

Please save the date for our upcoming CCC Breaks. All dates are online [here](#).

CCC-Break 6: 18th of June 2019, Functions of Silence

Silence can be “golden” as an important source of energy and creativity and we should appreciate it even more than ever in our fast-changing VUCA-world. It is important to “listen to your own thoughts” in between in the communication process and “charge your battery”; so to say to be a “silence seeker”.

Inspired by the theme, proposed by Birgit Griese-Saarinen “Functions of Silence” we started our Cross Cultural Coffee Break with one minute of silence and enjoyed a rich discussion after Birgit’s short input regarding her experiences gathered in Finland, where she is based.

Pretty soon we realized that the common challenge in cross-cultural relations is the underestimation of the significance of silence, which can signal a multitude of reasons. Above all, the interpretation of and reaction to silence always depends on the context/situation.

Therefor, in our cross-cultural coffee break we had a close-up at the following possibilities of interpretation and reactions to silence:

- There are many different mindsets concerning politeness, e.g. different ways of showing excitement or harmony in relationships
- Modesty and a lack of self-promotion can lead to underestimation on the counterpart’s side and silence plays here an important role
- A lack of comments, feedback or questions e.g. after a presentation may cause some irritation, discomfort and misinterpretation in Germany, whereas in Finland it is a sign of respect.
- Open protest and confrontation is quite rare in Finland, especially in bigger groups. That’s why there are often misunderstandings of “having a deal” with the Finns who interpret meetings often just as a platform for the exchange of thoughts. Missing criticism is often understood as an agreement. Regarding this dynamics Finland seem to have a lot in common with different Asian cultures.
- In Singapore, Malaysia and China (examples brought to the attention by participants of our CCC Break) silence and speech pauses are signs of respect and can depict dealing with hierarchies and sometimes the fear to lose one’s face.
- In India, people are very conscious of the value of silence and pay attention to the body language.

Furthermore, strategies of coping with silence in different cultures frequently depict the influence of upbringing and socialization. What kind of grade-system are you used to at school and in the higher education? Does it support verbal activity in the classroom or might you even be punished for making mistakes? This may have a strong impact on the verbal communication-behaviour later on, e.g. in business-life.

In France, for instance, students who are used to top-down dynamics in the educational context seldom speak up and silence is appreciated differently than it is the case in Germany where students of all ages are encouraged to use arguments and actively participate in discussions. Bad grades because of lack of verbal input in the classroom might make you believe that being silent is something negative that has to be changed. Such example guided us to one more European country, Italy, where silence is rather perceived as something embarrassing. People reframe and retell input they already have given in order to avoid any moments of silence. Repetitions in Italy are a sign that the oral content had been understood. This kind of approach can be pretty overwhelming for people from Finland or some Asian countries, who not only show their understanding of the content with longer pauses, but also can communicate their excitement with silence.

In general, it's quite a challenge to teach people with different cultural backgrounds in one classroom, as you need a lot of cultural sensitivity to take different codes and patterns of speech-behaviour into account.

Some pieces of advice to deal with silence across cultures were the greatest summary of our discussion with cups of coffee and glasses of water due to high temperatures in some locations:

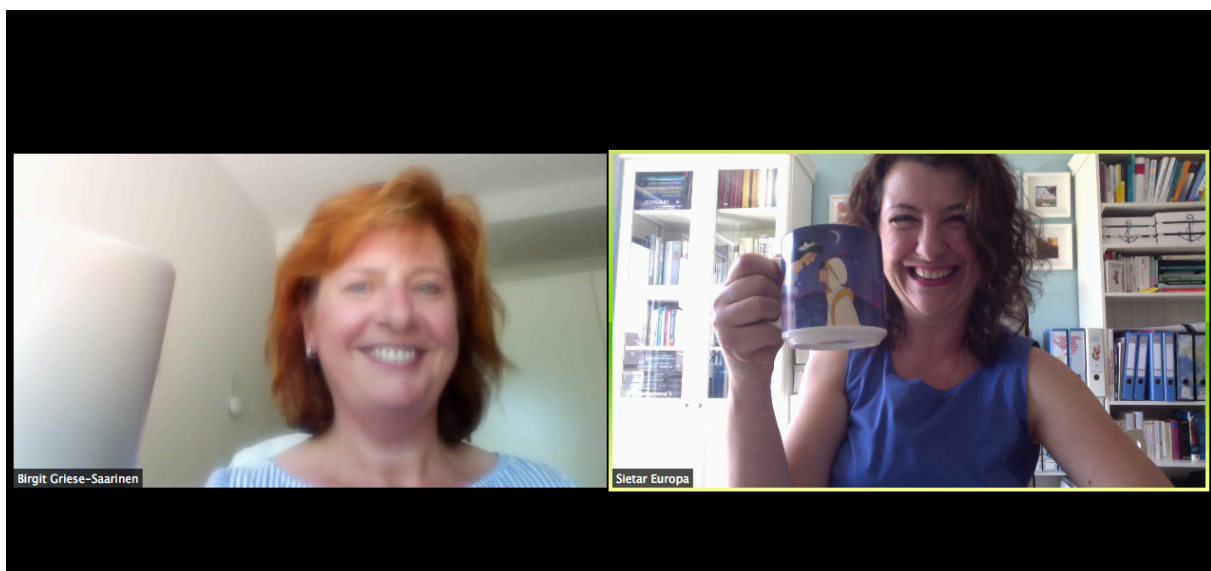
- verbalize the different communication styles and try to adapt to them (20%-rule)
- try to avoid judging long speech pauses and keep in mind that silence filtered by your own cultural lens can be misinterpreted. Such misinterpretations can involve stereotyping that our counterparts are neither cooperative nor interested; either bored or having nothing interesting to offer
- offer safe spaces to give feedback and address criticism. Often the written form is a good solution
- avoid asking direct questions, such as like "What would you personally do?" rather use general questions "What would be a good way to solve this?"
- consider to use passive forms, such as: "A mistake has been made and it needs to be improved",
- observe body language as it reveals the attitude towards the theme

- be conscious of the fact that the grade of explicit communication varies in different cultures
- keep in mind that it's not always necessary to "fill in the gaps" in communication – just lean back, relax and enjoy short moments of silence 😊
- remember that reticence in general does not always stem from low self-esteem or a lack of social skills! It can have important functions in different cultures and even be a sign of respect and politeness (e.g. intention not to disturb the thinking process of the counterpart)
- be mindful, relax and think of your facial expression. It is possible that you react to silence and long pauses with an irritated or bored look, which might lead to insecurity among your counterparts who treat silence as sign of respect and attentive listening.

P.S. As for dealing with silence many thanks to one of our participants who could not use microphone and participated very actively via chat window. Her comment was our very valuable closing:

Again as with all the topics related to intercultural differences. be aware of your own pattern and be aware of other patterns which might be normal for others.

Thanks for this summary of our CCC Break discussion to Birgit Giese-Saarinen and Joanna Sell:



For any further questions, remarks, even more pieces of advice, feel free to contact us:

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SIETAR Europa Cross Cultural Coffee Breaks

Summary

Thanks for intriguing discussions to all our participants:

