Introduction and study questions for Basso (1970)'To give up on words': Silence in Western Apache culture'

Basso describes five situations--e.g. Apaches meeting strangers, young Apaches courting, etc.--in which one or more participants in interaction are (to him and us) noticeably silent. He argues that there are commonalties across these six situations that can explain this relative silence, from an Apache point of view. One doesn't need to know only the words/grammar/pronunciation of a language in order to communicate appropriately. One needs "a knowledge of what kinds of codes, channels and expression to use, in what kinds of situations, to what kinds of people" (Basso p. 78). In other words, social interaction (or "interpersonal communication") is more about knowing how to participate in social life than it is about moving information from one head to another.

1) What do the five situations have in common? (In other words, why are Western Apache relatively silent in these situations?)

2) Are Americans that you know relatively silent in these situations? Or relatively verbose (talkative and chatty)? Some of them but not all of them? For the same reasons or different ones from the Western Apache?

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"To Give Up on Words": Silence in Western Apache Culture

Keith Basso

Introductory note from the Editors

If speech is socially organized, then so is silence, contends Keith Basso. Basso undertook an ethnographic analysis of the contexts in which silence was the expected communicative behavior for members of the Native American Western Apache community. His data led him to form a hypothesis about the kinds of social situations in which silence was the proper response. These included situations such as children returning home after a long absence, courtship behavior, or responding to insults. How would you handle the situations Basso describes? What communicative resources would you use? If silence is not simply "an empty interval between utterances" (Bauman 1983:11) but constitutes a communicative resource in its own right, what might you say about how silence operates in your own speech community?

It is not the case that a man who is silent says nothing.

ANONYMOUS

Anyone who has read about American Indians has probably encountered statements which impute to them a strong predilection for keeping silent or, as one writer has put it, "a fierce reluctance to speak except when absolutely necessary." In the popular literature, where this characterization is particularly widespread, it is commonly portrayed as the outgrowth of such dubious causes as "instinctive dignity," "an impoverished language," or perhaps worst of all, the Indians' "lack of personal warmth." Although statements of this sort are plainly erroneous and dangerously misleading, it is noteworthy that professional anthropologists have made few attempts to correct them. Traditionally, ethnographers and linguists have paid little attention to cultural interpretations given to silence or, equally important, to the types of social contexts in which it regularly occurs.

This study investigates certain aspects of silence in Western Apache culture. After considering some of the theoretical issues involved, I will briefly describe a number of situations – recurrent in Western Apache society – in which one or more of the participants typically refrain from speech for lengthy periods of time.[1] This is accompanied by a discussion of how such acts of silence are interpreted and why they are encouraged and deemed appropriate. I conclude by advancing a hypothesis that accounts for the reasons that the Western Apache refrain from speaking when they do, and I suggest that, with proper testing, this hypothesis may be shown to have relevance to silence behavior in other cultures.

Silence and Speech

A basic finding of sociolinguistics is that, although both language and language usage are structured, it is the latter which responds most sensitively to extralinguistic influences. Accordingly, a number of studies have addressed themselves to the problem of how factors in the social environment of speech events delimit the range and condition the selection of message forms (cf. Brown and Gilman 1960; Ervin-Tripp 1967; Frake 1964; Friedrich 1966; Gumperz 1961). These studies may be viewed as taking the position that verbal communication is fundamentally a decision-making process in which a speaker, having elected to speak, selects from among a repertoire of available codes that which is most appropriately suited to the situation at hand. Once a code has been selected, the speaker picks a suitable channel of transmission and then, finally, makes a choice from a set of referentially equivalent expressions within the code. The intelligibility of the expression he or she chooses will, of course, be subject to grammatical constraints. But its acceptability will not. Rules for the selection of linguistic alternates operate on features of the social environment and are commensurate with rules governing the conduct of face-to-face interaction. As such, they are properly conceptualized as lying outside the structure of language itself.

It follows from this that for a stranger to communicate appropriately with the members of an unfamiliar society it is not enough that he or she learn to formulate messages intelligibly. Something else is needed: a knowledge of what kinds of codes, channels, and expressions to use in what kinds of situations and to what kinds of people – as Dell Hymes (1962, 1964) has termed it, an "ethnography of communication."

There is considerable evidence to suggest that extra-linguistic factors influence not only the use of speech but its actual occurrence as well. In our own culture, for example, remarks such as "Don't you know when to keep quiet?" "Don't talk until you're introduced," and "Remember now, no talking in church" all point to the fact that an individual's decision to speak may be directly contingent upon the character of his or her surroundings. Few of us would maintain that "silence is golden" for all people at all times. But we feel that silence is a virtue for some people some of

the time, and we encourage children on the road to cultural competence to act accordingly.

Although the form of silence is always the same, the function of a specific act of silence – that is, its interpretation by and effect upon other people – will vary according to the social context in which it occurs. For example, if I choose to keep silent in the chambers of a justice of the Supreme Court, my action is likely to be interpreted as a sign of politeness or respect. On the other hand, if I refrain from speaking to an established friend or colleague, I am apt to be accused of rudeness or harboring a grudge. In one instance, my behavior is judged by others to be correct or fitting; in the other, it is criticized as being out of line.

The point, I think, is fairly obvious. For a stranger entering an alien society, a knowledge of when *not* to speak may be as basic to the production of culturally acceptable behavior as a knowledge of what to say. It stands to reason, then, that an adequate ethnography of communication should not confine itself exclusively to the analysis of choice within verbal repertoires. It should also specify those conditions under which the members of the society regularly decide to refrain from verbal behavior altogether.

Silence in Social Context

The research on which this paper is based was conducted over a period of sixteen months (1964–9) in the Western Apache settlement of Cibecue. Cibecue's 850 residents participate in an unstable economy that combines subsistence agriculture, cattle raising, sporadic wage earning, and government subsidies in the form of welfare checks and social security benefits. Unemployment is a serious problem, and substandard living conditions are widespread.

Although reservation life has precipitated far-reaching changes in the composition and geographical distribution of Western Apache social groups, consanguineal kinship – real and imputed – remains the single most powerful force in the establishment and regulation of interpersonal relationships. The focus of domestic activity is the individual 'camp' *gową*. This term labels both the occupants and the location of a single dwelling or, as is more apt to be the case, several dwellings built within a few feet of each other. The majority of *gową* in Cibecue are occupied by nuclear families. The next largest residential unit is the *goták* ('camp cluster'), which is a group of spatially localized *gową*, each having at least one adult member who is related by ties of matrilineal kinship to persons living in all the others. An intricate system of exogamous clans serves to extend kinship relationships beyond the *gową* and *goták* and facilitates concerted action in projects, most notably the presentation of ceremonials, requiring large amounts of manpower. Despite the presence in Cibecue of a variety of Anglo missionaries and a dwindling number of medicine men, diagnostic and curing rituals, as well as the girls' puberty ceremonial, continue to be performed with regularity. Witchcraft persists in undiluted form.

Of the many broad categories of events, or scenes, that comprise the daily round of Western Apache life, I shall deal here only with those that are coterminous with what Erving Goffman (1961, 1963) has termed "focused gatherings" or "encounters." The concept *situation*, in keeping with established usage, will refer inclusively to the location of such a gathering, its physical setting, its point in time, the standing behavior patterns that accompany it, and the social attributes of the persons involved (Ervin-Tripp 1967; Hymes 1962, 1964).

In what follows, however, I will be mainly concerned with the roles and statuses of participants. The reason for this is that the critical factor in the Apache's decision to speak or keep silent seems always to be the nature of his or her relationships to other people. To be sure, other features of the situation are significant, but apparently only to the extent that they influence the perception of status and role. What this implies, of course, is that roles and statuses are not fixed attributes. Although they may be depicted as such in a static model (and often with good reason), they are appraised and acted upon in particular social contexts and, as a result, are subject to redefinition and variation. With this in mind, let us now turn our attention to the Western Apache and the types of situations in which, as one of my consultants put it, "it is right to give up on words."

1 'Meeting strangers' (*'adahyé nagahahí bidedeyaa*). The term *'adahyé nagahahí* labels categories at two levels of contrast. At the most general level, it designates any person – Apache or non-Apache – who, prior to an initial meeting, has never been seen and therefore cannot be identified. In addition, the term is used to refer to Apaches who, though previously seen and known by some external criteria such as clan affiliation or personal name, have never been engaged in face-to-face interaction. The latter category, which is more restricted than the first, typically includes individuals who live on the adjacent San Carlos reservation, in Fort Apache settlements geographically removed from Cibecue, and those who fall into the category *doohwak'iida* (non-kinsmen). In all cases, strangers are separated by social distance. And in all cases it is considered appropriate, when encountering them for the first time, to refrain from speaking.

The type of situation described as 'meeting strangers' (*'adahyé nagahahí bidedeyaa*) can take place in any number of different physical settings. However, it occurs most frequently in the context of events such as fairs and rodeos, which, owing to the large number of people in attendance, offer unusual opportunities for chance encounters. In large gatherings, the lack of verbal communication between strangers is apt to go unnoticed, but in smaller groups it becomes quite conspicuous. The following incident, involving two strangers who found themselves part of a four-man roundup crew, serves as a good example. My consultant, who was also a member of the crew, recalled the following episode:

> One time, I was with A, B, and X down at Gleason Flat, working cattle. That man, X, was from East Fork [a community nearly forty miles from Cibecue] where B's wife was from. But he didn't know A, never knew him before, I guess. First day, I worked with X. At night, when we camped, we talked with B, but X and A didn't say anything to each other. Same way, second day. Same way, third. Then, at night on fourth day, we were

> sitting by the fire. Still, X and A didn't talk. Then A said, "Well, I know there is a stranger to me here, but I've been watching him and I know he is all right." After that, X and A talked a lot.... Those two men didn't know each other, so they took it easy at first.

As this incident suggests, the Western Apache do not feel compelled to "introduce" persons who are unknown to each other. Eventually, it is assumed, strangers will begin to speak. However, this is a decision that is properly left to the individuals involved, and no attempt is made to hasten it. Outside help in the form of introductions or other verbal routines is viewed as presumptuous and unnecessary.

Strangers who are quick to launch into conversation are frequently eyed with undisguised suspicion. A typical reaction to such individuals is that they "want something," that is, their willingness to violate convention is attributed to some urgent need which is likely to result in requests for money, labor, or transportation. Another common reaction to talkative strangers is that they are intoxicated.

If the stranger is an Anglo, it is usually assumed that he "wants to teach us something" (i.e., give orders or instructions) or that he "wants to make friends in a hurry." The latter response is especially revealing, since Western Apaches are extremely reluctant to be hurried into friendships – with Anglos or each other. Their verbal reticence with strangers is directly related to the conviction that the establishment of social relationships is a serious matter that calls for caution, careful judgment, and plenty of time.

2 'Courting' (*liigoláá*). During the initial stages of courtship, young men and women go without speaking for conspicuous lengths of time. Courting may occur in a wide variety of settings – practically anywhere, in fact – and at virtually any time of the day or night, but it is most readily observable at large public gatherings such as ceremonials, wakes, and rodeos. At these events, 'sweethearts' (*'izeegé*) may stand or sit (sometimes holding hands) for as long as an hour without exchanging a word. I have been told by adult consultants that the young people's reluctance to speak may become even more pronounced in situations where they find themselves alone.

Apaches who have just begun to court attribute their silence to 'intense shyness' (*histe'*) and a feeling of acute 'self-consciousness' (*dayéézi*) which, they claim, stems from their lack of familiarity with one another. More specifically, they complain of "not knowing what to do" in each other's presence and of the fear that whatever they say, no matter how well thought out in advance, will sound "dumb" or "stupid."

One consultant, a youth seventeen years old, commented as follows:

> It's hard to talk with your sweetheart at first. She doesn't know you and won't know what to say. It's the same way towards her. You don't know how to talk yet... so you get very bashful. That makes it sometimes so you don't say anything. So you just go around together and don't talk. At first, it's better that way. Then, after a while, when you know each other, you aren't shy anymore and can talk good.

The Western Apache draw an equation between the ease and frequency with which a young couple talks and how well they know each other. Thus, it is expected

that after several months of steady companionship sweethearts will start to have lengthy conversations. Earlier in their relationship, however, protracted discussions may be openly discouraged. This is especially true for girls, who are informed by their mothers and older sisters that silence in courtship is a sign of modesty and that an eagerness to speak betrays previous experience with men. In extreme cases, they add, it may be interpreted as a willingness to engage in sexual relations. Said one woman, aged thirty-two:

> This way I have talked to my daughter. "Take it easy when boys come around this camp and want you to go somewhere with them. When they talk to you, just listen at first. Maybe you won't know what to say. So don't talk about just anything. If you talk with these boys right away, then they will know you know all about them. They will think you've been with many boys before, and they will start talking about that."

3 'Children coming home' (*chąghášhé naakai*). The Western Apache lexeme *'ilta'naadzaa* ('reunion') is used to describe encounters between an individual who has returned home after a long absence and his relatives and friends. The most common type of reunion, *chąghášhé naakai* ('children coming home'), involves boarding school students and their parents. It occurs in late May or early in June, and its setting is usually a trading post or school, where parents congregate to await the arrival of buses bringing the children home. As the latter disembark and locate their parents in the crowd, one anticipates a flurry of verbal greetings. Typically, however, there are few or none at all. Indeed, it is not unusual for parents and child to go without speaking for as long as fifteen minutes.

When the silence is broken, it is almost always the child who breaks it. Parents listen attentively to everything he or she says but speak hardly at all themselves. This pattern persists even after the family has reached the privacy of its camp, and two or three days may pass before the child's parents seek to engage him or her in sustained conversation.

According to my consultants, the silence of Western Apache parents at (and after) reunions with their children is ultimately predicated on the possibility that the latter have been adversely affected by their experiences away from home. Uppermost is the fear that, as a result of protracted exposure to Anglo attitudes and values, the children have come to view their parents as ignorant, old-fashioned, and no longer deserving of respect. One of my most thoughtful and articulate consultants commented on the problem as follows:

> You just can't tell about those children after they've been with White men for a long time. They get their minds turned around sometimes. . . . They forget where they come from and get ashamed when they come home because their parents and relatives are poor. They forget how to act with these Apaches and get mad easy. They walk around all night and get into fights. They don't stay at home.
>
> At school, some of them learn to want to be White men, so they come back and try to act that way. But we are still Apaches! So we don't know them anymore, and it is like [illegible]. It is hard to talk to them when they are like that.

Apache parents openly admit that, initially, children who have been away to school seem distant and unfamiliar. They have grown older, of course, and their physical appearance may have changed. But more fundamental is the concern that they have acquired new ideas and expectations which will alter their behavior in unpredictable ways. No matter how pressing this concern may be, however, it is considered inappropriate to directly interrogate a child after his or her arrival home. Instead, parents anticipate that within a short time the child will begin to divulge information that will enable them to determine in what ways, if any, his or her views and attitudes have changed. This, the Apache say, is why children do practically all the talking in the hours following a reunion, and why their parents remain unusually silent.

Said one man, the father of two children who had recently returned from boarding school in Utah:

> Yes, it's right that we didn't talk much to them when they came back, my wife and me. They were away for a long time, and we didn't know how they would like it, being home. So we waited. Right away, they started to tell stories about what they did. Pretty soon we could tell they liked it, being back. That made us feel good. So it was easy to talk to them again. It was like they were before they went away.

4 'Getting cussed out' (*shildit'éé*). This expression is used to describe any situation in which one individual, angered and enraged, shouts insults and criticisms at another. Although the object of such invective is in most cases the person or persons who provoked it, this is not always the case, because an Apache who is truly beside himself with rage is likely to vent his feelings on anyone whom he sees or who happens to be within range of his voice. Consequently, 'getting cussed out' may involve large numbers of people who are totally innocent of the charges being hurled against them. But whether they are innocent, their response to the situation is the same. They refrain from speech.

Like the types of situations we have discussed thus far, 'getting cussed out' can occur in a wide variety of physical settings: at ceremonial dance grounds and trading posts, inside and outside wickiups and houses, on food-gathering expeditions and shopping trips – in short, wherever and whenever individuals lose control of their tempers and lash out verbally at persons nearby.

Although 'getting cussed out' is basically free of setting-imposed restrictions, the Western Apache fear it most at gatherings where alcohol is consumed. My consultants observed that especially at 'drinking parties' (*naa'idlą́ą'*), where there is much rough joking and ostensibly mock criticism, it is easy for well-intentioned remarks to be misconstrued as insults. Provoked in this way, persons who are intoxicated may become hostile and launch into explosive tirades, often with no warning at all.

The silence of Apaches who are 'getting cussed out' is consistently explained in terms of the belief that individuals who are 'enraged' (*hashkee*) are also irrational or 'crazy' (*bíni'édįh*). In this condition, it is said, they "forget who they are" and become oblivious to what they say and do. Concomitantly, they lose all concern for the consequences of their actions on other people. In a word, they are dangerous. Said one consultant,

> When people get mad they get crazy. Then they start yelling and saying bad things. Some say they are going to kill somebody for what he has done. Some keep it up that way for a long time, maybe walk from camp to camp, real angry, yelling, crazy like that. They keep it up for a long time, some do.
>
> People like that don't know what they are saying, so you can't tell about them. When you see someone like that, just walk away. If he yells at you, let him say whatever he wants to. Let him say anything. Maybe he doesn't mean it. But he doesn't know that. He will be crazy, and he could try to kill you.

Another Apache said, "When someone gets mad at you and starts yelling, then just don't do anything to make him get worse. Don't try to quiet him down because he won't know why you're doing it. If you try to do that, he may just get worse and try to hurt you."

As the latter of these statements implies, the Western Apache operate on the assumption that enraged persons – because they are temporarily "crazy" – are difficult to reason with. Indeed, there is a widely held belief that attempts at mollification will serve to intensify anger, thus increasing the chances of physical violence. The appropriate strategy when 'getting cussed out' is to do nothing, to avoid any action that will attract attention to oneself. Since speaking accomplishes just the opposite, silence is strongly advised.

5 'Being with people who are sad' (*ndee bił doobilgozhǫǫda*). Although the Western Apache phrase that labels this situation has no precise equivalent in English, it refers quite specifically to gatherings in which individuals find themselves in the company of someone whose spouse or kinsman has recently died. Distinct from wakes and burials, which follow immediately after a death, 'being with people who are sad' is most likely to occur several weeks later. At this time, close relatives of the deceased emerge from a period of intense mourning (during which they rarely venture beyond the limits of their camps) and start to resume their normal activities within the community. To persons anxious to convey their sympathies, this is interpreted as a sign that visitors will be welcomed and, if possible, provided with food and drink. To those less solicitous, it means that unplanned encounters with the bereaved must be anticipated and prepared for.

'Being with people who are sad' can occur on a footpath, in a camp, at church, or in a trading post; but whatever the setting – and regardless of whether it is the result of a planned visit or an accidental meeting – the situation is marked by a minimum of speech. Queried about this, my consultants volunteered three types of explanations. The first is that persons 'who are sad' are so burdened with 'intense grief' (*'ádił ńtsikęęs*) that speaking requires of them an unusual amount of physical effort. It is courteous and considerate, therefore, not to attempt to engage them in conversation.

A second explanation is that in situations of this sort verbal communication is basically unnecessary. Everyone is familiar with what has happened, and talking about it, even for the purpose of conveying solace and sympathy, would only reinforce and augment the sadness felt by those who were close to the deceased. Again, for reasons of courtesy, this is something to be avoided.

The third explanation is rooted in the belief that 'intense grief', like intense rage, produces changes in the personality of the individual who experiences it. As evidence for this, numerous instances are cited in which the emotional strain of dealing with death, coupled with an overwhelming sense of irrevocable personal loss, has caused persons who were formerly mild and even-tempered to become abusive, hostile, and physically violent.

> That old woman, X, who lives across Cibecue Creek, one time her first husband died. After that she cried all the time, for a long time. Then, I guess she got mean because everyone said she drank a lot and got into fights. Even with her close relatives, she did like that for a long time. She was too sad for her husband. That's what made her like that; it made her lose her mind.
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> My father was like that when his wife died. He just stayed home all the time and wouldn't go anywhere. He didn't talk to any of his relatives or children. He just said, "I'm hungry. Cook for me." That's all. He stayed that way for a long time. His mind was not with us. He was still with his wife.
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> My uncle died in 1941. His wife sure went crazy right away after that. Two days after they buried the body, we went over there and stayed with those people who had been left alone. My aunt got mad at us. She said, "Why do you come over here? You can't bring my husband back. I can take care of myself and those others in my camp, so why don't you go home." She sure was mad that time, too sad for someone who died. She didn't know what she was saying because in about one week she came to our camp and said, "My relatives, I'm all right now. When you came to help me, I had too much sadness and my mind was no good. I said bad words to you. But now I am all right and I know what I am doing."

As these statements indicate, the Western Apache assume that a person suffering from 'intense grief' is likely to be disturbed and unstable. Even though outwardly composed, they say, there is always the possibility that he or she is emotionally upset and therefore unusually prone to volatile outbursts. Apaches acknowledge that such an individual might welcome conversation in the context of 'being with people who are sad', but on the other hand they fear it might prove incendiary. Under these conditions, which resemble those of situation 4, it is considered both expedient and appropriate to keep silent.

[...]

Status Ambiguity and Role Expectations

Although the types of situations described above differ from one another in numerous ways, I will argue in what follows that the underlying determinants of silence are in each case basically the same. Specifically, I will advance the hypothesis that keeping silent in Western Apache culture is associated with social situations in which

participants perceive their relationships with one another to be ambiguous and/or unpredictable.

Let us begin with the observation that, in all the situations we have described, *silence is defined as appropriate with respect to a specific individual or individuals*. In other words, the use of speech is not directly curtailed by the setting of a situation nor by the physical activities that accompany it but, rather, by the perceived social and psychological attributes of at least one focal participant.

It may also be observed that, in each type of situation, *the status of the focal participant is marked by ambiguity* – either because he or she is unfamiliar to other participants in the situation or because, owing to some recent event, a status formerly held has been changed or is in a process of transition.

Thus, in situation 1, persons who earlier considered themselves "strangers" move towards some other relationship, perhaps 'friend' (*shit'eké*), perhaps 'enemy' (*shik'endiihí*). In situation 2, young people who have had relatively limited exposure to one another attempt to adjust to the new and intimate status of 'sweetheart'. These two situations are similar in that the focal participants have little or no prior knowledge of each other. Their social identities are not as yet clearly defined, and their expectations, lacking the foundation of previous experience, are poorly developed.

Situation 3 is somewhat different. Although the participants – parents and their children – are well known to each other, their relationship has been seriously interrupted by the latter's prolonged absence from home. This, combined with the possibility that recent experiences at school have altered the children's attitudes, introduces a definite element of unfamiliarity and doubt. Situation 3 is not characterized by an absence of role expectations but by the participants' perception that those already in existence may be outmoded and in need of revision.

Status ambiguity is present in situation 4 because a focal participant is enraged and, as a result, considered 'crazy'. Until this individual returns to a more rational condition, others in the situation have no way of predicting how he or she will behave. Situation 5 is similar in that the personality of the focal participants is seen to have undergone a marked shift which makes their actions more difficult to anticipate. In both situations, the status of focal participants is uncertain because of real or imagined changes in their psychological makeup.

[...]

This discussion points up a third feature characteristic of all situations: *the ambiguous status of focal participants is accompanied by either the absence or the suspension of established role expectations*. In every instance, nonfocal participants (i.e., those who refrain from speech) are uncertain of how the focal participant will behave towards them and, conversely, how they should behave towards him or her. Stated in the simplest way possible, their roles become blurred with the result that established expectations – if they exist – lose their relevance as guidelines for social action and must be temporarily discarded or abruptly modified.

We are now in a position to expand upon our initial hypothesis and make it more explicit.

1 In Western Apache culture, the absence of verbal communication is associated with social situations in which the status of focal participants is ambiguous.
2 Under these conditions, fixed role expectations lose their applicability and the illusion of predictability in social interaction is lost.
3 To sum up and reiterate: keeping silent among the Western Apache is a response to uncertainty and unpredictability in social relations.

[...]

Note

1. The social situations described in this paper are not the only ones in which Western Apaches regularly refrain from speech. There is a second set of situations in which silence appears to occur solely as a gesture of respect, usually to persons in a position of authority. A third involves ritual specialists who claim they must keep silent at certain points during the preparation of ceremonial paraphernalia.

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