

UNDERSTANDING SILENCE IN JAPANESE CONVERSATIONAL COMMUNICATION



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ABSTRACT

This article examines silence as an interactional resource in Japanese conversational discourse. While earlier linguistic research concentrated primarily on spoken utterances, recent pragmatic studies emphasize that meaning is constructed through the management of interaction, including pauses and non-verbal responses. The present study explores how silence operates as an indirect communicative action in naturally occurring Japanese interaction. Using qualitative discourse analysis, conversational episodes from peer, institutional, and workplace settings were examined. The analysis demonstrates that silence functions as an interpretable communicative move rather than a communicative absence. It indexes stance, mitigates dispreferred responses, preserves social alignment, and enables participants to negotiate interpersonal relationships. The findings suggest that Japanese speakers rely on shared inferential frameworks to interpret silent turns. The study contributes to interactional pragmatics by showing that silence is a structured component of turn-taking organization and a culturally shaped strategy for maintaining relational harmony.

Keywords: *silence, interactional pragmatics, Japanese discourse, indirectness, turn-taking, politeness.*

АННОТАЦИЯ

Данная статья рассматривает молчание как интеракционный ресурс в японском разговорном дискурсе. Если ранние лингвистические исследования в основном сосредотачивались на устных высказываниях, современные прагматические исследования подчеркивают, что значение формируется также посредством организации взаимодействия, включая паузы и невербальные реакции. В настоящем исследовании анализируется, каким образом молчание функционирует как косвенное коммуникативное действие в естественном японском общении. С использованием качественного дискурсивного анализа были изучены разговорные эпизоды в неформальной,

институциональной и профессиональной коммуникации. Анализ показывает, что молчание выступает не как отсутствие коммуникации, а как интерпретируемый коммуникативный ход. Оно выражает позицию говорящего, смягчает нежелательные ответы, сохраняет социальное согласование и позволяет участникам регулировать межличностные отношения. Полученные результаты свидетельствуют о том, что японские говорящие опираются на общие инференциальные механизмы при интерпретации молчаливых реплик. Исследование вносит вклад в интеракционную прагматику, показывая, что молчание является структурным компонентом организации очередности речи и культурно обусловленной стратегией поддержания межличностной гармонии.

Ключевые слова: молчание, интеракционная прагматика, японский дискурс, косвенность, очередность речи, вежливость.

ANNOTATSIYA

Ushbu maqolada sukut yapon og'zaki diskursida interaksion resurs sifatida tahlil qilinadi. Avvalgi lingvistik tadqiqotlar asosan og'zaki nutqqa e'tibor qaratgan bo'lsa, zamonaviy pragmatik tadqiqotlar ma'no muloqotni tashkil etish, jumladan pauzalar va noverbal reaksiyalar orqali ham shakllanishini ta'kidlaydi. Mazkur tadqiqotda sukutning tabiiy yapon muloqotida bilvosita kommunikativ harakat sifatida qanday ishlashi o'rganiladi. Sifatli diskursiv tahlil asosida norasmiy, institutsional va ish muhitidagi suhbat epizodlari tahlil qilindi. Tahlil natijalari sukut kommunikatsiyaning yo'qligi emas, balki talqin qilinadigan kommunikativ harakat ekanini ko'rsatdi. U nutq egasining pozitsiyasini bildiradi, noqulay javoblarni yumshatadi, ijtimoiy moslashuvni saqlaydi hamda suhbat ishtirokchilariga shaxslararo munosabatlarni tartibga solish imkonini beradi. Natijalar yapon suhbatdoshlari sukutni talqin qilishda umumiy inferensial bilimlarga tayanishini ko'rsatadi. Tadqiqot interaksion pragmatikaga hissa qo'shib, sukut nutq almashinuvi tashkilining tarkibiy qismi va madaniy jihatdan shakllangan munosabatlar uyg'unligini saqlash strategiyasi ekanini isbotlaydi.

Kalit so'zlar: sukut, interaksion pragmatika, yapon diskursi, bilvositalik, nutq navbati, xushmuomalalik.

INTRODUCTION

Communication is often associated primarily with verbal expression. However, naturally occurring interaction demonstrates that meaning emerges not only from spoken language but also from the organization of participation in conversation.

Pauses, overlaps, hesitation markers, and silence influence how interlocutors interpret communicative intentions [Sidnell, 2010].

In pragmatic research, silence is increasingly treated as an interactional phenomenon rather than an absence of speech. Its interpretation depends on its sequential position within discourse and on the expectations created by prior turns [Couper-Kuhlen & Selting, 2018]. When a response is relevantly expected but delayed or withheld, interlocutors search for inferential meaning. Japanese communication offers a particularly suitable context for examining this phenomenon. Studies in intercultural pragmatics frequently characterize Japanese discourse as relying heavily on contextual inference and shared situational awareness [Maynard, 2007]. Speakers often avoid explicit disagreement or refusal and instead employ indirect strategies. Indirectness in Japanese interaction is closely connected with the maintenance of interpersonal alignment and relational harmony. Because direct negative responses may threaten interpersonal rapport, speakers frequently delay or suspend verbal replies. Silence thus becomes an interpretable communicative action rather than communicative failure. Speech act theory proposes that utterances perform social actions such as requesting, refusing, or apologizing [Searle, 1969]. However, interactional pragmatics extends this idea by suggesting that communicative actions can be performed through participation management, including delayed turns and silence [Heritage, 2012]. From this perspective, a silent response may function as an action within conversational sequence organization. The present study addresses three research questions:

1. How does silence function within Japanese conversational turn-taking?
2. What interactional meanings are conveyed through silent responses?
3. How do interlocutors interpret silence without explicit explanation?

Methodology. The research is based on a qualitative analysis of naturally occurring Japanese conversations collected through observation and audio recording in everyday communicative settings. The corpus consists of informal peer conversations among university students, classroom interactions between teachers and students, and workplace exchanges between supervisors and employees. In total, twenty-five conversational sequences were transcribed, and only those instances in which a response was expected but replaced by silence were selected for detailed analysis. The study draws on principles of conversation analysis and interactional pragmatics, examining each sequence within its immediate conversational environment, particularly in relation to adjacency pairs such as question–answer or evaluation–response [Sidnell, 2010]. The analytical procedure involved identifying the initiating action, locating the silent response,

analyzing the subsequent speaker's reaction, and interpreting the social action accomplished through silence. Pauses lasting approximately three seconds or longer were treated as interactionally significant, as such silences noticeably altered the progression of turns and contributed to meaning-making within the interaction [Stivers et al., 2009].

Results. The analysis demonstrates that silence consistently performs identifiable communicative functions.

Silence as a Dispreferred Response. Example

A: 明日のパーティーに来ますか。

“Will you come to the party tomorrow?”

B: ちょっと……

[silence]

A: そうですね。また誘います。

“I see. I'll invite you again.”

In conversation analysis, refusals are categorized as dispreferred responses, which are typically delayed and mitigated [Sidnell, 2010]. The hesitation marker *chotto* followed by silence signals rejection without explicit wording. The interlocutor interprets the response correctly and withdraws the invitation. Thus, silence functions as an indirect speech act.

Silence as Alignment Management. Example

Teacher: この課題はあまり良くないですね。

“This assignment is not very good.”

Student: ……

[silence]

Teacher: 一緒に直してみましよう。

“Let's fix it together.”

The student's silence acknowledges the teacher's evaluation without confrontation. The response maintains alignment and prevents escalation. Such interactional behavior corresponds to relational politeness strategies designed to preserve social harmony [Haugh, 2015].

Silence as Hierarchical Sensitivity. Example:

Manager: この提案についてどう思いますか。

“What do you think about this proposal?”

Employee: ……

[long pause]

Employee: 検討してみます。

“I will consider it.”

The delayed response reflects sensitivity to hierarchy. Rather than disagreeing immediately, the employee postpones evaluation. Silence therefore operates as a stance-displaying device indicating caution and deference [Heritage, 2012]. Silence as Interpretive Space. In several sequences, silence prompted the initiating speaker to reformulate or soften the request. Silence thus created interpretive space within interaction. Participants relied on inference rather than explicit correction, a pattern typical of high-context communication [Maynard, 2007]. Silence as Face Protection. Speakers often remained silent when uncertain or lacking knowledge. Instead of providing incorrect information, they allowed interlocutors to adjust expectations. Silence therefore protected social identity and reduced risk of embarrassment, aligning with politeness-related face management.

Discussion. The findings demonstrate that silence constitutes an integral component of conversational organization. Rather than interrupting communication, silence helps structure interactional flow, as delayed responses frequently precede dispreferred actions such as refusal, disagreement, or hesitation [Sidnell, 2010]. In many cases, speakers orient to silence as meaningful and treat it as part of the turn-taking system, adjusting their subsequent turns, reformulating questions, softening evaluations, or providing additional clarification. Thus, silence operates not as a breakdown in communication but as an interactional resource that allows participants to manage social relations, mitigate potential conflict, and negotiate alignment.

From an inferential perspective, interlocutors interpret silence through contextual expectations. When a relevant response is absent, participants infer meaning through implicature-like reasoning processes [Heritage, 2012]. The absence of a verbal reply prompts hearers to draw on shared knowledge, prior discourse, and situational cues in order to interpret the speaker's stance. Communication therefore relies not only on linguistic coding but also on shared interpretive frameworks and pragmatic competence. Silence, in this sense, functions similarly to indirect speech: it conveys stance, attitude, and evaluation without explicit verbalization.

Japanese interaction particularly illustrates this process. Participants rely heavily on relational awareness, social hierarchy, and situational context to interpret non-verbal responses [Maynard, 2007]. Speakers frequently avoid overt disagreement or direct refusal in order to preserve harmony and maintain interpersonal face, and silence provides a socially acceptable alternative to explicit

negative responses. The interlocutor, recognizing the culturally conventionalized meaning of such pauses, interprets the silence as hesitation, polite refusal, or disalignment. Consequently, silence becomes a culturally shaped communicative strategy that enables participants to communicate sensitive meanings while maintaining politeness and social balance, demonstrating that effective communication may occur even in the absence of words.

CONCLUSION

This study investigated silence as a communicative strategy in Japanese conversational discourse. The analysis showed that silence is not communicative absence but a meaningful pragmatic tool. The findings indicate that silence: performs indirect speech acts, expresses refusal without confrontation, maintains social hierarchy, reduces conflict, protects interpersonal harmony, creates implicatures interpreted by interlocutors.

Successful interpretation of Japanese communication requires attention not only to verbal expressions but also to non-verbal elements. Silence carries structured meaning and should be considered part of the communicative system. Understanding silence is especially important in intercultural communication, where speakers from low-context cultures may misinterpret it as hesitation, indifference, or misunderstanding. Future research may compare silence across cultures or analyze its role in digital communication environments.

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