

How silence speaks volumes

Abstract:

The motivational causes and effects of silence in social interaction are often described in considerable detail. Some of the many studies of silence are closely related to research into listening^[1] and have a strong impact on the development of communicative competence in general, and foreign or additional language learning in particular. However, a concise, explicit and unified explanatory account of silence in human interaction, one that would make it possible to spell out the relationship between the causes and effects of communicative silence, has not been proposed. The present paper sketches the lines along which such an account could be developed in the context of relevance-theoretic assumptions about human communication and cognition. The discussion draws on descriptions of several real-life situations to demonstrate that silence does speak, provided one knows how to listen.

Keywords: *Silence; Communication; Cognition; Relevance; Context; Ostensive stimulus.*