

Communicative Functions of Silence and Repetition in Meditation and Prayer

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ABSTRACT

As the integral part of communication process, the silence has very significant role in every act of exchange of messages. Complexity of silence as a communicational phenomenon is also perceivable in various spiritual practices, such as meditation and prayer in general. Silence as a quietude has a crucial role in the Christian Orthodox praxis of hesychia i.e., the “prayer of silence.” The double ‘quasi paradoxical’ function of silence as the external condition and as a real goal of meditation and prayer is analyzed in the light of their differences and similarities, but also regarding the function of repetition as the integral part of both practices.

Keywords: communication, silence, meditation, prayer, information, redundancy, repetition

Introduction

As the integral part of communication process, silence has a very significant role in every act of exchange of messages. Theory of communication recognized *eloquent silence* as a special mode of communicative acting (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1995). The borderline between *articulation* and *non-articulation* which coincides with the difference between *speech* and *silence* (Schmitz, 1994) could be perceived as a difference between the *order* and the *chaos*. The activity of speaking is both the moving between these boundaries, and the act which enables the appearance of such delimitation. Thus, silence is not-as it was within the mechanistic concept of communication- the form of *defect* which appears whenever the ‘communicative machine’ stops. On the contrary, the boundary between the speech and the silence *is not beyond* the speech, but within.

Functionalist approach to silence is focused upon its use in a discourse. According to this view, silence and speech are in a sort of symbiotic relation, since silence is always the part of some linguistic context, because at least it enables continuum of communication.

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The notion of silence

In the theory of communication, the notion of silence is defined regarding the difference toward the categories of *pause*, *hush* and *noise*. Namely, hush (stillness) is defined as the absence of noise and is

considered as external to the communicative interaction. It can occur in the state of dreaming, meditation, reading etc. However, silence can be considered as a communicative status of the listener. Silence also can have the status of the pause which is the integral part of the process of interchanging of messages.

Silence is considered as *coded* and *non-coded* alternative to speech. As coded alternative to speech, silence is culturally and contextually determined behavior which has its own acoustic and kinetic dimension (Saunders, 1995). As non-coded alternative to speech silence appears as a form of expression of various emotional responses. Regarding this perspective, silence can be interpreted as a peculiar form of *non-verbal communication*.

However, silence can be considered as a form of *yet-non-spoken*. For example ‘empty spaces’ or blank spaces between words, punctuation signs or even the communicational ‘gap’ which occurs when the response is expected, have the same function. ‘Empty place’ as a communicative form can be a sort of expression in art (K. Malevitch’s famous painting ‘White square’, the function of holes in H. Moore’s sculptures, etc.). Hence, information and its (pseudo) absence are contrasted, but they together form a sort of non-articulated presumption for articulation, which has got a special function within the practices of meditation and prayer.

The silence in meditation

The notion of meditation is derived from the Latin *meditationem* which signifies contemplation and thoughtfulness. As a specific form of spiritual practice which was developed both in the East as well as in the West, meditation in all its different forms, meanings and functions (Goleman, 1988.) is significantly important not only as cultural but also as a communicational phenomenon.

Even thou in the colloquial sense, meditation is perceived as the praxis of mind focusing, calming, concentration, lifting consciousness and inner prayer, it is also used as a form of healing, as the aspect of artistic preparation for the experience in creation, or as a deep training for mastering the martial art techniques (Pajin, 1989). However, in all

its varieties and functions, meditation was one of the crucial aspects of spiritual and religious practices, but according to many researchers meditation is not necessarily linked with religious experience, since it can be theistic as well as atheistic. According to its origin and function, meditation can have several different forms (Pajin, 1989):

1. Religious meditation /concentration
2. Atheist meditation /receptivity
3. Aesthetic meditation/purifying
4. Ordinance meditation/ reframing

Some authors, (Rossano, 2007) stressed out that precisely the appearance of the ability for *focused attention* (which is one of the core features of the meditative practice) was the significant contribution to the biological evolution of humanity. Many meditative practices, regardless to which cultural, spiritual or religious traditions belong, strive to attain a certain degree of *mental silence*. Mental silence is nothing but a state of the calmness of the mind, which correlates with the specific activities of the brain waves. In fact, meditation is a way of turning off the irrelevant brain activities in order to secure focused inner attention (Aftanas & Golosheykin, 2005).

In this context, the silence as the absence of sounds and noise represents the condition beyond which it is impossible to practice meditation. On the other hand, it would be legitimate to state that meditation represents precisely the path and practice to attaining the state of *inner silence*, namely the calmness of the mind. From this point, it is possible to consider “silence” as a sort of *external condition* necessary for securing the stillness of the mind, the inner peacefulness, and a specific sort of thoughtlessness. But at the same time, the silence appears as the *final goal* of the meditative practice.

The common feature of the various cultural, spiritual and religious traditions in which different meditative techniques were developed, is to attain the specific state of mind recognized as a form of ‘mind transcending state’. In other words, the aim of meditation is reaching the form of consciousness, which overcomes reflective mind, discursive reason, and logical thinking.

Although many neuroscience studies on alternate states of consciousness during meditation were interested to explore specificities of this practice, the scientists were not unanimous regarding the definition of its structure and effects. For some, this practice is nothing but a sort of training attention in order to put all mental activities under the will power of the subject for attaining the psychical and physical harmony (Walsh & Shapiro, 2006). Others claim that meditation in general is just the way to regulating attention (Cahn & Polich, 2006). However, in spite of many popular interpretations, there are some researches claiming that meditation is a specific mental technique for attaining the subjective experience of enlightenment (Jevning, Wallace & Beidebach, 1992).

Apart of the mentioned neuroscience interest in meditation, the communicational approach focuses on the fact that meditation is a form of communication. One of the most interesting phenomena is the one referring to the fact that within many meditative practices one uses specific words and sounds (mantras), in order to attain the state of the “stillness of the mind.” Stillness of the mind is designated as a state of *thoughtlessness*. In the Ayurveda and Yoga philosophy, this universal mantra is the sound AUM.

“The ancient realized beings, rishis, or seers of truth, discovered truth by means of religious practices and disciplines. Through intensive meditation, they manifested truth in their daily lives. Ayurveda is the science of daily living and this system of knowledge evolved from the rishis’ practical, philosophical and religious illumination, which was rooted in their understanding of the creation. They perceived, in the close relationship between man and the universe, how cosmic energy manifests in all living and nonliving things. They also realized that the source of all existence is Cosmic Consciousness... Creation, Protection and Destruction are the manifestations of the first cosmic soundless sound, AUM, which are constantly operating in the universe” (Lad, 1985, p. 5).

The discovery of the frequency of the ‘soft flickering’ of the Universe, understood as the very manifestation of Being, represents the

foundation upon which the ancient Indian theory and science of sound (voice, word) was developed. For Indian tradition, the Sound is the primordial manifestation of the *akasha*. It was exactly what was lately in the ancient Greek tradition signified by the notion of Ether, and respectively, as the category of space.

Mantras are the acoustic equivalence of that primordial ‘soundless sound’ of the Being. Actually, the ancient Indian rishis knew that certain group of sounds and sound frequencies could alternate the consciousness status of the Subject. Today, modern science knows that certain sounds articulated according to the system of defined frequency can effectively change the physiological status of the brain activities.

In his study, Rolf Alexander (2009) points out that the power of the mind is actually based upon the subject’s ability to control thought processes, and therefore to influence the change of the brainwave frequency. Meditation enables lowering the brainwaves frequency, and in an ideal case, it can reach so called the Delta phase of the brain activity (1-3 Hz) commonly associated with the long lasting meditative practice of the Tibetan monks. The importance of the meditative practice is stressed out not only by the philosophy and practice of Yoga, but also by many modern neuro-scientific researches. Results show that slowing down the brain activities enables more time between thoughts, and therefore provides better opportunities for decision making.

The silence in *Hesychasm*

Although many studies of the phenomenon of meditation expose the thesis that this spiritual practice is equal to prayer, there is substantial difference among them. First, unlike the prayer, meditation does not require religiosity, and because of that, it is not considered a religious practice *sensu stricto*. Second, in communicational sense, one could say that meditation represents particular *self-addressing* or *cosmic intelligence- addressing* communication. On the other hand, in the very core of the prayer is the attempt to actualize the specific and direct communication with God. This is particularly important in the Christian Orthodox tradition of *Hesychasm*.

Hesychasm (gr.ησυχια, *hesihia*-calmness, stillness, silence) represents a specific prayer practice used by the Orthodox Christian monks, *hesychasts* (Mayendorff, 1974). Silence and prayer in the hesychast tradition were synonyms. Serbian theologian Justin Popovic (Radovic, 2010) created the term *quietude* (*molitveno tihovanje*). Hesychasm is in fact a contemplative way of life based upon the spirit and scripture of Gospels. It is a specific prayer practiced in the complete stillness, silence, and seclusion of monastery life.

“For the Orthodox tradition, prayer is defined as a personal relation to God, which enables reestablishing the true human nature. Active prayer is a form of invocation, a process which enables Subject to come to itself. In its structure the Christian prayer had the accentuated moment of invocation, but the question was not “of what” but ‘to whom’. Through the prayer the man addresses God as Alive, concrete and personal and prayer reflects the personal relation of man and God, understood as the Person. Also, by the prayer, the desired dialogue between man and God was established, which was the existential moment of Christian ontology” (Lazić, 2008, p. 257).

The phenomenon of the *prayer of the mind* is in the center of the Hesychasm. The specificities of the practice of *quietude* are very interesting topics from the communicational perspective. Although this practice starts with the purification of the soul and the body, it continues by the incessant practice of the *inner prayer of the heart*. Prayer of the heart is exercised in silence, enabling practitioners to turn inward.

The prayer technique of Hesychasm was described by J.M. Vlahos (2003, p. 101). In order for mind to enter the heart, it is recommended that after the concentration, the mind should be driven upward to the *nasal cavity*, which is the way the air enters the heart. The mind should be forced to reach the heart along with the inhale. Once in the heart the mind should stay there for a while in order to feel the Heavenly Kingdom.

The ultimate goal for hesychasts is union with God, which could be achieved by *dispassion* (Greek *apatheia*), and *stillness* (*hesychia*). The final state is an abiding state of illumination, the perfect union with God (*theosis*). The term silence refers predominantly to the avoidance of unnecessary talking, but also according to Isaac, the Syrian signifies the ultimate condition for awakening the mind to God (Kadlou-bovsky and Palmer, 1976).

The hesychast practice consists of *speaking inwardly* and incessantly, with the mind and from the heart: “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of God, have mercy on me.” The technique requires sitting silently, with the eyesight fixed to the belly-button area, and with the chin resting on the chest, in order to enable the greater concentration of the mind to the heart. This praxis leads to the state of peacefulness of mind and soul as a crucial condition for communication with God.

The prayer of *the heart*, which is in fact the *prayer beyond the prayer*, is precisely the *speech of the silence*, during which one experiences and testifies the inexplicable and deep communication with God. However, in this type of prayer, there is a specific aesthetic experience (Lazic, 2008). The *aesthetic experience within the prayer of the heart* concerns the deep spiritual *pleasure*, which occurs along with the entering into the Divine Grace. This experience is interpreted as a deed of an inner enlightenment and attainment the likeness of God.

Communicational aspects of silence and repetition

If meditation and prayer represent specific forms of the use of language and silence, what are their communication functions?

As it was already stated, silence is a very complex and integral part of communication, due to its multi-functionality (Tomic, 2016). Among many different facets of silence, the most intriguing is the fact that it can function as *entropy*, as *information* and as *redundancy*.

1. If speech and silence can be understood as interdependent but also as confronted notions, the relation between them can be

interpreted as presence and absence, fullness and emptiness, and finally as order and chaos. If silence represents the preceding condition for the appearance of the speech, than it can be interpreted as the *entropic* condition/aspect of communication. But silence which signifies accordance and understanding of the discourse and context doesn't serve as the entropic condition of communication. On the contrary, it becomes its goal, the final sign of its accomplishment. Does it refer to the thesis that every understanding (Tomic, 2016) ends in silence, as Wittgenstein has stated?

2. Silence can be decoded as an “empty sign”. Even thou an empty sign, silence has a meaning. As the means of communication, silence can have any of six functions of language: referential, poetic, emotive, conative, phatic and metalinguistic (Jakobson, 1960). Since a bearer of meaning, silence has a character of information. The aspect of the “new” which is inherent to the informative character of the message can stay in correlation to any of six functions of language. However, in this context, the most important is the emotive function of silence especially within the frame of so called non-coded, subjectively used silence. Furthermore, if silence in meditation and prayer is considered as an external condition for attaining the ‘supreme encounter’ (with inner Self, Cosmic conscience or God), it stands as a coded feature of communication.
3. Redundant character of silence is present in all situations of its social coding. The other form of its redundant function can be recognized in its capability to manifest and reproduce the phatic function of communication. According to Roman Jakobson, the phatic function is the aspect of communication, which keeps open the line of communication itself. Phatic function serves not to exchange messages, but to continue communication, i.e., to make it last.

Apart from the spiritual aspect of meditation and theologian aspect of hesychasm, phenomenon of silence in communication, opens up several questions:

1. What is the nature of this peculiar “silent speech”? What is the nature of the speech in which the words are not strictly pronounced, but still can be “heard”? Is it a sort of special, non-explicable act of communication? As it was stated:

The communication with ...leaves and with birds and with water... reflects the mystical act of eloquent silence of the prayer and the prayerful communication with the whole material world. It is about the mystic of restrained and deliberately unarticulated words and thoughts where word and thought mutually neutralize and revoke, creating the silence as the gnoseologic category. It is hesychastic monastic-ascetic intuitive knowledge, where hesychia, namely prayer quietude, becomes the condition for the highest knowledge, the theory (θεωρία). (Lazic, 2008, p. 77)

2. Does this refer to the notion of ‘silent comprehending’, which was the basis for what was ‘a resonant, wordless understanding’ as the only true communication present at the pre-literary stage of human history? Can we agree with the thesis that for ‘ancient man, to speak a word too many was to lose a word forever’ (Sloterdijk, 2012, p. 641)?
3. One can say that in the phenomena of meditation and prayer, with the silence and repetition in their center, there is a tendency to reduce information to communication. The word communication implies here the idea of *commune* in the sense of *sharing* and *togetherness*. The question however is not *what* is emitted, transferred or silently pronounced, (because it is always the repetition of the same) but rather, what is the purpose of this form of communication? The prevalence of redundancy (the known part of message) over the information (the category of the new) implies the possible answer: the aim is to experience the encounter between two *presences*- the presence of the emitter and the presence of the receiver. Since this experience is inexplicable, there are no suitable words to *transmit* and describe it, and therefore, silence appears as the ultimate result, as Wittgenstein (1961) has stated:

My propositions serve as elucidations in the following way: anyone who understands me eventually recognizes them as nonsensical, when he has used them – as steps –to climb up beyond them. (He must, so to speak, throw away the ladder after he has climbed up it.)He must transcend these propositions, and then he will see the world aright. What we cannot speak about we must pass over in silence. (Wittgenstein, 1961, 6:54 & 7)

4. But if it is so, and if communication in general means the exchange of messages, the question is what is the meaning and the function of repetition? Does the repetition represent only the redundant aspect of communication?

In his prominent book, G. Deleuze (1994) has stated that repetition is the form of acting in which a specific *universality of singular* manifests. In the phenomenon of repetition a peculiar type of relation is established towards what was the *first*, because what was the first is what only can be repeated. Therefore, what was the first is unique, and has nothing else to be similar to.

5. Contrary to what is inherent to the sphere of natural sciences, and especially in the field of mathematics - where the equality is the dominant symbol, and subsequently where every term can be substituted by some *equivalent* -in the world of art, and especially in the world of spirituality, every term is *irreplaceable*, and therefore it can be only *repeated*. The thesis Deleuze refers to is that the head “is the organ of exchange, but the heart (*Coeur*) is the amorous organ of repetition” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 2). This particular statement coincides with the hesychiastic permanent prayer of the heart.

This thesis refers to the fact that every exchange, in communication as well, requires establishing and recognizing the relation of equivalence. This means that it is based upon the rational principles of comparing, measuring, and evaluating. If the head is, to paraphrase Deleuze, the organ of knowledge, and consequently if the reason is the agent which recognizes, conceptualizes and establishes the validity of exchange according to the general law and logic of exchange, is it possible for heart as an *amorous organ*

of repetition, to have any significant role? Can we agree with Deleuze (1994, p. 2) when he states – “If repetition is possible, it is due to miracle rather than to law. It is against the law”?

6. If repetition is possible, it must be the matter of the heart, and not the matter of the logic. Repetition is an act of freedom, and therefore an act that cannot succumb to the universal law of equivalence. It can be said referring to Heraclitus, that every repetition (of the Same) represents always the confirmation and manifestation of something completely new, since the very act of repetition itself is, by its nature, something which is always new.
7. Following Nietzsche, one could say that in prayer and in meditation, the repetition is transformed into the very object of the will. Repetition itself ensures certain degree of spiritual enjoyment, which can be perceived as the real goal of monastic and meditative practice. In this view, repetition can be interpreted as to paraphrase Kierkegaard, as a ‘logos of solitary’. In other words it is all about the “vertical repetition”, which “akes us inside the words” (Deleuze, 1994, p. 22).
8. Repetition has the dimension of temporality. But repetition bringing the New, which is unrepeatable paradoxically, manifests itself as the function of future. Namely, every act of repetition is new, in spite the fact that in repetition, one manifests relation to the *repeated* as the aspect of the past (without this it would be impossible to have repetition manifested).
9. Repetition of mantra serves calming the thought process and eventually, attaining a specific level of brain activities. Repeating a mantra helps to transcend all mental activity and to experience the ‘source of thought’, which is said to be pure silence, ‘pure awareness’ or ‘transcendental Being’, ‘the ultimate reality of life.’ However, repetition in hesychia has a different goal. Considered as a true dialogue with God, hesychia use repetition as the act which brings the New, as a tool of transformation. “It is the expression of divinization and beauty, the transformed man’s image and the shaping of his *"hypostasis"*, his personality” (Lazic, 2008, p. 51).

Finally, if silence is the integral part of meditation and prayer, if as the “stillness of the mind” it simultaneously serves as the final goal of communication, can it be said that the function of repetition of certain words (in prayer or in meditative practice) in the dialectic of the past, present and future, exposes its ontological status as the feature of the ‘quiet duration’, as the very property of life itself?

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