them in plural. They can do many things and, among them, build relations or destruct them.

EXPLICIT SILENCE

Explicit silences are *notable* silences. Barry Brummett (Brummett, 1980) gives an example of strategic silence, when he discusses presidential silences. He focuses on the US President, Jimmy Carter's conspicuous absences from public life. In July 1979, for then days, Carter cancelled a major speech on the rising costs and decreasing availability of oil. Instead, he withdrew into his Camp David residence, where he held a "domestic summit", consulted adds and met locals but did not talk publicly about the worsening energy crisis.

Brummett is a key author for this analysis. He stands out with offering an original and workable definition of strategic silence. Its angle, however, is a very specific one. He studies presidential silences as cases of political strategic silence. (But which strategic silence is not political?) He assigns to strategic silence three major features: It (1) violates expectations; (2) it always attributes a predicable set of meanings such as "mystery, uncertainty, passivity and relinquishment"; and (3) it is intentional and directed at an audience (Brummett, 1980; p. 290).

Violation of Expectations

Violation of expectations is an important aspect of strategy. Yet it is pertinent to the definition of *explicit silence*, not of implicit silence. Brummett's presidential silences are explicit silences. There is no place for implicit silence in his theory. He confuses strategic silence with one of its dimensions – with the more obvious one. People who remain silent when they are expected to speak grab the attention – for better or worse. Joaquin Phoenix' weird and full-blown silence on the David Letterman *Late Night Show*, for example, was a promotional hoax, which rather backfired and almost ruined his career (NBC, 2009).

Explicit silence is notable silence that violates the expectations of a public for *verbal* communication. Instead it offers a continuation of communication but of a *non-verbal* kind. And this is a problem. How does the public know that silence here is a continuation of talk (just with other means) and not a breakdown of communication altogether? To accept and make

sense of this silence, the public is pushed out of its comfort zone. It is tacitly asked to redefine and broaden its expectation of communication – to include silence as part of it.

This is a big ask – and risk. But it is strategic. Risk and strategy often go hand in hand. The President offers his silence as a different – he hopes a better – medium for his message. But would the public be able follow him – to process that shift of medium and message? Would it tolerate that violation? Would it be willing – according to Herbert Grice's principle of relevance – to walk the extra mile, accept silence as flouting the rules of rationality, and find sense in what does not sound right (Grice, 1975)? (It does not sound at all in this case.) Would it be able to "decode" the presidential silence as communication instead of the lack of such?

Explicit silence is *conversational* silence (Bilmes, 1994). The President is expected to talk, but he does not. And this is remarkable. Publics interpret each notable silence regardless of whether it is intended or not. A silence becomes notable when it constitutes something like an exception, deviation or disruption. Silences, which are formal (i.e. of the subordinate) or customary (i.e. out of respect), are not strategic. Normative, ritual, institutional, role-bound, unmarked, and other silences are expected and therefore not notable. They remain an inarticulate background of other non-silent events. Brummett claims that Mahatma Gandhi's practice of observing regular periods of silence (Merriam, 1975) was meaningful and political but not strategic. That may had been the case in various contexts of his life. But when he fell silent and went on infinite hunger strike until the atrocities between Hindus and Muslims stop, he strategically used physical self-denial, "dead silence" as the ultimate form of leadership.

Silence as Mystery

The second part of Brummett's definition of strategic silence – that it attributes a predictable set of meanings such as "mystery, uncertainty, passivity and relinquishment" – is unconvincing. He presumes that presidential silences do not fully need to rely on context. There is something metaphysical in the political stature (if not charisma) of the President. Perhaps he knows something the people do not know. Perhaps the perceived weakness of the President conceals his real strength. Perhaps he is holding his winning cards to his chest. Perhaps Carter was not speaking because he was listening. Perhaps

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his strategic silence “received at least one desirable attributed meaning, that of creating an image of receiving communication even if he gave none out” (Brummett, 1980, p. 300).

Mystery is a convenient substitute for explanation. Linking silence with mystic has been an entrenched bias in the Western cultural tradition. Mystical is what cannot be expressed in words. What cannot be expressed in words is mystical (Bindeman, 1981; Streng, 1983). Brummett chooses metaphysics to practice. He presupposes invariable and predicable attributions to presidential silences. Such constants do not exist. There are no equal silences – not even presidential ones. No strategic silence should be taken out of the conditions and context of its production. One should explore the presuppositions of Brummett’s presuppositions. In the President Carter’s example, “mystery” and “uncertainty” may indicate disorientation. In the end, his silence failed. It did not create more suspense. It did not merely flout the rule of relevance – it broke it. Meaningful communication was no longer taking place. The public saw Carter as “weak” and “wavering yet again”.

By the way, Brummett builds a positive category (strategic silence) based on a negative case (failed silence). This does not help him either. What is wrong, after all: President Carter’s strategic silence of Brummett’s definition?

Strategy and Intentionality

The third aspect of Brummett’s definition – that strategic silence is “intentional” and “directed” towards audiences – is not wrong. Of course, people and organisations intend, formulate, plan and direct strategies toward audiences. Brummett, however, finishes where his analysis should start. His model of communication is abstract, asymmetric and productionist. The speaker, the President in this case, is who creates the meaning. Missing in the analysis are the critical co-determinants – the existing discursive practices, including political strategies, which circulate in collective, impersonal and widely automatized modes. In the political public sphere, politicians and communicators are neither the sole nor the main producers of communication strategies. They need at least half of their time to research and adjust to the flow of already existing strategies and use their direction and thrust. What they can do is to “piggyback” or “sail into the wind” of

that flow. What they cannot is to create or control it.

Successful Presidential Silences

There are examples of successful presidential silences, though. Abraham Lincoln’s prolonged silence before his Gettysburg Address, which purpose was to prevent not only the country but also (and perhaps more importantly) the Republican party from early splitting on the inevitability of the imminent war with the Border slave states, is a classic example of strategic silence (Black, 1994; Gunderson, 1961). Strategic is also the near silence of the “minimum comment” (Brummett, 1980; p. 295). In 1979 Senator Edward Kennedy tersely and repeatedly denied his intention to run for president. This is one of the most universal uses (if there is such) of strategic silence. He who denies running for a leadership position until the time has come does not give the rivals the munitions to subvert him as the “presumptive” frontrunner. Silence keeps one’s powder dry. Variations of this *near-silence* often mark the boundary between strategy and tactic. Such are the techniques of “small target” and “keeping low profile”, when more public attention would inevitably inflict more political damage. In short term, such tactics may serve as camouflage to survive the contest. But in the long run, because strategy requires more than reflex, they may turn self-defeating.

In 1991, when the fall of the Soviet Union was approaching, President George H. W. Bush chose to remain largely silent in response to the critical events around the attempted coup in Moscow and its aftermath. It proved to be the right move. It allowed the disintegration of the USSR to occur without leaving an impression of US interference, which would give the communist hardliners an excuse to rebel against meddling from outside (Harlow, 2014). Other silences, however, such as the failure of President Ronald Reagan in the 1980ies to denounce the regime of apartheid in South Africa were more controversial. Even if it was as a provisional strategic choice in the absence of a best choice, many interpreted Reagan’s silence as complicit rather than diplomatic (Dugard, 1982; Harlow, 2010).

Explicit silence is a risky strategy because it places much weight on the interpretative capacity of a public, and in the presidential case – of many publics. The public, not the speaker has to do the heavy lifting of sense making. The risk is double. The public has to

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decide what meaning silence carries. But it also has to establish whether it is meaningful in the first place. This is a public relations issue too. It affects the relationship of the person or organisation with a public. Does a notable silence allow the public to relate to a speaker or not? Does the public interpret it as a prolonged conversation or as an abrupt escape from it? Because the PR principle remains the same: No conversation – no relating – no relations.

Explained and Unexplained Silences

Explicit silences may be explained or unexplained. The presidential silences discussed above were not explained – at least not to their addressees. And there are degrees of explanation – and anything in between. A speaker may choose to clarify why he has been (was, will be) silent. But is talking about silence still silence? Talking about silence is still talking. Silence is especially powerful when self-explanatory. Brummett is right when he counts only *unexplained* silence as strategic silence. Explained silence cannot violate expectations (1980, p. 290). Businesses and governments often go to great lengths in justifying their various silences with “nothing new”, intellectual rights, confidentiality clauses, privacy protection, litigation concerns, operational matters, military secrets and national security. That way, they create and maintain expected silences, which may be a part of broader strategies but are not strategic silences per se.

IMPLICIT SILENCE

In contrast to explicit silence, which is notable, implicit silence is anything but. Its function is quite the opposite. Explicit silence means something that words cannot express. Implicit silence means one thing by saying another. Explicit silence appeals to the consciousness of the public. Implicit silence tries to slip under its radar. Explicit silence takes chances. It challenges the public to be the judge. Implicit silence plays safe. It relies on truths not worth mentioning because taken for granted. No mentioning – no questioning. Explicit silence clarifies by stillness. Implicit silence obscures by words (Bilmes, 1994; p. 82).

Fedspeak

The former Federal Reserve Chairman, Alan Greenspan, has elevated implicit silence to art and science of monetary policy communication. His *Fedspeak* has emerged and evolved as *the* language of all those national and international bank leaders, whose statements may affect

global markets (Bligh & Hess, 2007; Farber, 2013). Since Greenspan, monetary policy speeches have become frameworks of strategic silence. Laces of measured remarks are knit to say a little in many words. But they are not entirely hollow. That little matters much. Markets – stock, commodity and currency traders, media pundits – expect direction. The responsibility is enormous.

Explicit silence is out of question. No comment would increase uncertainty and send markets into overdrive. Implicit silence such as “massaging” the meaning of undeniable facts and not getting caught in “uncooked” policy decisions informs the statements. “Obfuscation” is how Greenspan readily called it once. “What tends to happen is your syntax collapses”, he confessed. “All of the sudden you are mumbling. It often works. I created a new language, which we now call Fedspeak. Unless you are expert at it, you can’t tell that I didn’t say anything” (Barnhart, 2007).

Consider this statement by Greenspan in 2005 before the US House Financial and Services Committee:

Risk takers have been encouraged by a perceived increase in economic stability to reach out to more distant time horizons. But long periods of relative stability often engender unrealistic expectations of it[s] permanence and, at times, may lead to financial excess and economic stress. (Holden, 2015)

At first glance, the chairman’s language is defensive, designed merely to protect the institution and minimise the risk of unintentional consequences from the bank’s communication. Yet, there is more to it. Even when Greenspan admits obfuscation, he obfuscates. His “revelation” is part of his silence. If his only goal was to say as little as possible – and ideally nothing – that would amount not to a successful strategy but to a failed tactic. The function of Fedspeak is more pro-active, although less apparent. It is subtle governance by indirect communication. On the one hand, it leaves people with the vague feeling that something significant is said, though beyond their competence. This is image management. On the other, the trained eye detects valuable cues. Pundits can still speculate about what the decision makers really think (Bourne, 2017).

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This is not because it is impossible to fully hide – especially from vested interests and core expertise – actual monetary policy behind a wall of verbose silence. Quite the contrary, it is because this form of doublespeak is policy. It is made to influence. Ben Bernanke, who succeeded Greenspan, said in a 2012 speech that “communication about the Fed’s expectations” in regard of the exceptionally low interest rates “is [after security purchases] a second new monetary policy tool [my italics]” (Farber, 2013).

With Fedspeak, central bankers can manipulate not only interest rates. They guide expectations about inflation, growth, unemployment, housing market and more. They use strategic ambiguity in the balancing act of remaining vague but also precise, credible and, above all, manifestly confident in the fundamentals and overall direction of the economy. In that regard, one can also study the forestalling and reassuring language of the Bank of England in the aftermath of the UK Brexit vote (Lea, 2016; Pettifor, 2017). Public relations assumes a central role when communications about a policy becomes the policy as well.

Doublespeak

Fedspeak falls only marginally into the category of *Doublespeak*. Taking cue from George Orwell’s “Newspeak” and “Doublethink”, William Lutz has identified types of doublespeak such as euphemisms (i.e. “enhanced interrogation”), specialist jargon (i.e. “quantitative easing”), “bureaucratese” (i.e. “downsize”) and inflated language (i.e. “negative patient care outcome”, see Lutz, 1989, 1996). Although Fedspeak brims with doublespeak, this alone is not enough to make its silences implicit or strategic. Doublespeak usually shows the first function of Fedspeak, verbose defensiveness (saying much and meaning little), but not the second one, silent influence (meaning more than actually saying).

Lutz analyses Doublespeak elements at the lower level of words and phrases in a text. Although Fedspeak makes use of such words and phrases, its magic works at the higher level of the whole text and its connection with other texts (inter-contextuality). Doublespeak is impervious to context. Its words and phrases are abstract, like replaceable bricks. Fedspeak is highly sensitive to context. Its constructs are concrete, like transient visions. This difference between levels of discourse translates in PR practice as the distinction between tactic and

strategy. In short, Fedspeak is more strategic than doublespeak.

Unspeak

One can also compare the concept of Doublespeak with that of *Unspeak*. Steven Poole has written the seminal “*UnspeakTM: How words become weapons, how weapons become a message, and how that message becomes reality*” (Poole, 2006). What is the difference here? Doublespeak pretends it is not saying what it is saying. It is not what you think. It does not mean what it says. Unspeak, on the contrary, does not say what it means. What matters is what is unsaid, left out (Jalbert, 1994). Double speak openly dissuades; Unspeak “persuades by stealth”. Doublespeak is lexical; Unspeak is syntactic.

Halliday & Matthiessen have observed that tacit meaning is more common when we move from micro to macro, in language from lexical to grammatical choices. “Conscious language achieves its creative force mainly by lexical means; and lexical items are semantically close to experience. Unconscious language depends much more for its creative force on grammar – and grammatical categories are far removed from experience” (2004; p. 303). In my opinion, this also delineates a major difference between Doublespeak and Unspeak.

The silences of Unspeak are implicit. It subtly infers meanings, which do not surface as utterances in the conversation. This is not because those meanings are not relevant but because they are naturalised as common sense. The implications then serve as subconscious frames for interpreting other meanings, which are questioned and debated. Unspeak makes wide use of implicatures – various discursive tools that shape discourses through implicit silence (Pop, 2010; Vallauri & Masia, 2014). Poole uses the classic example with the “pro-life” and “pro-choice” parties in the abortion debate. As implicature “pro-life” discourse suggests that the opponents are “anti-life”. “Pro-choice”, on the contrary, infers that those who are against are sexists who deny women their right to dispose of (and make independent decisions about) their body. “Tax relief” is another example. It presupposes that tax is a burden. It replicates but does not unmask a dominant neoliberal discourse. Or take the “state” versus “independent” school discourse. It predicates meanings and conclusions different from a “public” versus “private” school discourse. Like Doublespeak, Unspeak moulds words and

phrases at lexical level. But those words and phrases are concrete, not abstract. They encapsulate in miniature whole unspoken narratives, which silently impact on the listener's mind the higher levels of text and intertextuality.

Steven Poole's *Unspeak* TM drew the ire of Alastair Campbell who is best known as the [Director of Communications and Strategy](#) for the UK Prime Minister [Tony Blair](#) (from 1997 and 2003). Campbell was instrumental in designing the "New Labour" strategy and language of the Blair years (Campbell, 2007). Poole richly uses examples of the New Labour vocabulary not only to deconstruct their ideological façade, but also to question their "newness" in the broader neo-liberal discourse. In a Foucauldian way, Poole does not distinguish between bad and good government (Michael Foucault, 1980; Michel Foucault, 2003). He rather deconstructs Labour's governance as universal and dominant knowledge-power, (which has to be) resisted by local and dominated knowledge-powers. His analysis, although with different argumentation, aligns with Norman Fairclough's critic of Blair's and Campbell's implicit appropriation of the neo-liberal discourse in "New Labour, New Language" (Fairclough, 2000).

Defending his legacy, Campbell attacks the "hypocrisy" in Poole's "Paris left-bank...vague, under-developed, anti-war, anti-corporate, anti-politics agenda" in his book review of *Unspeak*TM (Campbell, 2006). As a communication practitioner, he contends that indirect figures of speech, patterns of the unsaid and implicit meanings are inherently neither good nor bad. They are what they are. They are powerful discursive tools everyone can use. In the hands of governments, their concrete use – the values, motives and choices behind them – is what makes them good or bad. For example, Campbell argues, Ireland Republican Army was "in war" with governments, not governments with IRA. The success in Northern Ireland was sealed with the IRA declaration that "war" was over. Or Labour's "community support officer" should not be dismissed as "a second-class cadre of policeman". Politics of the unsaid is not the alternative of politics. What is said and what is left out do not mark economic, social and political divisions. They rather work in tandem on either side of the barricade. They are everywhere where strategic communication takes place.

Words Hide Discourses

Implicit silences that discourse are strategic. In Australia, for example, both the conservatives and Labour debate within the "tax relieve" discourse – not against it. They argue about whether a "levy" (i.e. on Medicare) or "duty" (i.e. on alcopops) is a tax or not. If it looks less like a tax, it is more likely to pass parliament. They would not argue for "raising taxes", although this is what both sides actually do. Neither would dare to attack the discourse at syntax level (Dimitrov, 2014). Neither would offer an alternative discourse such as that of justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, Jr. who has famously said, "I like to pay taxes. With them I buy civilization" (cited in Frankfurter, 1938, p.495). Neither unspeaks – that is deconstructs – "tax" as implicature. They need it unspoken for their tactical (for a political advantage), not strategic (for changing the society) struggle.

One cannot underestimate the importance of implicit silences in public communication. Practitioners need to know the intended and unintended effects from dealing with the lexical and syntax levels of discourse. Even when one aligns with a cause, constituency or client at the level of syntax, message and narrative, one may unwittingly undermine their own enterprise at lexical, order-word and code-word level. Communicators must be aware of the power of the unsaid – of whole ideologies, discourses and doctrines settled and hardened as self-evident, "neutral" and minute "figures of speech" in public language. When Labour politicians, for example, deny that their "revenue measures" amount to "raising taxes", they reinforce the neoliberal discourse of "tax is a burden". Which in the long run is self-defeating. They loudly argue in a language, which quietly works against their case.

Metamessages

The First Axiom of Communication suggests, "One cannot not communicate" (Watzlawick, Bevelas, & Jackson, 1998). What a speaker says and what not, how he says it and how not, are not only deliberate choices he makes to suit the expectations of an audience. Wittingly or unwittingly, he also communicates his whole social persona, including his habitual ways of communicating, over which he has no control (Bateson, 1972). To take the axiom to a new level: *We cannot not communicate a meta-message.*

As implicit silences, metamessage have a *dual connotation*: we (want to) show and tell people

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more than we say, but people also see and hear more from us than we (want to) tell them. Ultimately, the public judges a speaker against not only what he says but also what he shows. *Metalanguage is silent*. It may conceal or reveal.

There is metamessage in the metalanguage. Professional communicators watch and include it in their message strategies. A metamessage could have positive or negative effects on the speaker. In a metamessage, the indirect clues of the social status and orientation of the speakers are often more powerful than their direct statements and appeals (Bourdieu, 1977a). Yet unaware metamessages may also unwittingly “betray” what a messenger cannot say or does not want to. This is, for example, a disadvantage of advertised or promoted content. The metamessage is above all in the genre itself. Someone has paid for the message. The metamessage does not leave any doubt about whom the message serves first. But PR is also not immune to the unintended effects of metamessages. An example I have already discussed is when the message is not silent about (the hidden process of) its production.

The Polish President, Lech Walesa, usurped a big chunk of broadcast time in his frequent appearances on the national TV (Jakubowicz, 1996). He believed – and this was not rare in Eastern Europe in the 1990ies – that he who has the TV has the power. Yet being all over the place on air did not serve him the way he expected. The public could not prevent Walesa from appearing on “his” TV as often as he wanted, but Walesa could not prevent the audience from seeing not only what he wanted to show. He poorly understood the treachery of the medium and magnifying glass effects of the screen. Instead of dominating the agenda and imposing his authority, his rather high-handed and abrasive style alienated the viewers. The more they were watching him, the less they were listening to him (Millard, 1998). The Polish people, who had voted him in as the hero of anti-communist resistance, did not vacillate to vote him out as an autocratic and failed politician.

One cannot not metacommunicate. The question is not whether but how to do it. The metamessage is the most indirect, silent part of the message. *Any message is also a messenger of a metamessage*. The metamessage is often overlooked, although, potentially, it is the most powerful part of the message. It could be either a bliss or menace in PR practice. A bliss – when

the metamessage goes undetected under the radar of the addressee. And a menace, when it is just a slip of the tongue by the speaker. A bliss, because the metamessage does not appear as deliberate and instrumental as the message. This makes it especially efficient. And a menace, because undervalued and uncontrolled, a metamessage may work as a counter-message against the intended one. In this case, the communicator acts like a driver who simultaneously pushes both the accelerator and the breaks of the car.

CONCLUSION

Explicit and implicit strategies of silence are extreme forms of indirectness. Explicit silence speaks for itself. The meaning of what a speaker deliberately does not say is roughly the meaning of what he expects the listener to fathom. Implicit silence is more ambiguous. What is meant is different from what is said. Presupposition, implicature, sarcasm, irony and innuendo are tactics of implicit silence (Ephratt, 2008).

There are many strategic silences because they are many degrees of indirectness. For example, implicit silence is more indirect than the explicit one. In professional communications such as marketing, advertising and public relation there is a conspicuous lack or research of implicit silence – not only as strategy but also as silence. This is in stark contrast with advances in discourse studies such as cultural anthropology, ethnography of communication, rhetoric, functional linguistics, conversational analysis, pragmatics and semiotics (Clair, 1993; Jaworski, 1997; Shiffrin, 1994; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985).

The situation is even more precarious if we consider that that communication practitioners deal with silence on a daily basis. In “Public Relations Democracy”, Aeron Davis discusses evidence from the UK: “Within the industry, public relations is considered to be most effective, when acting invisibly.” He cites a Director of Corporate Affairs: “Over the year, it is 50:50. [Fifty] percent of the job is keeping stuff out of the press. I had ten years in Whitehall, and 70 percent of press relations there was keeping stuff out of the papers” (Davis, 2002; p. 13).

Because implicit silence is the most indirect from of strategic communication, many scholars do not recognise it as silence. Explicit silence –

perhaps, but implicit silence – no. As the argument goes: you are either silent or you do talk. One calls a spade a spade; one calls a silence a silence. Verbose silence seems to be an oxymoron. Indeed, the degree of indirectness in implicit silence is so high – and its tangle so subtle – that it often remains invisible for the naked eye.

But this is the whole point. *Silence is most strategic when it is not seen as silence.* As the highest form of indirect communication, implicit silence is so polyvalent, talkative and taciturn that it does not seem – and sound! – like silence. But this is exactly what makes it powerful. The strategic value of implicit silence lies in its appearance as anything but silence.

Two main implications for strategic communication research come from this – a critical and a positive one. *Critical* analysis would look into any discourse as practice and ask, “Why this practice rather than another, why these statements rather than others? As practices they have the effect of administering silences. What (that could be said) has not been said here?” (Neubauer & Shapiro, 1985). Because what is unsaid may be as important or more important than what is said (Lentz, 1991). Critical research deconstructs noise, where no silence is hearable. It makes silence audible – subject of public inquiry and scrutiny. It uncovers silence in a history of struggle. “We create silence by creating relevance” (Bilmes, 1994; p. 82). The critical function of theory here is to make people aware of the silent and invisible forces that affect them.

But “heroic” rhetoric and critical minds are not sufficient. The transforming role of theory has a second side – a *positive* one. Critique should not neglect the empirical knowledge, everyday practices and “hidden transcripts” in that struggle (Certau, 1984; Scott, 1990). Those are not “mere appearances”. They are treasure troves of resistance, experiment and creativity. Research should be able to identify those very real experiences and convert them into relevant *competence* such as communicative (counter-) strategies and skills. Silence is power. We need controlled knowledge, which harnesses that power – which provides guidance about how to recognise, make relevant and use it strategically and, at the same time, responsibly deal with its social, political and moral implications.

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Citation: Dr. Roumen Dimitrov. "Explicit and Implicit Strategies of Silence". *Journal of Advertising and Public Relations*, 2(1), 2019, pp. 19-31

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