Silence and Laconicism Among the Puget Salish

Andie Diane Palmer
University of Washington

J: Sit down! Sit right down! Take you loads off you
ass. You hungry? You want some beer? Maybe you
want some wine? You want crackers? Bread? You
want some sandwich? How 'bout it? You hungry?
I don't know. Maybe you get sick. Maybe you don't
eat again long time.

J: You sure looking good to me, L. You looking pretty
fat! Pretty good all right! You got new boots?
Where you buy them? Sure pretty good boots! I glad...

[Basso 1979: 46-47]

Introduction

In a paper such as this, on the topic of silence and laconic speech style in a North American Indian speech community[1], it seems fitting to present a comment from an American Indian on the speech behavior of White Americans. The above is a verbal caricature, a "Portrait of 'the Whiteman'" drawn by a Cibecue Apache. The modern Western Apache perceive Whites in general as a group that talks a great deal in situations where it is wholly inappropriate in Apache culture to do so; topics such as the addressee's health and personal appearance are reserved for intimates or completely avoided. The "laconic Indian" stereotype (Basso 1972) is bestowed upon them by a considerably chattier cultural group. It is therefore important to note that their laconicism does not neccesarily denote a lack of communicated information (cf. Tedlock 1983).

The "laconic Indian" image is fostered by a separate group that does not often attribute meaning to silence. A print-oriented, or literate society, focuses on words on a page, and not the spaces in between them. The breaks between words become meaningful only as dividers, not in and of themselves (cf. Rothenburg 1972: *xii*, Tedlock 1972). 'The Whiteman's' particular focus on speech as language helps to explain why sociolinguists, who endeavor to describe how people behave appropriately using language, have only recent'v come to examine silence as a significant component in communication as a whole.

Both silence and laconicism will be addressed herein. These terms are not interchangeable, although laconic speech can contain lengthy periods of silence between utterances. When mentioned together as "silence and laconicism", the reference is to a continuum between no speech and very spare speech.

Early written descriptions of silence and laconicism dealt with the topic only in the broadest terms, as in Plato's comparison of the verbose Athenians to the laconic Spartans. All that was conveyed by the description was relative quantity of speech (Hymes 1972: 44). The descriptions of "quantity" of speech in the literature from Plato onward remain undeveloped in most cases where a speech community's language behavior is described as "taciturn" (the Aritama of Colombia), "reserved" (the Paliyan of South India) or "laconic" (Hymes 1972: 44). In these cases, however, it seems important to go beyond the initial, quantitative judgement to determine the qualitative: how silence and taciturn speech behavior have meaning as they occur within given social contexts.

Silence and Laconicism Among the Western Apache

A significant contribution to the qualitative study of silence and laconicism in the field of sociolinguistics has been made by Keith Basso (1972). In his essay on "Silence in Western Apache Culture" (1972), Basso describes the social contexts in which the Cibecue Apache are silent, or taciturn. He concludes that they remain silent to suspend established role expectations when the status of the "focal participant" is marked by ambiguity, that is, they are silent when they perceive a social relationship to be "uncertain and unpredictable" (1972: 83). According to Basso's findings, the element of the set "SPEAKING" (Hymes: 1962) that primarily determines whether Western Apache silence behavior will occur is "Participants" (including the relative statuses of those participants.)

The title of Basso's paper emphasizes *silence* in the Western Apache culture, but the title does not in fact encompass the full range of behavior Basso discusses. His paper is also about laconicism. However, the Western Apache characterization of Whites as extremely verbose suggests that Whites make no distinction between little speech and no speech, but view them together as a single phenomenon: silence. From this pseudo-Apache viewpoint, Basso's title may be considered an apt understatement of the topic, whether consciously written as such, or not.

Basso suggests that his findings for the Apache, that their silence and laconicism are linked to speech situations in which the status of the focal participant is ambiguous, may be the case universally for other North American Indian groups described as "laconic" (1972: 84). Examples given for the Navajos' similar silence behavior by Pricilla Mowrer (see Basso 1972), are taken by Basso to lend support to

this generalization. Because the Apache are, of course, a cultural offshoot of the sedentary Navajo, such a comparison must be considered as inconclusive with regard to Indian groups other than the Navajo. Basso's proposition that silence behavior among other Indian groups be studied is nonetheless valuable in that it is a call to fill a gap in the descriptions of language behavior written up in sociolinguistics.

Data Sources and Method

Basso's descriptions of laconic speech behavior of the Apache lead to the consideration in this paper of the contexts in which silence and laconic speech styles are considered appropriate and employed by the Puget Salish Indians of Washington. This paper investigates how these sociolinguistic variables are valued by the Salish speech community and what meanings are conveyed by the use of silence, and of laconicism, in particular social settings. The data resulting from the participant-observer approach employed may add to the record of what speech events among North American Indian groups include silence or laconic speech as significant events, and to the sociolinguistic knowledge of what the functions are of these two features in particular contexts.

This paper provides a record of comments and ideas expressed (principally by one consultant, Vi Hilbert) on the topic of silence in speech behavior of the Salish, and by interpretation derived from the author's direct observation. The method incorporated in gathering the former kind of information was to take the role of participant-observer, noting comments on such behavior as they were brought up in the regular course of instruction by the consultant. No questions about silence behavior were asked by the researcher. This technique was employed in the hope that it would minimize the reification of 'silence situations', and would restrict the record to those situations considered significant enough to be noted by the consultant without prompting. (Thus reducing the significant danger in anthropological research that what a researcher looks for, she will find, regardless of its reality to the group studied.) Direct observations of public orations have also yielded much for interpretation in this paper. As was the case when Salish was an entirely oral culture, much of the important explicit cultural information is communicated through the *genre* of public oratory. As discussed below, laconic speech is and was highly valued by the Puget Salish in public oratory.

Setting and Participants in Public Oratory

For the Salish, the setting of public oratory was originally the longhouse, and today in most cases it is the longhouse, or the tribal auditorium. Speeches are given from the floor in the center of the longhouse, or from the front of the auditorium. The

speakers tend to be established tribal spokespersons, including Elders, the tribal chairperson, visiting Elders from other reservations, or they may be visitors from outside the culture invited expressly to speak. To be recognized as 'established' public speakers, some have previously been publicly designated as authorized to speak on behalf of their families or larger group by the agreement of members of the represented group. Speaking on behalf of any group is considered an important responsibility. It is considered appropriate to address the audience 1) entirely in English, 2) in English with code-switching to the Salish language of *lušutcid* for call-and-response exchanges with the audience after key statements, 3) in *lušutcid* with translation into English (by the same speaker, or by another), and call-and response exchanges in *lušutcid* , and 4) entirely in *lušutcid* when it is comprehensible to all present at a gathering. Beyond the scope of this paper is the interesting question of which language code is the unmarked form, if indeed there is an unmarked code in Salish public speech.

Qualities of Puget Salish Laconicism

The Puget Salish are often characterized as "laconic" by themselves and by the White community. However, as mentioned above with respect to Plato and others, the term 'laconic' in and of itself does not connote anything beyond quantity of speech. To any given speech community, laconic speech could signify in a different way. To the Puget Salish, **laconic speech** is the careful measuring of words, considered to be the ideal speech style for addressing a public gathering. To use laconicism is to "speak well":

> [The Puget Salish] greatly appreciate someone with the special ability to speak well at any type of gathering, no matter how large or how small. Afterwards, people discussed and evaluated his or her good words, expecially as they were medicine when carefully chosen and spoken. *The wisest speaker needed the fewest words, using his or her time to speak them slowly and distinctly.* Someone who speaks for a long time was also treated with respectful attention, but everyone was conscious of what they were enduring in the process.
>
> [Hilbert 1983: 199][italics mine]

When one is asked to speak at public gatherings, the valued form of speech is simple and direct. To this end, careful speeches are often prepared in advance when a person is told that they will be called upon. Under some circumstances, however, silence takes precedence over careful speech:

'At a recent [1985] public gathering, a woman who was supposed to have been called upon to speak was passed over, for so much of the time alloted had been taken up by the long speeches of others. For her to insist that her speech be heard would not have been considered proper. Despite the potential importance of her speech, she remained silent.'[2]

It seems that the Elder did not want to add to the length of the program, since after a certain point more speeches would turn the whole program into something to be endured. The Elder's silence was not an event that went unnoticed by the other participants. Rather, her silence was marked in that there was a general knowledge in the group of speakers that she was scheduled to give a speech. If it had not been known by any but herself that she had originally intended to speak at the gathering, her silence would not have communicated anything to the group, and would have gone unnoticed. Here is an example of silence as meaningful, purposeful, communicative behavior. Unmarked silence, that which does not communicate is outside of the range of phenomena studied in sociolinguistics.

Conveying Information, Bragging, and the Challenge Song

When speaking to convey information calls attention to one's own achievements, conflict between values and neccessity or practicality may result. Richard Bauman discusses this conflict with regard to the Quakers' emphasis on "plain speech, and the negative value placed on speaking within the Quaker meeting house" (1974). He reports the resulting ambivalence toward speech on the part of Quaker ministers who were expected to speak "sometimes four hours to the congregation, with little or no intermission" (J. Barclay 1833: 134 *in* Bauman 1974: 149).

The conflict between values and necessity experienced by Quaker public speakers is also evident in the Salish way of life. This conflict is especially evident when the Salish lifeway extends to interaction with White American culture, as is often the case. Vi Hilbert, in the simultaneous roles of Upper Skagit Elder and University Instructor, remarks that she is often caught in this bind, which requires careful consideration. For example, while lecturing at a folklore colloquium on the achievements of her culture and her efforts to preserve them, she cautioned:

"That's something frowned on in the culture. Don't brag about anything. So [this is] just information".

A common feeling among the Puget Salish is that if one has done something noteworthy, one should not discuss it; others will discover it on their own and they will be the ones to bring it to public attention. Sometimes, showing off may even result in dire consequences, as Vi Hilbert reports:

'A Skagit Elder, known to be a very strong medicine woman, never spoke of the strength of her power. When asked about it, she always denied it. To admit the strength of her spirit power could invite the challenges of other Indian doctors, whose challenges might be to the death.'

Because the Elder's power was well known publicly, her personal silence on the topic was marked, communicating that she would not brag of such things.

In contrast to the cultural ideal of not calling attention to one's own achievements is the exception of the Challenge Song. Challenge songs are performed in the special context of winter gatherings and are marked as belonging to another *genre* than everyday speech or spoken public oratory, in that they are sung. These challenges, which take oneupmanship to extremes, are sung in fun- "to keep the spirits up". In so doing I suspect they not only relieve tension, but also set an example for behavior (in other contexts) through their reversals of propriety. (This reversal is a teaching tool also incorporated into myths, as in the consistently bad example Coyote sets (see Hilbert 1980 for numerous and amusing examples).) The claims in song include one of bringing salmon to the folks downriver, when in fact the river is frozen and there are no salmon to be had. (The song source is a recording made by Leon Metcalfe of Susie Sampson Peter and Martin Sampson, translated by Vi Hilbert.)

Laconicism and Repetition

Audience comprehension and remembrance appear to be major factors shaping speech style. Speakers are expected to "measure their words" and "use few words to say a lot" (Hilbert.) to aid in this remembrance. To this end, Salish speakers have developed a distinctive form of laconic speech. Important points are repeated several times, with alterations in syntax, as in the following examples:

At Vi Hilbert's Naming Ceremony, Morris Dan exhorted the witnesses to speak:
[*Note: Spaces and line breaks in the example below denote length of pauses in speech, after the transcription style of Dennis Tedlock. For more complete information on the style, see Tedlock 1972, 1983.*]

"Can we have your attention for a minute?
You witnesses can all step forward.
We are going to give you FIVE MINUTES.
Each of you will respond with

five minutes.
A
five
minute
talk. Who is going to be first[?]
All right, come forward."
[Audiotape #3, side 2, 1978]

At a Memorial Ceremony, the relatives of the man being honored decided to videotape the proceedings, an unusual action. They wanted to inform the gathering that the recording was not for use outside of the family, and taping would result in no material gain for the family. I was unable to take notes, so what follows is an approximation of what was said.

'You can see that there is a videotape camera up there on the balcony.'
[Gestures to back of room, explains who the people are who are taping.]
Clearly, deliberately: 'The family would like all you people to know that this ceremony is being videotaped for the <u>family</u>. You should all know that the family is just videotaping this ceremony for their own use. The family would like you to know that. They want you to know that it's just for the family.'

The two speech acts cited above approach the Puget Salish ideal for public speech. Each speaker spoke "slowly and distinctly." "Few words were used" (Hilbert 1983: 199), and those that were important (eg. "five minutes") were repeated in refashioned sentences. This kind of repetition in the myths of oral cultures, particularly those of Amerindian groups, has been widely noted (see especially Hymes 1981, Tedlock 1983). In Northern Puget Salish myths, characters are often described performing acts four times, their pattern number, or 'magic number.' Among the Southern Puget Salish, the pattern number is five. Thus far, I have found that slow, careful speech is the norm throughout a public oration, but repetition is incorporated into this style only when an *action* is being described. In both public oratory and telling myths, the memory of the listener and of the speaker are aided by this repetition.

The Role of the Listener

For their part, the audience has as much of a responsibility to remember what is said as the speaker does to present it clearly. Audience members serve as witnesses, and continue the public record in their own memory. Some witnesses are thanked to remember and are given blankets, other household goods, or money to remember the names bestowed or actions taken at a public ceremony. Witnesses' silence in listening is marked by their public acceptance of gifts, and their silence conveys the meaning that these witnesses accept the responsibility of remembering.

Just as not all speakers may be gifted in the Salish style of public oratory, so are some listeners untalented in remembering. The gift of speaking and that of a good memory are often possessed by one person. The expectations are particularly strong for those who take on the role of historian for their family line. It seems that historians were not specifically chosen, they just emerged as the most careful memorizers in the family, and eventually came to be expected to take it on as a special responsibility. On the topic Vi Hilbert commented:

"It's quite a gift to learn how to listen." 'So many have not learned that great art. You listen differently when you have to listen to remember. [It's] just noise going past you when you're just there- a body. When I really concentrate I have to remember what is said. Something all of us need to [do is] train ourselves. Elders HAD to remember.'

Training or *hečusəda* ("Indian Education")

The training spoken of above starts early. Children were taught to "sit right here and listen" (Hilbert.) When legends were told, they were expected to listen, and demonstrate this by responding to the storytellers request to "say 'Haboo' or become a hunchback" [3] (see Hilbert 1980 for examples.) A sleeping or inattentive child could be caught out by not hearing this command in the story. Aside from saying 'haboo', however, children were not to speak during the telling of legends, even when they found them puzzling and wanted to interrupt for explanations.

"We don't have to turn corners and close doors. That's just the way the story is. Let it go. The Elders get upset if you have to have all this stuff answered" (Hilbert.)

Vi Hilbert also classified as 'training', times spent sitting absolutely quiet next to her father in his canoe, so as not to scare the fish. He set a good example for her himself, as she reports in this description of her father at home:

"I think that my dad was laconic. My mother was not". 'My dad measured his words. He spent 5 minutes sometimes between words. I would think: 'Is he going to continue?' My dad and my husband could communicate in silence for an hour. Dad would say one word'.

Conclusions

The Puget Salish incorporate silence and laconic speech style into their language in an entirely different manner than do the Cibecue Apache. Basso finds the Cibecue Apache to use silence and laconicism in ambiguous speech situations, where the status of the focal participant is unknown. Both the focal participant, and the listener/audience are found to use silence and laconic speech style in the case of the Puget Salish. Where the Apache form of laconicism is associated with ambiguity, for the Puget Salish it is associated with clarity of speech. The situations in which this speech style is used are well defined, as at public gatherings where speakers are designated in advance by custom or request. In addition to situational differences, the meanings of silence and laconicism communicated by or attributed to of the Puget Salish have been shown to be entirely different from those of the Apache. I suggest that silence and laconicism are styles of language which are assigned different meanings in different cultures. On a more basic level, 'silence', as the mere absence of verbal speech, can acquire meaning to a speech community in much the same way as can any minimal unit of spoken sound.

Endnotes

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1:   'Speech community' as defined by Hymes (1972: 43).

2:   Indented oral quotations are marked in this paper by single quotation marks,if they are slightly paraphrased, and by double quotation marks if they are verbatim. Verbatum quotes are given wherever possible.

3:   Thom Hess provides an example in *lušutcid*: "ʔəbil x̌ʷiʔ k̓ʷə ɬ(u)adsu.cut ʔə tiʔiɬ 'həmuʔ kayʔ, həmuʔ kayʔkawič̓', čəx̌ʷ [ə] g̓ʷə.kawič̓." Translation: "If you do not say 'həmuʔ kayʔ, həmuʔ kayʔkawič̓', you will become a hunchback" (in Hess 1976: 178).

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