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Major theoretical frameworks of silence

2.1 Introduction

How have researchers sought to define, interpret and understand silence? As a subject for study, this often-ignored phenomenon is both potentially fascinating and problematic in equal measure. Investigating something as intangible as silence, something that can be neither seen nor heard, poses real challenges for researchers, who must be creative and interpretively astute enough to capture silence’s true essence. What follows then is a selective overview of major studies which have provided valuable insights into various theoretical aspects of people’s silent behaviour. It will quickly become apparent to the reader that silence is not simply the absence of noise or merely the lack of communication. Indeed, the various studies reviewed below show that there are multiple ways to define silence and, concomitantly, multiple ways to go about the business of studying it. Even so, despite this seeming eclecticism, a number of major themes recur throughout the overview, for example, concerning how silence may be related to power, ambiguity, affect, and so on. Themes introduced in this initial outline will be referred to throughout the rest of the book.

The overview begins with an examination of two influential interpretive works that reach their theoretical conclusions by drawing on ideas from fields such as linguistics, sociology and, importantly, psychology. Ephratt (2008) notes that psychology has long been preoccupied with the study of silence (for a comprehensive review, see Lane, Koetting & Bishop, 2002), with the field having identified a variety of types and functions within the therapeutic discourse of psychoanalysis. With this in mind, the overview turns its attention to studies emphasising psychological and emotional aspects of silence, before considering how
silence can be interpreted, often ethnocentrically, in either a positive or negative way. The importance of studying silence within a specific cultural context is then highlighted by a section detailing influential ethnographic-orientated works that have made silence the focal point for investigation. There exist a number of ethnographic studies which have investigated speech and silence norms within individual communities (e.g. Agyekum, 2002; Nwoye, 1985; Philips, 1976), but it is perhaps Basso’s (1990) classic paper (originally appearing in 1972) on the silent behaviour of Western Apache American Indians that has been most significant, because it so effectively highlighted the roles that ambiguity and status inequality play in influencing whether a person decides to remain silent in a particular situation. I therefore outline the focal points of Basso’s research, which complements the description I give of Saville-Troike’s (1985) ethnographic framework through which silence may be viewed. As my research focuses on the silent behaviour of Japanese language learners, the final part of the overview concentrates on studies seeking to comprehend silences that occur specifically within educational contexts. I discuss both teachers’ and students’ attitudes and beliefs in relation to the differing ways in which they perform and construe classroom silence, and the reader will soon detect in this section an inherent tension resulting from dissimilar performances and interpretations.

2.2 Interpretive approaches

Jaworski’s ‘fuzzy categories’

One of the most important recent works contributing to our understanding of the theoretical aspects of silence is Jaworski’s (1993) *The Power of Silence: Social and Pragmatic Perspectives*. Jaworski’s interpretive work proposes that an essentialist approach to the study of silence in which one, true definition of silence can be reached, is untenable. He is particularly critical of Dauenhauer’s (1980) essentialist study into the ontology of silence and questions the wisdom of trying to reach the essence of silence through a conclusive definition. According to Jaworski, this type of approach is a waste of time and inevitably leads to ‘futile terminological disputes’ (1993, p. 30). Indeed, he draws our attention to Dauenhauer’s own telling admission that, in the end, ‘no ontological interpretation of silence can be definitively established’ (cited in Jaworski, 1993, p. 33). The rejection of this essentialist approach means that Jaworski is able to take up operational, working definitions which allow him flexibility in exploring the eclectic nature