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DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

**„Silence across cultures as a means of
expressing (im)politeness“**

Verfasserin

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magistra der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, April 2011

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt:

A 190 343

Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt:

Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik

Betreuerin:

o. Univ. Prof. em. Dr. habil. Barbara Kryk- Kastovsky

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First of all, I would like to thank my supervisor Professor Barbara Kryk-Kastovsky for the support and advice she gave me throughout the whole reading and writing process. She always encouraged me and eased my worries and concerns.

Moreover, I want to thank all the people who were willing to participate in the survey and thus provided important information for this thesis. I appreciate very much that you sacrificed some of your time for my project.

Finally, I need to thank my parents for giving me the opportunity to study and for encouraging me throughout all the years. Last but not least, I want to thank my friends for supporting me and giving me strength and new motivation whenever I needed it.

DECLARATION OF AUTHENTICITY

I confirm to have conceived and written this paper in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors and any ideas borrowed and/or passages paraphrased from the works of other authors are all clearly marked within the text and acknowledged in the bibliographical references.

Vienna, April 2011 _____

TABLE OF CONTENTS

1. Introduction	1
1.1. Preliminary remarks	1
1.2. Terminology	3
2. Politeness	5
2.1. Major politeness theories	5
2.1.1. Influential concepts: Grice's <i>Cooperative Principle</i> and Goffman's notion of <i>face</i>	5
2.1.2. Lakoff's rules of politeness	8
2.1.3. Leech	9
2.1.4. Brown and Levinson	13
2.1.5. Other theories	18
2.2. Criticism of politeness theories	22
2.2.1. Watt's criticism of politeness theories	22
2.2.2. Eelen's criticism of politeness theories	27
2.2.3. Criticism of Brown and Levinson	29
2.3. The nature of politeness – What is politeness?	31
2.3.1. Defining politeness	31
2.3.2. Politeness as a universal concept or a culture-specific phenomenon?.....	33
3. Silence in communication	39
3.1. Defining silence	39
3.2. 'Silence <i>versus</i> speech' or 'silence <i>and</i> speech'	42
3.3. Approaches to the study of silence	45
3.4. Different uses and functions of silence in communication	46
3.4.1. The preventive function of silence – avoiding conflict or offence	46
3.4.2. Silence and power	47
3.4.3. Strategic use of silence	48
3.4.4. Silence as a contemplative tool	49
3.4.5. Silence in religious context	50
3.4.6. Silence in public versus intimate context	50
4. Silence and politeness	53
5. Silence and culture	58
5.1. Silence as a culture-dependent issue	58
5.2. Western bias	64
5.3. Silence in 'Western cultures' – selected examples	66

5.3.1.	Silence in Greek, English, Swedish and Irish societies	66
5.3.2.	The silent Finn	68
5.3.3.	Silence in Italian culture	70
5.4.	Silence in 'non-Western cultures' – selected examples	72
5.4.1.	Silence in the Athabaskan culture and Athabaskan-English interaction.....	73
5.4.2.	Silence among the Igbo people	76
5.4.3.	Silence among American Indians	78
5.4.4.	Silence among indigenous versus white people in Australia and New Zealand	82
5.4.5.	Communicative silence in indigenous Akan society	85
6.	Empirical study – Investigating attitudes towards silence and politeness in German and English	88
6.1.	Theoretical considerations: Politeness patterns in German and English	88
6.2.	Methodology	92
6.2.1.	Aim of the study and type of research	92
6.2.2.	Informants	93
6.2.3.	The questionnaire	93
6.3.	Results and Analysis	94
6.3.1.	Situation 1	94
6.3.2.	Situation 2	95
6.3.3.	Situation 3	97
6.3.4.	Situation 4	100
6.3.5.	Situation 5	102
6.3.6.	Situation 6	104
6.3.7.	Situation 7	106
6.3.8.	Situation 8	109
6.3.9.	Situation 9	111
6.3.10.	Situation 10	117
6.4.	Summary of the results	120
7.	Conclusion	123
8.	References	126
9.	Appendices	132
	<i>Appendix 1 : Questionnaire English</i>	132
	<i>Appendix 2: Questionnaire German</i>	137
	<i>Appendix 3: English abstract</i>	142
	<i>Appendix 4: German summary/ Deutsche Zusammenfassung</i>	143

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1: Possible strategies for doing FTAs (Brown and Levinson).....	15
Figure 2: House's multilevel model of politeness	21
Figure 3: Dimensions of cross-cultural differences	89
Figure 4: Situation 1 (English vs. German)	95
Figure 5: Situation 2 (English vs. German)	96
Figure 6: Situation 2 (English: male vs. female)	97
Figure 7: Situation 2 (German: male vs. female).....	97
Figure 8: Situation 3 (English vs. German).....	99
Figure 9: Situation 3 (English: male vs. female)	99
Figure 10: Situation 3 (German: male vs. female)	99
Figure 11: Situation 4 (English vs. German)	101
Figure 12: Situation 5 (English vs. German)	103
Figure 13: Situation 6 (English vs. German)	104
Figure 14: Situation 7 (English vs. German)	107
Figure 15: Situation 7 (English: male vs. female)	108
Figure 16: Situation 7 (German: male vs. female)	108
Figure 17: Situation 8 (English vs. German)	110
Figure 18: Situation 9 (English vs. German)	112
Figure 19: Situation 9 (English: male vs. female)	113
Figure 20: Situation 9 (German: male vs. female)	113
Figure 21: Situation 10 (English vs. German)	118
Figure 22: Situation 10 (English: male vs. female)	118
Figure 23: Situation 10 (German: male vs. female)	118

1. Introduction

1.1. Preliminary remarks

Various debates about linguistic politeness, especially since the 1970's, have dealt with the topic of linguistic politeness, and a large number of researchers have dedicated their time to the investigation of what constitutes politeness and how it can be defined. For this reason, many aspects of language, for instance terms of address or different speech acts like apologies and requests have been observed in numerous studies in order to find out more about which linguistic moves are regarded as polite or rather impolite. However, one aspect has been ignored by linguistic research for a considerable time. This aspect is *silence in communication*.

This thesis will investigate the relationship between silence and politeness. Furthermore, it will take a cross-cultural view and compare how the issue of silence and politeness is treated in different cultures. Of course, it would go beyond the scope of this project to undertake an in-depth research of cultures from all over the world. Instead, I will work with studies that have investigated this issue, and in addition, I will conduct an own small case study comparing English and German with regard to the relationship silence-politeness.

In the course of this thesis, I will try to answer the following questions: Does silence in communication express politeness or rather impoliteness and what does this depend on? Does – and if yes, then how - the relationship between silence and politeness differ cross-culturally? Are there significant differences in the evaluation of silence according to its degree of politeness between rather similar cultures, such as the German- and the English-speaking cultures?

A major assumption of this analysis is that the relationship between silence and politeness is complex and by no means static and fixed. Furthermore, I assume that it is highly culture-specific, which makes it very difficult – if not impossible – to claim that silence in communication is either polite or impolite. Furthermore, I expect a major difference in the evaluation of silence and the extent to which it is regarded as polite or impolite in 'Western cultures' in contrast to 'non-Western cultures', and rather minor differences in how the relationship between silence and politeness is regarded in two distinct 'Western cultures' – the German and the English speaking one.

The reasons why I want to investigate the issue of silence and its relation to politeness are various. First of all, as Sifianou (1995) emphasises, the role of silence as a crucial component of human communication has been ignored by linguists for a long time. This is to some extent

understandable because silence might not be as striking and noticeable as other aspects of communication. However, the fact that research into silence in communication has only started rather late is what makes this issue even more interesting for me. There are still a number of questions which have not been answered. Second, silence is also an issue to which people in every-day communication do not pay a lot of attention. Frequently, people use silences without even being aware of it, which is particularly fascinating. Silences are often received and produced subconsciously and as a result, usually not much importance and consideration is attributed to the use and meaning of silence. Nevertheless, they are present in all instances of communication. On the one hand, in the form of pauses silences structure our conversations. On the other hand, we can use communicative silence purposefully to convey a certain meaning. Moreover, another interesting aspect of silence is its culture-relativity. People are rarely aware of the fact that silence is often used and evaluated very differently in other cultures, which consequently often leads to problems and conflicts in intercultural communication.

Thus, investigating silence – and particularly its relation to politeness – should help increase awareness of the significance of silence in communication, investigate and illustrate what kind of different function silence can fulfil in communication, and highlight the fact that its use and evaluation differs substantially across cultures. Hence, possibilities of conflict caused through the use and misinterpretation of silence as well as potential barriers in intercultural communication will be indicated. Furthermore, I will attempt to show the relativity and variability of such concepts like *politeness* and *silence in communication*.

This thesis will first look at linguistic politeness in general and politeness theories in particular, and second, at the theory of silence in communication. Then, it will be discussed how silence is related to culture, and the use and evaluation of silence according to its degree of politeness in 'Western cultures' will be compared with that in 'non-western cultures'. The last section will focus on the relationship between silence and politeness in two specific languages: English and German. First, this topic will be investigated theoretically, and afterwards, a small empirical study comparing the attitudes towards silence and its relation to politeness will be conducted. The results of this study will be presented, analysed and compared to the literature on this topic, which will be discussed beforehand.

1.2. Terminology

One of the most problematic and delicate aspects in this analysis is the terminology. A number of frequently used terms, like *culture*, *Western culture*, *European culture*, *American culture* and some others, are in fact very controversial and do not have any clear-cut definitions. These expressions refer to concepts that are extremely difficult to define, probably because they are relative. They do not denote stable entities, but rather summarise the most salient features and aspects of very broad concepts. In fact, it may be impossible to pin down what the 'Western culture' is because even within this category there is a great degree of variation and diversity. Therefore, although I am aware of the difficulty and relativity of such terms, they will be used in this thesis – referring to constantly changing and variable entities.

A great number of scholars frequently use these terms quite loosely, often without clearly defining them. Furthermore, even if there are definitions, they differ substantially from one another. Apart from the difficulty of defining the group of 'Western cultures', we also have to admit that even if we choose a smaller group, such as 'European cultures', this does not really facilitate the process of definition. Europe is not a homogeneous entity, nor can the single countries within Europe be regarded as such. Most of the researchers who will be quoted in this thesis distinguish between 'Western cultures' and 'non-Western cultures'. Undoubtedly, this distinction is very vague and actually daring because the terms are rather fuzzy. Both terms rather sum up a huge amount of different attitudes, beliefs and traditions. It seems that this distinction is a very attractive and convenient one. It appears to be a basic human desire to compartmentalise things and establish neat dividing lines between strikingly different things, thus overlooking and neglecting minor differences of the things that are on either side of this line. Being aware of the differences within the category 'Western cultures' and of the problematic nature of this expression, I will use the term in this analysis – mostly in order to interpret and discuss the research that has already been done in this area, which is often based on such categorisation.

It is very unlikely that this problem should be solved in the near future. Its existence and seriousness should by no means be denied or called into question. However, for the purpose of this analysis it is necessary to establish certain categories such as 'European culture', 'Anglo-American culture' or – both taken together – 'Western cultures' and to recognise and keep in mind but not focus on the problem of intra-categorical differences and the lack of homogeneity of these groups.

In addition, two other terms should be mentioned here, as they relate to the investigation of silence in different cultures. One of them is *cross-cultural*; the other one is *intercultural*. Both refer to similar phenomena. Furthermore, it seems that in the literature these expressions are often used to refer to the same issue, which increases confusion about them even more. Jandt (2007: 36) defines them differently. According to him, *cross-cultural* “generally refers to comparing phenomena across cultures” and *intercultural* “generally refers to face-to-face interactions among people of diverse cultures”. In order to avoid unnecessary confusion, this thesis will rely on Jandt’s definition, and use the terms accordingly.

2. Politeness

This chapter will have a look at an issue with which we are concerned continuously in everyday interaction: *politeness*. Politeness is usually regarded as an important aspect of human interaction. It can of course be expressed in various ways, including gestures, facial expressions, and certain actions. However, this thesis will mainly focus on linguistic politeness – the way politeness is expressed through language, or, as we will see later, through the absence of language. Moreover, cultural differences with regard to assumptions and evaluations of politeness will be taken into consideration.

During the last few decades the study of politeness has enjoyed substantial interest, and a considerable amount of research on this topic has been conducted, as is also affirmed by Hickey and Stewart (2005: 1):

Politeness is an area of interactional pragmatics which has experienced an explosion of interest over the past quarter of a century and in which empirical studies have proliferated, examining – individually and cross-culturally – languages and language varieties from around the world.

Watts (2003: 53) argues that the study of politeness in the Western world has been sparked off by the appearance of Austin's speech act theory in the 1960's. Further influential concepts for the development of the study of politeness were Grice's *Cooperative Principle* and Goffman's notion of *face* and *facework*. This chapter will give an overview of the major theories about linguistic politeness and their criticism, and it will try to shed more light on the discussion of what politeness is and how it is defined.

2.1. Major politeness theories

2.1.1. Influential concepts: Grice's *Cooperative Principle* and Goffman's notion of *face*

Grice's contribution to the field of pragmatics reaches back to the 1950's when he published his article "Meaning" (1957). In this work he suggested that two types of meaning are involved in every verbal utterance: first, the *sentence meaning* – the conventional denotative meaning of the sentence uttered – and second, the *speaker meaning* – what the speaker means by producing this utterance. Furthermore, Grice published "Logic and conversation" in 1969, which has been more relevant for our discussion of politeness. In this article, he presents the

concept of the *Cooperative Principle* (CP). It consists of the following four conversational maxims and further sub-maxims:

- Maxim of QUANTITY: Give the right amount of information.
 - Make your contribution as informative as is required.
 - Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.
- Maxim of QUALITY: Try to make your contribution one that is true.
 - Do not say what you believe to be false.
 - Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.
- Maxim of RELATION: Be relevant
- Maxim of MANNER: Be perspicuous.
 - Avoid obscurity of expression.
 - Avoid ambiguity.
 - Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity).
 - Be orderly.

(taken from Grice 1989: 308)

Grice claims that participants of a conversation usually adhere to these maxims. However, sometimes interactants deliberately violate or flout one or more of the maxims and in this way signal a conversational *implicature* that the hearer has to recognise in order to understand the speaker's intention. Thus, the CP is reinstated again. By introducing the Cooperative Principle, Grice wanted first, to describe normal conversational behaviour and second, to account for the fact that a hearer can infer meanings that are not conveyed in the literal utterance of the speaker (implicatures).

Politeness is not an explicit part of the CP. Grice does not deal with politeness; his maxims do not even mention it. However, the concept of the CP has substantially influenced subsequent research into linguistic politeness. Many people who deal with politeness in language, for instance Leech (1991 [1983]) and Brown and Levinson (1987), have used the CP as a basis for their theory and argued that the aspect of politeness is missing and should be added.

Bowe (2007: 12) points out that Grice's work has received some criticism (Sperber & Wilson 1986; Wierzbicka 1991; Clyne 1994) for its anglocentric approach. While relevance might be the most neutral and universally applicable maxim, different cultures and languages might have different assumptions and attribute different degrees of importance to the maxims of quantity, quality, and manner. For instance, while the maxim of manner is highly valued in Anglo-based cultures like England, the USA, and Australia, in other cultures, such as Vietnamese, Japanese and Javanese, implicitness is not regarded as very important. Moreover,

the maxim of quality, and thus the concept of truth, is a crucial value in Europe, but it is not considered as essential in Vietnamese and South-east Asian Chinese cultures (Clyne 1994: 193).

As we will see, Brown and Levinson, whose theory of politeness is probably the best-known and most influential one, also draw on Goffman's notion of *face*. Goffman (1967 [1956]: 5) describes face as an image of the self which is constructed within social interaction through the social attributes given by others:

The term *face* may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self delineated in terms of approved social attributes [...].

Thus, face can be unstable and changeable, and is constantly renegotiable. It depends on the conversational situation and on the interactants. Goffman emphasises that a person's face depends substantially on his/her behaviour and on the way how this is evaluated by others, which means that face is determined to a great extent by society:

In any case, while his social face can be his most personal possession and the center of his security and pleasure, it is only on loan to him from society; it will be withdrawn unless he conducts himself in a way that is worthy of it. Approved attributes and their relation to face make of every man his own jailer; this is a fundamental social constraint even though each man may like his cell. (Goffman 1967: 10)

Goffman also emphasises that it is not only important for a person to save his/her own face, but also that of the others. Maybe because face is constructed through social interaction and thus everyone is somehow dependent on others, people are expected to show both self-respect and considerateness for other people:

Just as the member of any group is expected to have self-respect, so also he is expected to sustain a standard of considerateness; he is expected to go to certain lengths to save the feelings and the face of others present, and he is expected to do this willingly and spontaneously because of emotional identification with the others and with their feelings. (Goffman 1967: 10)

Furthermore, Goffman uses the concepts of *deference* and *demeanour*. He defines *deference* as "the appreciation an individual shows of another to that other, whether through avoidance rituals or presentational rituals" (Goffman 1967: 77). *Demeanour* means denying positive attributes in front of someone with a higher social status. Thus, Goffman presents a duality of concepts that are in a continuous dialectic relationship during social interaction. As Watts

(2003: 107) points out, Goffman's notion of face can be also applied to collectively organised societies and allows both volitional and discernment politeness.

2.1.2. Lakoff's rules of politeness

In her article "The logic of politeness; or minding your p's and q's" published in 1973 Robin Lakoff presents a model of politeness which suggests setting up pragmatic rules in addition to the existing syntactic and semantic rules. Her attempt at setting up rules for pragmatic well-formed utterances can probably be attributed to her training as a generative linguist. Analogously to Chomsky, Lakoff believes that the notion of *pragmatic competence* is the basis for the search for pragmatic rules (Watts 2003: 59).

In her model of politeness Lakoff (1973) suggests two major rules of pragmatic competence which both consist of a set of sub-rules. On the one hand, pragmatic competence consists of what Lakoff calls *rules of conversation* ("Be clear"). These rules actually correspond to Grice's CP and its maxims (quantity, quality, relevance, and manner). On the other hand, there are the *rules of politeness* ("Be polite") which consist of the sub-rules "Don't impose", "Give options", and "Make A feel good – be friendly" (Watts 2003: 60). Furthermore, Lakoff (1973) claims that there are different levels of politeness types – ranging from *formal/impersonal politeness* (don't impose) over *informal politeness* (give options) to *intimate politeness* (make A feel good).

Lakoff (1977: 17) calls Grice's rules of conversation "rules of clarity" because, as she claims, they exist for the reason of communicative clarity. Similarly to the rules of conversation, the rules of politeness which she proposes serve to help people through cooperative transaction without much friction and waste effort. However, she emphasises that they are to a certain extent mutually exclusive, which means that depending on the situation, usually only one of them should be applied (1977: 19).

Lakoff (1977: 34) points out that a major problem with the rules of conversation is that what is relevant or necessary to the speaker is in fact not always relevant and necessary to the addressee. Furthermore, she argues that people normally react similarly to the violation of the rules of conversation as to the violation of the rules of politeness. Usually, the reaction is annoyance. Thus, according to her, the rules of conversation can be regarded as sub-cases of the rules of politeness. However, she stresses that the rules of politeness are only effective up to a certain point. As soon as real danger or injury threatens, they are not effective anymore because in such a situation nobody cares about politeness (Lakoff 1977: 36).

Moreover, she clarifies that it is not usual to follow all these rules in normal friendly conversation because adhering to all the rules would result in a stiff and dull conversation. This is certainly true, as probably anyone has already realised. However, here it might be helpful to pay attention to Kasper (1990: 205) who points out an important distinction between discourse types. According to her, the discourse type has an influence on the quality and quantity of politeness. The distinction is made between *transactional discourse types* and *interactional discourse types*. While the former category is concerned mainly with efficient transmission of information, the latter is focused on establishing and maintaining social relationships.

Lakoff (1977: 40) argues that people break some of the rules of conversation continuously but still understand each other very well. Here, she probably means conversations of the interactional discourse type, where this behaviour is typical. She even claims that the addressee usually also understands why the speaker does not adhere to the rules and why he implies something instead of saying it directly. Her explanation for this is that by communicating information indirectly, a speaker shows the addressee that the information, or even the whole conversation, is of a special kind (Lakoff 1977: 42). As a consequence, Lakoff suggests that there is a particular overriding principle: "Be clear, unless there is some reason not to be".

In conclusion, Lakoff (1977: 52) admits that the pragmatic rules she suggests are fuzzy, just like the fuzzy syntax and the fuzzy semantics. According to her, adhering to all of these rules is not always crucial for 'smooth communication'. Fraser (1990: 223) points out that Lakoff never actually defines politeness explicitly. Yet, he infers that what she regards politeness to be is the avoidance of offense, as she maintains that when there is a conflict between politeness and clarity, politeness supersedes because it is more important to avoid offense and strengthen the relationship than to achieve clarity and convey information (Lakoff 1973: 297-298).

2.1.3. Leech

Leech is one of many researchers who highlight the importance of politeness in human communication. He emphasises that politeness is not only a minor or subsidiary aspect, but in fact an essential component of human communication:

Far from being a superficial matter of 'being polite', politeness is an important missing link between the CP and the problem of how to relate sense to force. (Leech 1991 [1983]: 104).

Leech (1991 [1983]) points out that the Cooperative Principle (CP) alone is not enough, as there is a range of situations where its maxims are violated. He argues for introducing another principle into pragmatics: the *Politeness Principle* (PP). Thus, he takes a closer look at Grice's Cooperative Principle (CP) and emphasises that the principle does not apply equally to all societies, but that different societies operate maxims differently, for instance by giving politeness a higher value in certain situations than cooperation. As a consequence, he regards the PP as an essential complement to the CP because it can account for certain exceptions to the CP (Leech 1991: 80).

Leech takes up Grice's concept of the Cooperative Principle and basically defends it but suggests adding a further aspect: the Politeness Principle (PP). He asserts that the CP makes it possible for a participant in a conversation to communicate on the assumption that the other participant is cooperative and therefore, it functions as a regulator of what people say in order to achieve a certain illocutionary goal (1991: 82). However, according to Leech, the PP has a higher regulative role as it helps to "maintain the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable us to assume that our interlocutors are being cooperative in the first place" (Leech 1991: 82). Thus, Leech first of all emphasises the PP's purpose of establishing and maintaining comity in a social group, and secondly, he claims that if you are not polite, communication will break down consequently. Because of these reasons, he regards politeness as an essential component of human communication.

Furthermore, he (1991: 83) points out a few interesting issues. First, he stresses what has been already put forward by Grice himself, that when someone wants to be polite, this person is often confronted with a clash between the CP and the PP. Apart from this, he highlights the distinction between absolute and relative politeness and between negative and positive politeness. As far as the latter distinction is concerned, he explains it in the following way:

Negative politeness [...] consists in minimizing the impoliteness of impolite illocutions, and positive politeness consists in maximizing the politeness of polite illocutions. (Leech 1991: 83, 84)

He also maintains that, although he mostly uses 'politeness' in the sense of absolute politeness – as a scale with a positive and a negative pole –, people usually use the term 'polite' in a relative sense – relative either to a particular norm of behaviour or a certain setting. Different cultural groups have different assumptions and norms regarding politeness and people are judged as being impolite or polite on the basis of such norms. Therefore, Leech points out that relative politeness is variable on many dimensions, depending on the standards that are investigated. However, the question here is if there actually is such a thing as absolute

politeness? The fact that Leech describes absolute politeness as a scale already seems like a contradiction in terms, as a scale usually implies something relative. Apart from that, we should ask the question if it is really possible to regard politeness separately from its context.

Leech (1991: 104 ff) also indicates that different situations call for different kinds of politeness. He looks at different illocutionary functions that are classified into four categories according to their relation to the social goal of establishing and maintaining comity. These categories are: *competitive*, *convivial*, *collaborative*, and *conflictive*. He concentrates on the first two of them and on the corresponding categories of negative and positive politeness. When the illocutionary function is competitive, for instance in ordering, asking, demanding or begging, the politeness involved is of a negative kind. As competitive goals are always discourteous and involve a discord between what the speaker wants to achieve and what is regarded as 'good manners', the purpose of politeness in this context is to reduce this discord (Leech 1991: 105, 106). Thus, Leech claims that the PP has the function of mitigating the intrinsic discourtesy of the goal. In contrast to this, convivial goals are intrinsically courteous. They include for instance situations of offering, greeting, thanking or congratulating. The politeness involved here is of a more positive character and basically seeks opportunities for comity (Leech 1991: 105). Hence, he maintains that some types of illocutions are inherently polite or impolite, which is criticised by Fraser (1990: 227) who points out that while the performance of an illocutionary act can be evaluated as polite or impolite, the act itself cannot be said to be either polite or impolite.

Similar to Brown and Levinson, Leech (1991: 108) emphasises that the degree of politeness can be increased by using a more indirect kind of illocution. Indirectness seems to be commonly associated with politeness. Leech gives two reasons for this, i.e. increased optionality and alleviated force:

Indirect illocutions tend to be more polite (a) because they increase the degree of optionality, and (b) because the more indirect an illocution is, the more diminished and tentative its force tends to be. (Leech 1991: 108)

Consequently, taking this claim into account, one is tempted to assume that silence is a very polite form of behaviour because it is definitely the most indirect form possible. However, as we will see, this is not always the case. In fact, although silence is certainly an indirect form of expression, it is not regarded as polite in all situations and in all cultures. This is later also confirmed by Leech (1991: 109) when he admits that it is not enough to focus on the correlation between indirectness and politeness. He stresses that we must, above all, be able to say *why* a certain device of indirectness helps to achieve a specific illocutionary goal.

Moreover, Leech describes a range of different scales that give information about how much and what kind of politeness is required in a certain speech situation. On the whole, it is five of them which will be described shortly. The *cost-benefit* scale informs about the cost or benefit of a certain action to the speaker or the hearer. The *optionality* scale shows how much choice the speaker gives to the hearer and the *indirectness* scale tells how long the path connecting the illocutionary act to its illocutionary goal is (Leech 1991: 123). Moreover, the scales of *authority* and *social distance* influence the degree of politeness that is required by a person towards another, and determine, for instance, the choice between familiar or respectful pronouns of address in many European languages.

Leech (1991: 132 ff) identifies six maxims of politeness which will be outlined shortly here together with their submaxims:

- *Tact maxim*: a) Minimise cost to other b) (Maximise benefit to other)
- *Generosity maxim* a) Minimise benefit to self b) (Maximise cost to self)
- *Approbation maxim* a) Minimise dispraise of other b) (Maximise praise of other)
- *Modesty maxim* a) Minimise praise of self b) (Maximise dispraise of self)
- *Agreement maxim* a) Minimise disagreement between self and other b) (Maximise agreement between self and other)
- *Sympathy maxim* a) Minimise antipathy between self and other b) (Maximise sympathy between self and other)

According to Leech (1991: 133), not all of these maxims and sub-maxims are equally important. Thus, the Tact maxim is more essential than the Generosity maxim. The Approbation maxim is stronger than the Modesty maxim. This shows that in politeness more emphasis is put on the *other* than on *self*. Furthermore, with regard to the sub-maxims, the first one is more important than the second because this is only a natural corollary of the first. This also highlights that in general more importance is attached to negative politeness than to positive politeness. On the whole, this list of maxims gives the impression that being polite is actually a very complicated task if all of these maxims have to be fulfilled. However, Leech (1991: 133) reminds us that these maxims are only observed up to a certain point and that they are no absolute rules.

Another observation Leech (1991: 138) makes is that there is a general tendency to exaggerate agreement with other people and alleviate disagreement, for instance by expressing regret or also partial agreement. He maintains that another possibility is to remain silent when disagreeing with another person. In this case, silence can be regarded as a polite form of producing a dispreferred and discourteous illocution. Accordingly, such a silence would carry

out a face-threatening-act, but at the same time reduce the face-threat substantially. An obvious problem with this is, as is indicated Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987), the danger that the addressee might not understand this instance of silence as a form of disagreement.

Relating to this general tendency of emphasising agreement and underplaying disagreement, Leech (1991: 147) mentions the *Pollyanna Hypothesis* which claims that people preferably look on the bright side of life rather than on the gloomy side of it. Thus, in a communicative framework this means that participants of a conversation prefer to talk about pleasant topics rather than about unpleasant ones. As a result, euphemisms are created to disguise unpleasant topics by referring to them by inoffensive expressions. For instance, when a worker is dismissed, one will frequently hear “*He was made redundant*”. Another consequence of the Pollyanna Hypothesis is the tendency to understate the degree to which something is bad. Hence, applying silence instead of verbally expressing something touchy, or bad news could be attributed to this principle.

Finally, Leech claims that the principles and maxims mentioned are in a way universal; they control human communication. However, he admits that the particular maxims might have a different value and weight in different cultures:

These observations assume, of course, that such principles, being the general functional ‘imperatives’ of human communication, are more or less universal, but that their relative weights will vary from one cultural, social, or linguistic milieu to another. (Leech 1991: 150)

The question arises here whether the claim for universality holds if some maxims have such little value in certain cultures that they can be completely ignored.

2.1.4. Brown and Levinson

Although Robin Lakoff’s work of 1973 has already treated and highlighted politeness as an area of linguistic interest, Brown and Levinson’s theory of politeness, which was published for the first time in 1978, constitutes one of the major and most important approaches to linguistic politeness and it has formed the basis for further research in this area. It is probably the most well-known and influential theory available on the ‘linguistic market’. Several later linguists have based their work on this theory and have interpreted their empirical data with the help of Brown and Levinson’s model, for instance Scollon and Scollon (1989), Sifianou (1992), Janney and Arndt (2005). As Hickey and Stewart (2005:3) point out, Brown and Levinson’s work has, most importantly, demonstrated that human communication is not only about conveying

information, but also to a great extent about establishing and maintaining interpersonal relationships in a certain socio-cultural context.

This model of politeness consists of the three basic concepts *face*, *face-threatening acts* (FTAs) and *politeness strategies*. It is based on the analysis of the three unrelated languages English, Tamil, and Tzeltal, and it was presented as being universally applicable. The notion of face is taken from both Goffman's (1967) work and from the English folk perception of "being embarrassed or humiliated, or 'loosing face'" (Brown and Levinson 1987 [1978]: 61).

According to Brown and Levinson (1987:3), Grice's theory of conversational implicature is correct. As a consequence, they criticise Leech's (1983) proposal that in addition to the CP another principle, the Politeness Principle (PP), should be included in the framework. As has been mentioned previously, Leech maintains that the CP and the PP are coordinate principles and the CP alone would be incomplete and insufficient to account for many instances of linguistic behaviour. Brown and Levinson (1987: 4-5) emphasise that this argument is not convincing, particularly because not every pattern of language requires an explanatory maxim or principle. In fact, this would cause an unconstrained pragmatic theory that would not be able to identify any counter-examples. They argue that the Gricean framework is sufficient and indeed able to recognise and hold out against such counter examples and behaviour that deviates from the maxims:

The Gricean maxims are not merely statements of regular patterns in behaviour; they are background presumptions, which by virtue of that special status are robust to apparent counter-evidence. (Brown & Levinson 1987: 5)

They disagree with Leech who claims that the CP is not enough to account for apparently uncooperative behaviour:

[...] the assumption of cooperative behaviour is actually hard to undermine: tokens of apparent uncooperative behaviour tend to get interpreted as in fact cooperative at a 'deeper level'. (Brown & Levinson 1987: 5)

In fact they call politeness principles only "principled reasons for deviation" whereas they regard the CP as a neutral and unmarked framework for communication. In Brown and Levinson's model it is the mutual awareness of face sensitivity plus the CP that permit making inference of implicatures of politeness. Maxims are violated at face value and as a consequence, inferences can be derived (Brown & Levinson 1987: 5-6).

Brown and Levinson's (1987: 59, 60) argument can be summarised as follows. Their most powerful assumption is the existence and mutual maintenance of *face*. They define face as "the public self-image that every member wants to claim for himself" (Brown & Levinson 1987:

61). According to them, face consists of two aspects: first, the *negative face* – the claim to freedom of action and freedom from imposition, and second, the *positive face* – the positive self-image and the desire of its appreciation and approval by others. As face consists of wants that can be only satisfied by the actions of others, communication partners are assumed to be mutually interested to maintain each other's face.

Thus face is something that is emotionally invested, and that can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction. [...] normally everyone's face depends on everyone else's being maintained, and since people can be expected to defend their faces if threatened, and in defending their own to threaten other's faces, it is general in every participant's best interest to maintain each other's face, that is to act in ways that assure the other participants that the agent is heedful of the assumptions concerning face [...]. (Brown & Levinson 1987: 61)

There are some acts that intrinsically threaten face. Brown and Levinson call them *face-threatening-acts* (FTAs). Normally, the speaker will wish to minimise the face-threat of the FTA unless s/he for some reason wants to threaten the hearer's face deliberately:

In the context of the mutual vulnerability of face, any rational agent will seek to avoid these face-threatening-acts, or will employ certain strategies to minimize the threat. (Brown & Levinson 1987: 68)

There are a number of different strategies to do or not do an FTA; they are displayed in Figure 1.

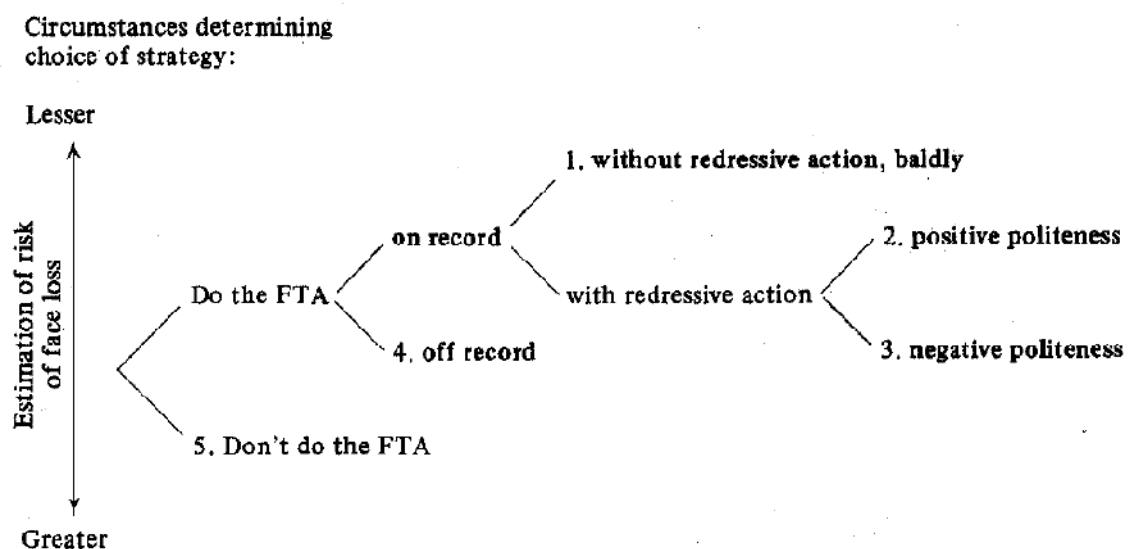


Figure 1: Possible strategies for doing FTAs (Brown & Levinson 1987: 60)

Brown and Levinson claim that since the points mentioned above are generally known by participants of a conversation, they will not opt for a strategy less risky than necessary because this could indicate that the FTA is more threatening than it actually is the case.

There are two major possibilities to do an FTA (Brown & Levinson: 68-70). First, a speaker can go *on record* with his/her act, which means that his/her intention in doing the act is clear and unambiguous. Second, a person can go *off record* in doing an FTA. Consequently, the intention behind this act is not as clearly and easily identifiable, the act is less direct, and the addressee would have to infer what the speaker's real intention is. Thus, its meaning is to a certain degree negotiable, and this minimises the face threat. However, by using this strategy, the speaker risks that the hearer does not derive the inference, and as a result, the intended FTA does not have the effect it should have had.

For FTAs *on record* there are two possibilities. One of them is to do an act *baldly, without redress*, which means to do it in a very direct, clear and unambiguous way. This strategy is usually used when efficiency is regarded as more important than face demands, or where the danger for face threat is relatively small, for instance in offers, suggestions and requests that are in the addressee's interest, or in situations where the speaker is clearly superior in power than the hearer. The other possible strategy for doing *on record* acts is with *redressive action*, which means that the speaker tries to counteract the potential damage to the hearer's face by indicating clearly that no face threat is intended and that the speaker actually respects the hearer's face wants.

For FTAs done *on record with redressive action* there are again two possible strategies. The first is *positive politeness*, which means that the speaker minimises the potential face threat by making clear that s/he appreciates at least some aspects of the hearer's self-image. The second possibility is *negative politeness*. This strategy is avoidance-based; the speaker shows respect for the addressee's negative face wants and emphasises his/her freedom of action. According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 73, 74), the positive politeness strategy is more 'dangerous' than the negative politeness strategy. Therefore, it is in general safer for a speaker to assume that the hearer attaches more importance to freedom of action and self-determination (and thus to his/her negative face wants) than to the appreciation of his positive face wants.

Apart from this, Brown and Levinson (1987: 70) claim that there is one other possibility which constitutes a kind of compromise between the desire to go *on record* and the desire to go *off record*; they call it *conventionalised indirectness*. This strategy implies an indirect mechanism of doing an FTA, however due to conventionalisation this act can no longer be regarded as off-record. An example for this would be the conventionalised indirect request *Can you pass the salt?*

According to Brown and Levinson's (1987: 73) theory, participants in a conversation usually consider the advantages and effects of the different strategies, and in general, the more dangerous a certain FTA seems to them, the higher-numbered the strategy they chose will be.¹ Every strategy has its advantages and its disadvantages. Strategies that minimise the face risk require more effort from the speaker, and are less clear. Therefore, no one will use a strategy that involves more face-risk minimisation than is necessary to retain the addressee's cooperation.

Brown and Levinson make a few distinctions with regard to FTAs. One major distinction is that of acts that threaten the addressee's negative face and those that threaten his/her positive face (Brown & Levinson 1987: 65 ff). The former category comprises such acts that predicate a future action of the addressee, for instance orders, requests, suggestions, advice, reminding, threats, warnings or dares. Furthermore, it includes acts that predict a positive future act of the speaker towards the hearer, such as offers or promises, and acts that express a desire of the speaker towards the addressee or his/her goods, for example compliments, expressions of envy or admiration, or expressions of strong (negative) feelings towards the hearer. The second category comprises acts that threaten the addressee's positive face, i.e. those that show the speaker's negative evaluation of some aspect of the hearer's positive face, like expressions of disapproval, criticism, contempt or ridicule, complaints, accusations, insults, contradictions or disagreement, and challenges. This type also includes all kinds of acts that show that the speaker does not care about the hearer's positive face, for instance mention of taboo topics, bringing bad news about the hearer, raising delicate topics, or non-cooperation in an activity (Brown & Levinson 1987: 65-67).

Their second major distinction is the one between threats to the hearer's face and threats to the speaker's face. Apart from acts that threaten the addressee's face, like those mentioned above, there are acts that threaten the speaker's negative face, such as expressing thanks, acceptance of another person's apology, acceptance of offers or compliments, and unwilling promises or offers. Acts that threaten the speaker's positive face include for instance apologies, confessions, admissions of guilt or responsibility, breakdown of physical control over body, or self-humiliation (Brown & Levinson 1987: 67-68). Thus, according to Brown and Levinson's theory, almost every act of communication is a threat to the face, which means that we cannot accept an offer, an apology or a compliment because we commit ourselves to some debt or may feel constrained to minimise the others' debt or make a compliment in return.

¹ "Higher numbered" refers to the numbers preceding the different strategies in Figure 1. Thus, an FTA done *on record* and *without redressive action* would be lowest-numbered whereas not doing the FTA at all would be the highest-numbered strategy.

Moreover, the theory also takes into account sociological variables which influence the choice of strategy substantially. The three major factors that are involved in the assessment of seriousness of FTAs are the *social distance* between speaker and hearer, the *relative power* of speaker and hearer and the *absolute ranking* of impositions in the specific culture (Brown & Levinson 1987: 74).

In summary, Brown and Levinson's model is a production model. It claims to explain how and why certain forms of linguistic politeness occur rather than others, and in addition, it presents politeness as a universal concept. Probably because of this, it has received a lot of attention. This theory presents communication as an extremely dangerous and complex process in which interpersonal and politeness-dependent, as well as economic considerations play an important role. It seems that politeness, which in this case means respecting and taking into consideration the face wants of the interlocutors, plays an important role and poses a kind of counter-interest to the personal interests and wants of the speakers. As a result, communication seems to be a constant evaluation and weighing of one's own desires and those of the other people with whom one wants to converse, and in the end, one has to take a decision that is more or less risky.

If verbal communication is really as dangerous to the individual face and the relationship of the participants, then it seems that silence in communication is a comparatively safe strategy. It can avoid face risk both of speakers and hearers and therefore, following Brown and Levinson, one is tempted to regard it as the most polite way of behaviour in certain situations. However, that this cannot be generalised because the evaluation and meaning of silence in communication substantially depends on individual, situational and particularly cultural aspects, will be discussed in more detail at a later stage of this thesis.

2.1.5. Other theories

Another researcher concerned with politeness is Fraser (1990). He identifies the following four major views of linguistic politeness. First, there is the *social-norm view* which is based on the folk interpretation of politeness in English-speaking countries and assumes that every society has a set of social norms that prescribe particular ways of behaviour and thinking in a certain context (Fraser 1990: 220). This view associates politeness with good manners. In the past, manuals of etiquette promoted this view. Second, Fraser (1990: 222 ff) identifies the *conversational-maxim view* which is based on Grice's Cooperative Principle and includes models such as those by Lakoff (1973) and Leech (1983). Then, there is the *face-saving view*, which is the one adopted by Brown and Levinson. While Brown and Levinson regard Grice's

theory of the Cooperative Principle as correct, they maintain that the desire to ensure politeness constitutes a strong motivation for not always adhering strictly to Grice's conversational maxims (Fraser 1990: 228).

Finally, Fraser's own perspective on linguistic politeness is called the *conversational-contract view*, first outlined in 1975. Although it also adopts Grice's concept of the Cooperative Principle and employs Goffman's notion of face, it differs to some extent from Brown and Levinson's view. This approach assumes that each participant in a conversation has an individual set of rights and obligations that have an influence on the interaction. They can be renegotiated within an interaction and are influenced by a number of factors such as status and power of the speaker, and the nature of circumstances:

[...] upon entering into a given conversation, each party brings an understanding of some initial set of rights and obligations that will determine, at least for the preliminary stages, what the participants can expect from the other(s). During the course of time, or because of a change in the context, there is always the possibility for a renegotiation of the conversational contract: the two parties may readjust just what rights and what obligations they hold towards each other. (Fraser 1990: 232)

This view expects participants of a conversation to act within the negotiated constraints. As a consequence, being polite is not a behaviour that is noted because it constitutes the norm. However, if people do not behave in the way they are expected to do, they are considered impolite or rude (Fraser 1990: 133). Moreover, Fraser emphasises that it is not sentences or languages that are more or less polite or impolite. As a matter of fact, it is only speakers who are polite or not.

Fraser (1990: 234-235) rejects both the *social-norm view* and the *conversational-maxim view* and maintains that despite some differences, the *face-saving view* and the *conversational-contract view* share the same orientation: the fact that the linguistic form is chosen because of a responsibility towards the hearer within the interaction. However, he emphasises that Brown and Levinson's approach needs to be systematically challenged.

Unlike Brown and Levinson, Sifianou (1992: 49) calls the two conflicting needs that participants of a conversation have to balance according to culturally specific norms in order to communicate successfully *involvement* and *independence*. Thus, she only seems to substitute different terms for Brown and Levinson's *positive politeness* and *negative politeness*. Sifianou defines politeness as consideration for others:

At its most basic level, politeness is seen as consideration for the other person, according to expected norms. [...] What form this consideration will take and to whom

it will be addressed largely depends on the cultural background of the participants, that is, their shared and thus expected norms of behaviour. (Sifianou 1992: 83)

Her main concern about politeness research is to “point out that there are basic differences in the conception of what politeness means, and, consequently, in its manifestations [...]”(1992: 94). Thus, politeness is realised differently in different cultures, which is frequently a reason for problems in intercultural communication.

Scollon & Scollon (1995: 36) follow Brown and Levinson's stand in that they also describe face as consisting of two major needs which are always present in each conversation. However, like Sifianou they call these *involvement* and *independence*. The co-existence of these needs produces a paradoxical situation. According to them (Scollon & Scollon 1995: 44), there are three main types of politeness systems which differ from each other in the relation of power difference (+P or -P) and distance between participants (+D or -D). They call these *deference politeness system* (-P, +D), *solidarity politeness system* (-P, -D), and *hierarchical politeness system* (+P, +/- D). Of these three, Scollon & Scollon (1995: 46) claim that the hierarchical politeness system is the most common “sort of organisational relationship”.

Janney and Arndt (2005: 21 ff) distinguish two types of politeness: *social politeness* and *tact*. While social politeness stems from people's desire for smooth interaction with others and functions mainly as a means to provide a framework of standardised strategies for getting into and out of common social situations, such as beginning, maintaining and ending conversation, tact relates to people's need to maintain face and behave in an interpersonally supportive way. Hence, social politeness coordinates social interaction and tact maintains face and regulates interpersonal relationships (Janney and Arndt 2005: 23-24). Janney & Arndt claim that being tactful is essential for maintaining a positive frame of communication with the partners, particularly because misunderstandings in conversation are sometimes inevitable. In intercultural communication these misunderstandings are even more difficult to handle because the participants do often not share the same strategies of tact (Janney and Arndt 2005: 21).

Moreover, Janney and Arndt (2005: 28-29) identify two basic face-needs to which tact is directed. First, there is the basic need to feel free, unimpeded and self-determining, which they call the *need for personal face*, and second, there is the need to feel accepted, appreciated and respected, which they call the *need for interpersonal face*. To some extent, they admit that these needs are antithetical. Thus, they present a notion of face that seems to rely on Brown and Levinson's concept; yet, they use different expressions. Like Brown and Levinson, Janney and Arndt also regard almost any utterance in a conversation as potentially

face-threatening. They claim that “[...] every request, suggestion, evaluation, command, criticism, or difference of opinion of any kind can be interpreted as an implicit threat to the face” (2005: 29).

Another view has been proposed by House (2005). She regards politeness as “one of the basic socio-psychological guidelines for human behaviour” and being polite as the unmarked way of behaving (House 2005: 13). Moreover, she emphasises that only speakers, and not utterances, can be called ‘polite’ or ‘impolite’, and defines politeness as “demonstrated consideration of one another” (House 2005: 14). Hence, her definition is similar to that of Sifianou, but in addition, by using the term ‘demonstrated’, House stresses that politeness does not necessarily need to be genuine or sincere. According to her, politeness is both a general human behavioural trait and also reflects a particular culture’s behavioural norms (House 2006: 264). House attempts at producing a descriptive and explanatory framework of politeness that combines universal aspects of politeness with culture- and language-specific aspects. Her model of politeness consists of four levels and is displayed in Figure 2.

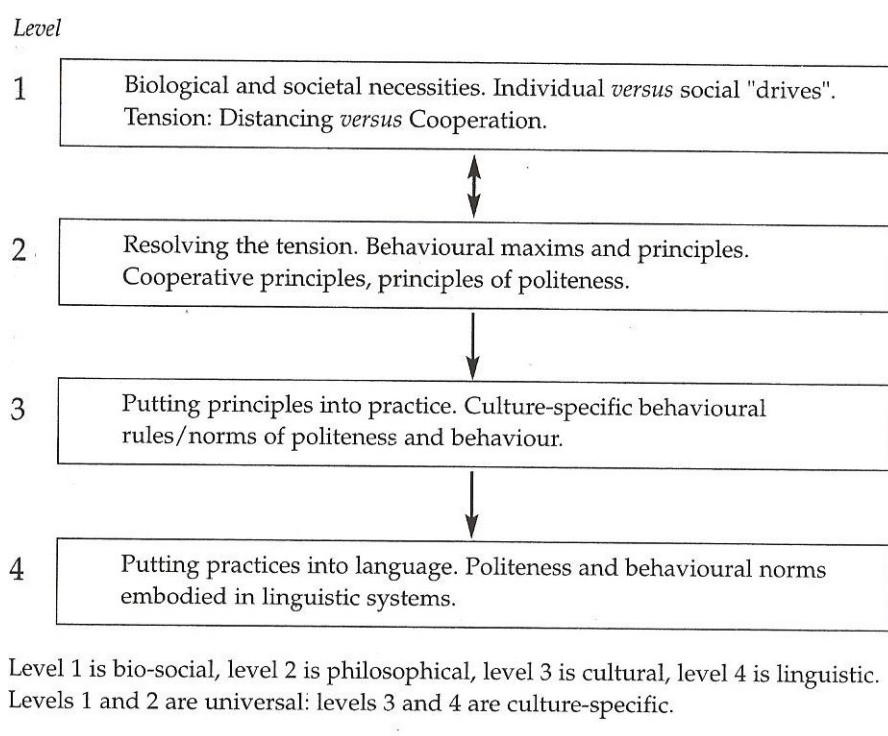


Figure 2: House’s multilevel model of politeness (House 2005: 17)

First, there is a biological, psycho-social level on which the two basic needs of *coming together with others* and *distancing oneself from others* are located; they correspond to Brown and Levinson’s positive and negative politeness. The second level is what House calls “the philosophical level”. It combines the biological drives into a set of principles and maxims which are realised on the third level, the level of culture-specific norms of behaviour. On the fourth

level, these politeness and behavioural norms are built into the language system (House 2005: 18).

2.2. Criticism of politeness theories

Now that some of the most influential politeness theories have been presented, it is also important to take into account the criticism that they have received. The following section will first discuss Watt's and Eelen's contributions to the study of politeness. Both of them have expressed their own critiques about politeness theories. Second, a discussion of the criticism that focuses particularly on Brown and Levinson, who have produced the most influential and well-known model of politeness, will follow.

2.2.1. Watt's criticism of politeness theories

Watts argues for a strikingly different model of politeness than those which his predecessors offered. In his book *Politeness* (2003) he presents an overview of the major and most influential models of politeness of the past and discloses their flaws and insufficiencies. Clearly, his intention is to criticise and draw attention to the deficiencies of former models of linguistic politeness and to propose a different view and a different way of tackling the problem of politeness. Although he outlines a number of models of which most present at least one or more interesting aspects, in his view only Brown and Levinson's (1978) and Leech's (1983) approaches are well-developed, so that they can be used as a theoretical basis for further research:

The fact remains that only Leech and Brown and Levinson have elaborated their positions in sufficient detail to allow them to be tested through application to real-language data. In addition, only these two models have given extensive examples of the kinds of linguistic structures that are put to use to realise politeness strategies. Researchers are thus given data and analyses of these data that they can check against their own materials. (Watts 2003: 63)

Nevertheless, he puts forward considerable criticism of both theories. With regard to Leech's (1983) model of linguistic politeness, Watts (2003: 68) points out that a number of questions remain open. Thus, he stresses that first, we do not know how to define the parameters on Leech's scales of values, like *cost*, *benefit*, *praise* etc and second, we should ask the question if those parameters can be universally valid. Apart from this, Watts doubts that a speaker can manage to adhere to all the maxims Leech proposes - of the CP, the PP and the IP (Irony Principle), and he criticises Leech's discussion of politeness from the point of view of speech

act types (2003: 69). His model seems to imply that some speech acts are inherently polite or impolite but it does not really give information about how an interactant can know the amount and the type of politeness that is required for a certain speech act.

Watts also discusses and criticises Lakoff's model of politeness. He points out that there is a major weakness in this model because if a speaker adheres to Lakoff's rules of politeness s/he will have to violate at some point the rules of conversation, i.e. one or the other maxim of Grice's CP. Lakoff seems to be aware of this problem and concludes that "when Clarity conflicts with Politeness, in most cases (but not [...] all) Politeness supersedes" (Lakoff 1973: 297 quoted in Watts 2003: 60). Yet, this still does not change the fact that adhering to the rules of politeness results in breaking the rules of conversation.

In a later article published in 1975 Lakoff maintains that "politeness is developed by societies in order to reduce friction in personal interaction" (Lakoff 1975: 64 quoted in Watts 2003: 61). Watts (2003: 61) stresses that from the model she proposes it does not become clear if the rules she suggests describe how people *do* behave or if they are rather normative rules which prescribe how people *should* behave. Moreover, he underlines that even if it might look like that at first sight, Lakoff's model is not a theory of politeness production and that it cannot be regarded as a theoretical model of second-order politeness (Watts 2003: 62, 63).²

From the beginning onwards, Watts (2003) emphasises that a major problem of the study of politeness is that many researchers confuse folk interpretations of politeness with the technical or scientific interpretations. Therefore, he pays particular attention to differentiating between these two types of interpretations by calling the former type *first-order (im)politeness* or *(im)politeness₁*, and the latter one *second-order (im)politeness* or *(im)politeness₂* (Watts 2003: 4).

Another problem he points out is the fact that there is a discursive struggle over the value of the term *politeness*, i.e. lay members of society have different assumptions of politeness and tend to evaluate it differently:

[...] characterisations of politeness in English-speaking societies range from socially 'correct' or appropriate behaviour, through cultivated behaviour, considerateness displayed to others, self-effacing behaviour, to negative attributions such as standoffishness, haughtiness, insincerity, etc. (Watts 2003: 8).

Watts emphasises that in theories of politeness the term *politeness* is mostly used to refer to ways of conceptualising second-order politeness, although the meaning of lexemes such as

² For an explanation of *second-order politeness*, see paragraph below.

polite and *politeness* is being constantly negotiated by people interacting in English and is thus a matter of first-order politeness. There is a discursive struggle over the values of those expressions, which is also illustrated by the fact that the way how politeness₁ is mostly interpreted nowadays differs substantially from the way it was seen in past centuries (Watts 2003: 13).

As a consequence, Watts (2003: 9) argues that the fact that there has been and will be a continuous struggle over the term *(im)politeness* should be the central focus of any theory of politeness. This means that, according to Watts, in the development of a social theory of politeness the focus should be on the study of first-order politeness, not second-order politeness – as it has been the case with former theories:

A theory of politeness₂ should concern itself with the discursive struggle over politeness₁, i.e. over the ways in which (im)polite behaviour is evaluated and commented on by lay members and not with ways in which social scientists lift the term ‘(im)politeness’ out of the realm of everyday discourse and elevate it to the status of a theoretical concept in what is frequently called Politeness Theory. (Watts 2003: 9)

Thus, Watts (2003) does not aim at developing another theory of second-order politeness but wants to highlight the importance of going back to studying lay notions of (im)politeness and how these influence behaviour in social interaction, instead of studying second-order politeness as a concept that has been lifted out of the context of real social interaction and lay conceptualisations.

Apart from this, Watts (2003: 12) demonstrates that the universality claim of Brown and Levinson’s theory is problematic. Nevertheless, he admits that such a claim is quite attractive for the study of linguistic politeness. Hence, he proposes to define first-order politeness in a way that it can be recognised in interaction in any language (Watts 2003: 14). He suggests assuming that the universal lies in the fact that in all human cultures there are forms of social behaviour which are regarded by the members of the respective culture as mutually shared consideration for others:

Cooperative social interaction and displaying consideration for others seem to be universal characteristics of every socio-cultural group. (Watts 2003: 14)

Thus, on the one hand, Watts maintains that there cannot be a valid universal scientific concept of politeness. On the other hand, he admits that the claim for universality (proposed by Brown and Levinson) is at least attractive, and he tries to follow this path by searching for something all cultures have in common, which he calls “shared consideration for others”, as we have seen above. Yet, he also makes clear that what is understood as ‘consideration for

others' often differs from one culture to another. With regard to this, he refers to Sifianou's (1992) research on politeness, in Greek and English. As has been mentioned above, Sifianou understands politeness as consideration for others and hence has the same view like Watts. Her survey shows that in both cultures consideration for others is regarded as an integral part of politeness, but that there are differences in what is interpreted as consideration (Sifianou 1992: 92). Whereas Greeks put a lot of emphasis on the expression of intimacy, warmth and friendliness when asked about what constitutes polite behaviour, English people's concept of politeness does not only stress consideration towards others, but also includes the maintenance of a certain distance – the wish not to impose upon others, the expression of things like altruism, generosity, morality and self-abnegation (Sifianou 1992: 88).

Watts points out a number of further interesting aspects about the study of linguistic politeness. For instance, Watts (2003: 12) stresses the considerable ambiguity in the use of terms like *polite* and *politeness*, which some researchers have tried to avoid by substituting different terms, such as *emotive communication* (Arndt and Janney 1985), *tact* (Janney and Arndt 1992; Leech 1983), or *politic behaviour* (Watts 1992). In order to bring more clarity and less ambiguity into the field of politeness research, Watts himself introduced the concept of *politic behaviour* which he defines as "that behaviour, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction". He claims that we usually know beforehand how we are supposed to behave in a certain interaction, which clearly shows that many forms of social interaction have become institutionalised. 'Politic behaviour' is not polite or impolite; it only means that kind of behaviour which is considered by participants of a conversation as appropriate to the ongoing social interaction. Watts (2003: 19) argues that any linguistic behaviour that is regarded as being beyond politic behaviour is open to classification as 'polite' or 'impolite'.

It seems as if Watts had introduced politic behaviour in order to produce a term that denotes appropriate behaviour which does not leave much space open to any kind of evaluation. Thus, he at least claims to deal with a more or less straightforward concept which is not continuously struggled over, as it is the case with the term *politeness*. However, one could also say that what people regard as 'appropriate to a certain interaction' can vary as well. Like most lexemes, the term *appropriate* does not have only one clearly-defined meaning. As a matter of fact, it can mean a lot of different things, and what is considered appropriate depends very much on the socio-cultural context and then also on the individual's point of view on the world around him/her. As a consequence, Watt's notion of politic behaviour does not appear as clear and straightforward as he would probably like it to be.

With regard to politeness research, Watts (2003: 23) emphasises that it is very difficult to locate (im)politeness in natural discourse. The reasons he gives are first, the impossibility of evaluating (im)polite behaviour without the whole context of the ongoing verbal interaction. Second, he claims that a theory of (im)politeness has to take into account both the speaker and the hearer and points out that meanings and evaluations are constantly negotiated during the interaction process, which means that what has been initially interpreted as polite or impolite might be re-evaluated as the interaction progresses. As a result, Watts stresses that it is impossible to develop a predictive model of linguistic (im)politeness and that therefore it is not possible to come up with an idealised, universal scientific concept of second-order politeness.

In sum, Watts (2003) argues that a good theory of politeness has to take into account the “chameleon-like nature” of politeness in social interaction, the fact that there is a constant struggle over the terms *(im)politeness* and *(im)polite* and that what is often declared as ‘polite behaviour’ is open to evaluation by the members of an interaction. Above all, he stresses that the real object of study of such a theory has to be first-order politeness (politeness₁), not second-order politeness (politeness₂), and that therefore, “it will not be possible to define a universal scientific concept of (im)politeness which can be applied [...] to all human societies” (Watts 2003: 24). Watts highlights the importance of the study of politeness₁ by presenting, as he himself admits, a rather absurd conclusion:

Politeness and impoliteness – and of course their rough equivalents in other languages – are terms referring to ways in which individuals use language socially, so the model of (im)politeness, politeness₂, can never be stripped of its evaluative clothing: The reason is simple: (im)politeness *is* the clothing! [...] The model for (im)politeness cannot therefore divorce itself from these facts, which leads to the seemingly absurd conclusion that (im)politeness₁ is the model for (im)politeness₁. (Watts 2003: 48-49)

In accordance with this point of view, Spencer-Oatey (2005: 97) emphasises that politeness is subjective. She even goes a step further than Watts and claims that politeness is rather a broad evaluative label than a certain kind of behaviour:

[...] I take (im)politeness to be the subjective judgements that people make about the social appropriateness of verbal and non-verbal behaviour. In other words, it is not behaviour per se that is polite, politic (Watts 2003) or impolite; rather (im)politeness is an evaluative label that people attach to behaviour, as a result of their subjective judgements about social appropriateness. I take (im)politeness to be an umbrella term that covers all kinds of evaluative meanings (e.g., warm, friendly, considerate, respectful, deferential, insolent, aggressive, rude).

Consequently, it seems that there can be no such thing as a 'study of politeness'. What is possible instead is a 'study of attitudes towards (linguistically) appropriate behaviour' which can be labelled 'polite' or 'impolite'.

2.2.2. Eelen's criticism of politeness theories

As the title of his book already announces, Eelen (2001) presents a critique of several theories of politeness, including the most common models like those by Lakoff, Brown and Levinson, Leech and Watts. From the beginning, Eelen (2001: i) emphasises that politeness is a complex issue and that the term does not have a straightforward and clear meaning. He points to the fact that although it is a commonsense term with a considerable history which can be traced back to the sixteenth century, there is a range of different associations that are connected to it, as is indicated by associated terms like *civility*, *courtesy* or translations into other languages. However, politeness is a well-established concept within linguistic research. According to Eelen (2001: i), politeness theory is "one of the more popular branches of contemporary pragmatics, and a widely used tool in studies of intercultural communication". Yet, the fact that it is not a straightforward concept is discernible from the large amount of different definitions and interpretations of politeness.

Eelen (2001) sets out to examine how different politeness theories are related by similarities and which overlaps there are. He uses scientific texts as the empirical data he analyses. Like Watts, Eelen makes a clear distinction between the commonsense notion of politeness (politeness1) and the scientific concept of politeness (politeness2), which also constitutes his major point of criticism of common politeness theories. According to Eelen (2001: iv), the commonsense notion of politeness "relates language to aspects of social structure [...] as well as behavioural codes and ethics". Therefore, he argues that the study of politeness helps to understand how ethics and society are related to language and behaviour in general and how society is established and maintained through interaction. Eelen (2001) aims at investigating the relationship between the two notions of politeness.

His examination of politeness theories leads to the conclusion that the distinction between politeness1 and politeness2 is hardly ever questioned explicitly. As a matter of fact, Eelen (2001: 241) claims that theories frequently jump from politeness1 to politeness2 and vice versa. Thus, they do not recognise the distinctive nature of everyday notions of politeness in contrast to scientific reasoning. He maintains that the distinction between hearer and scientist is blurred and as a consequence, the scientific view does not take into account the evaluative nature of politeness anymore:

[...] because in everyday politeness the hearer is involved in an evaluative practice, this has two immediate consequences: the evaluative nature of politeness is lost from the scientific view and it is transformed into – and lent the status and authority of – objective scientific analysis. (Eelen 2001: 242)

Eelen (2001: 243) argues that everyday evaluations of politeness are justified and strengthened through references to socially shared norms. These norms are usually the basis of theoretical models of politeness, which shows, according to Eelen, that theories of politeness do not question everyday reality, but only mimic it.

Furthermore, he points out that theories show a bias towards the polite end of the polite-impolite continuum, which according to him might be explained through a production bias and the view of politeness as guided by social norms. These norms usually require positively evaluated behaviour, which explains why such a concept of politeness that is related to social norms can handle politeness better than impoliteness (Eelen 2001: 243). Thus, impoliteness is regarded as a disruptive factor, whereas politeness is usually associated with ‘smooth communication’, ‘normal interaction’, ‘conflict-avoidance’ and ‘equilibrium’ and as a consequence, politeness is seen as maintaining social stability (Eelen 2001: 244).

In summary, Eelen (2001: 245) claims that the vast majority of politeness theories show the same or very similar flaws and insufficiencies. Hence, only a radically different conceptualisation of politeness could avoid the traditional pitfalls. He argues for a completely different notion of politeness:

[...] a notion that takes full account of the hearer’s position and the evaluative moment; is able to capture both politeness and impoliteness; provides a more dynamic, bidirectional view of the social-individual relationship; and thus acknowledges the individual (in terms of both variability and creativity) as well as evolution and change as intrinsic to the very nature of politeness. (Eelen 2001: 247)

Eelen highlights the fact that *politeness* is above all a word made up by human beings, and as such it is not an objective referential sign. Moreover, he claims that politeness is an “essentially contested concept”, such as *beauty* or *democracy*. Those concepts are intrinsically vague (Eelen 2001: 249).

Traditional approaches to politeness search for a scientific explanation of what is polite and what impolite, which has resulted in the identification of politeness with certain linguistic forms and formulae (Eelen 2001: 248). It has been attempted to find out the evaluative rules which are applied by the hearer, assuming that these are the same for all hearers, which is obviously not true, as Eelen stresses. The approach Eelen (2001: 249) argues for should not focus on the production of (im)polite behaviour, but on the production of (im)politeness

evaluations. It should avoid prescriptivism by giving up the attempt at prediction. He strongly argues for a theory that clearly distinguishes between politeness₁, the commonsense notion which he describes as “a notion from within the practice of everyday life”, and politeness₂, the scientific notion which according to him “constitutes an analytical perspective on the commonsense notion and its relationship to the practice of everyday life” (Eelen 2001: 151). Apart from that, he emphasises that politeness₁ should be the object of investigation and the starting point of scientific analysis, as is also proposed by Watts. Thus, he totally rejects any theory that uses an artificial notion of politeness as its basis, as it is the case in Brown and Levinson's model. All in all, Eelen does not present a fully-fledged alternative theory of politeness, which he is also aware of, but he presents a range of alternative starting points for a new and different approach towards politeness research.

2.2.3. Criticism of Brown and Levinson

Undoubtedly, this model has been extremely influential in linguistics and particularly in the area of linguistic politeness. However, it has also received considerable criticism. One of the harshest critics is Watts (2003). First of all, he points out that one of the most important aspects of this theory is the claim that politeness is a universal feature of language usage, which means that all languages of the world can express politeness. According to him, a major deficiency is that this claim for universality is related to an idealised concept of second-order politeness (politeness₂), not to the way ordinary people struggle over first-order politeness (politeness₁) in real social interaction (Watts 2003: 12). Moreover, like many other researchers, e.g. Maier (1995), Watts (2003: 98) emphasises that Brown and Levinson use data from three languages only (English, Tzeltal, Tamil) to support their theory, which according to him is not enough to make any claims for universality.

Another major problem of Brown and Levinson's approach identified by Watts is that speakers are expected to make rational choices in finding the appropriate strategies, which first, seems to be a very long and complicated process, and second, does not allow the possibility of choosing two or more strategies at the same time:

Setting out the choices open to speakers in the form of a binary system conveys the impression that they have to work their way through the whole system before they can arrive at the appropriate utterance in which to frame the FTA. (Watts 2003: 88)

Watts (2003: 93) also argues that the strategies suggested by Brown and Levinson are not politeness strategies but rather facework strategies and thus, the linguistic structures used for realising these strategies are not necessarily associated with linguistic politeness. Thus, he

maintains that what Brown and Levinson offer is a theory of facework rather than a theory of politeness.

Watts even goes further and claims that there is not much sense in distinguishing between positive and negative politeness:

It [politeness] might even range over whole talk exchanges and contain examples of Brown and Levinson's positive and negative politeness. What therefore is the validity of making a distinction between these two kinds of face in the first place? (Watts 2003: 95)

Furthermore, as Watts (2003: 81) indicates, substantial criticism of Brown and Levinson's theory on face and politeness has been put forward by Asian linguists, for instance Sachiko Ide and Yoshiko Matsumoto. Both Ide and Matsumoto claim that the approach is eurocentric because the division of face into positive and negative face is not appropriate to cultures in which the social group is more important than the individual, as it is the case in many Asian cultures. According to them, Brown and Levinson over-emphasise the notion of individual freedom and autonomy. They argue that in 'Western cultures' and Western politeness research the concept of *volition* plays a crucial role. *Volition* means that the individual can decide if s/he is polite or not. In contrast to this, in Japanese culture the individual can only gain status through affiliation to a certain group. As a consequence, people are strongly orientated towards the well-being and maintenance of the group rather than following individual goals:

What is of paramount concern to a Japanese is not his/her own territory, but the position in relation to the others in the group and his/her acceptance by those others. [...] Acknowledgement and maintenance of the relative position of others, rather than preservation of an individual's proper territory, governs all social interaction. (Matsumoto 1988: 405)

Thus, in Japanese culture the concept of *discernment* of the appropriate strategy for a social interaction is more important than the concept of *volition*. Criticism of the fact that Brown and Levinson do not take into account cultural differences of politeness is also put forward by Sifianou (1995: 98) who argues that the claim for universal applicability leaves only little space for cross-cultural variation in this theory of politeness. Sifianou argues that a discussion of the fifth superstrategy "*Don't do the FTA*" would have shed more light onto this aspect. Besides, she criticises Brown and Levinson's claim that some acts are inherently face-threatening and points out that it is invalid and ethnocentric to attribute degrees of face-threat to certain acts outside their socio-cultural and situational context, as acts have different values in different societies (Sifianou 1995: 103).

Another interesting point of criticism is voiced by Bowe (2007: 30-31) who adds that although the concept of face is probably a key principle underlying politeness, as is agreed upon by many researchers, it might be that not all members of a community are consciously aware of this principle. She claims that it is possible for people to acquire conventionally polite ways of speaking and interacting as a consequence of social norms of communication without even understanding the notion of face. Moreover, she argues that one of the major problems of Brown and Levinson's theory is that it deals mainly with politeness strategies in the context of face-threatening acts although interaction does not only exist of FTAs (Bowe 2007: 35). Another problem Bowe (2007: 37) points out is that Brown and Levinson assume a direct connection between indirectness and politeness and maintain that the more unclear the intention of an utterance is, the more polite it is. However, Bowe highlights that a number of researchers (for instance Blum-Kulka & House 1989, Wierzbicka 1991, 2003) have found out that this relationship between indirectness and politeness differs from culture to culture.

With regard to Brown and Levinson's assumption that all communicative acts are face-threatening acts, Conlan (2005: 132-133) argues that it is necessary to distinguish between face-threatening acts (FTAs), which include all speech acts because these are part of the face-threatening activity of discourse construction, and primary face-threatening acts (PFTAs), acts through which a certain pragmatic goal that threatens the addressee's face is realised. PFTA are usually preceded by preambles which indicate the following face-threat in order to prepare the hearer. Thus, s/he attempts at mitigating the impression that all communication is dangerous, as Brown and Levinson suggest.

On the whole, one can state that although Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness has been very influential and remains to be well-known by people concerned with politeness research, more recent studies of politeness show a greater distance to this approach. As House (2005: 15) emphasises, the focus of analysis has shifted – from a Brown and Levinson-influenced focus on speaker, isolated speech acts and their face-threat to more addressee-orientated approaches and investigations of politeness in face-to-face interaction.

2.3. The nature of politeness – What is politeness?

2.3.1. Defining politeness

While politeness is definitely an essential part of human interaction and we are all more or less able to recognise politeness and impoliteness, it seems to be very difficult to define it. Fraser (1990: 219) points out the difficulty of accounting for the phenomenon of politeness:

While the existence of politeness or the lack thereof is not in question, a common understanding of the concept and how to account for it is certainly problematic.

According to Fraser, this difficulty and uncertainty with regard to a definition of politeness is discernible from the literature on this topic:

In reviewing the relevant literature in preparing this critique, I was struck by the lack of consistency among researchers on what politeness is, never mind how it might be accounted for. Remarkably, many of the writers do not even explicitly define what they take politeness to be, and their understanding of the concept must be inferred from statements referencing the term. (Fraser 1990: 219)

Hence, he points out that Lakoff as well as Brown and Levinson and Leech do not explicitly define the concept of politeness in their work. Nevertheless, their theories are well-known and have influenced a great amount of further research on this topic. In sum, all of them conceptualise politeness as a strategy for conflict avoidance.

On the whole, it seems that all theories of politeness that have been presented so far understand politeness somewhat differently, but they also have something in common. While Lakoff (1973) appears to regard politeness as the avoidance of offence, Brown and Levinson (1987 [1978]) interpret it as a system for alleviating FTAs. Leech (1991 [1983]) stresses the importance of politeness in establishing and maintaining comity in a social group and claims that without it communication would break down. Janney and Arndt (2005) identify two parts of politeness (social politeness and tact), whereby one facilitates smooth interaction and the other guarantees interpersonal supportiveness. Fraser (1990) understands politeness as the observance and negotiations of rights and obligations towards other participants of a conversation. Sifianou (1992) and Scollon and Scollon (1995) consider politeness as the balancing of the two conflicting basic needs *involvement* and *independence* within a conversation. House (2005) regards politeness as a behavioural tendency which operates on different levels. Hence, it seems that what all of these interpretations of politeness share is the assumption of a certain consideration for others, which corresponds to Sifianou's (1992: 83) point of view of politeness, as we have seen above. Nevertheless, the various definitions of politeness still differ from one another to a greater or lesser extent.

Politeness is an abstract concept, which makes it very difficult to define it. Sell (2005: 113) claims that "[n]othing will ever fix the reference of 'politeness' to human behaviour once and for all". Watts (2005: xiii) affirms that "[...] politeness will always be a slippery, ultimately indefinable quality of interaction which is subject to change through time and across cultural space".

2.3.2. Politeness as a universal concept or a culture-specific phenomenon?

It seems that a lot of the literature published on linguistic politeness – particularly the most influential and best-known approaches – deal with Anglo-American views on politeness and focus on politeness in the English-speaking societies. This fact increases to a certain extent the danger of believing that evaluations, rules and assumptions of politeness are universally valid. However, a number of researchers have demonstrated that this is not the case.

Thus, Leech (1991: 137) stresses that there are cultural differences in the importance that is attached to the single maxims. He points out that in Japanese society, and especially among Japanese women, more emphasis is put on the modesty maxim than for instance in English-speaking societies - and probably also in most European cultures. While it is usual in English-speaking societies and also, for instance, in the Austrian society to accept a compliment by thanking the speaker for it, in Japanese culture this is not common because there the receiver of the compliment goes on denying it. According to Leech, this might go so far that a maxim of politeness may become more important than the maxim of quality. This seems to imply that some cultures are more polite than others, or, in other words, that some cultures attach more importance to politeness than others do.

Leech illustrates it as follows. In Japanese culture, as in most others, it is common for a host to offer his/her guests some snacks. However, while it would be usual in European cultures to say “*Please take some*” or “*Have as many as you like*” and in this way appear generous to one’s guests, in Japanese it is usual to say “*Please have one*” and so apparently minimising one’s generosity. This example illustrates that in Japan great importance is attached to modesty and not so much to generosity. To offer more would imply that the host thinks his/her food is so good that it is worth eating more of it. The same tendency can be observed, for instance, in giving presents to other people. While a person from an English-speaking country will usually call his/her present *small*, a Japanese person would give the present to the other person and say “*this is a present which is of no use to you, but...*” (Leech 1991: 137, 138). These examples pertinently illustrate how different assumptions about what is polite and what is impolite operate in different cultures.

Considering cultural differences in the field of interpersonal rhetoric, Leech claims that our knowledge of this is rather anecdotal:

[...] there is the observation for example, that some eastern cultures (e.g. China and Japan) tend to value the Modesty Maxim much more highly than western countries; that English-speaking culture (particularly British?) gives prominence to the Maxim of

Tact and the Irony Principle; that Mediterranean cultures place a higher value of the Generosity Maxim and a lower value of the Modesty Maxim. (Leech 1991: 150)

In their paper about politeness in Greece Sifianou and Antonopoulou (2005: 263) emphasise that writing on politeness is a very difficult undertaking because of the masses of available publications which demonstrate that politeness is an extremely complex phenomenon about which we actually know very little. Apart from that, they show that Greek society favours positive politeness in contrast to the English tendency towards negative politeness. An example for this is the following announcement, first made in an English speaking setting, followed by a translation of the Greek announcement:

1. a) Ladies and gentlemen you are kindly requested to remain seated while cabin attendants take a passenger count. Thank you.
- b) Ladies and gentlemen so that no mistakes take place and delay our departure now that the crew are occupied with the count we request you to remain in your seats. Thank you.

(Sifianou & Antonopoulou 2005: 269)

Sifianou and Antonopoulou argue that sentence a) would not be regarded as polite in a Greek setting, as the lack of a proper explanation and justification would violate the basic positive politeness strategy typically used in Greece. In contrast to this, b) would not work as a polite announcement in English because the explicitness of information could be regarded as face-threatening for the addressee who seems to be made responsible for a possible delay. Another difference is the active voice frequently used in Greek language contrasting with the passive voice typically used in English in order to express distance. This example from an ordinary routine situation shows clearly how different attitudes and assumptions about politeness influence language behaviour.

With regard to telephone conversations in Greece, Sifianou and Antonopoulou (2005: 270) argue that Greeks usually avoid self-identification in order not to sound formal or distant. Both callers and respondents rather rely on the other's recognition of the familiar voice. Moreover, contrary to, for instance, the beliefs of Austrian people, Greeks do not normally assume that their call will disturb anyone but rather consider it as an expression of concern and interest in other people. As a consequence, apologies for intrusions are rare in Greek.

In contrast to the corresponding cultural pattern in other countries, it seems that in Spain thanking one another is rather rare and not very much importance is attributed to this act:

[...] neither shop-assistants, administrators, public transport officials nor their clients usually thank one another nor do members of one family. (Hickey 2005: 328)

Hickey (2005: 329) argues that in Spanish positive politeness is emphasised, which is demonstrated in language behaviour through non-formulaic, non-self-humbling, non-deferential thanking by expressing interest in what is being presented but ignoring the effort of the other person. Furthermore, Spanish politeness is characterised rather by positive politeness strategies such as effusiveness, personal enthusiasm, admiration and praise rather than negative politeness strategies like avoiding intrusion or apologising for an imposition.

On the contrary, Irish politeness puts a lot of emphasis on thanking. Kallen (2005) maintains that reciprocal *thanks* is strikingly frequent in Ireland. He points out that a simple shop transaction usually comprises a considerably high number of thanks:

Handing over goods, money, change, credit or debit cards, receipts and a bag for goods offers opportunities for both customer and shop assistant to say *thanks*: though not all opportunities must be taken, I have counted 14 utterances of *thanks* in one transaction involving a simple purchase. (Kallen 2005: 140)

These are only a few of the many examples of politeness in Europe that Hickey and Stewart (2005) present. Yet, these already show that even within Europe there are differences as far as politeness is concerned. As Hickey and Stewart's (2005) collection of articles makes clear, European countries are still very diverse and therefore, it is extremely difficult to make general claims about politeness in Europe:

This volume is about politeness in Europe but, if the concept and everything to do with politeness is problematical and uncertain, much more so is the concept of Europe. (Hickey & Stewart 2005: 10)

There might be a tendency of similarities in general patterns of politeness in Southern European countries such as Greece or Spain in contrast to Central and Northern European societies, for instance the British, German, or Scandinavian ones. More cultural differences within Europe will be mentioned in the following chapters.

In general, one can say that politeness is a crucial element of human communication and, as becomes clear also from the literature in this field, it seems that we make a great effort to be polite in our conversations. Communication is thus certainly not only about conveying information and in this point Brown and Levinson's observation is true. My personal impression that the expression of politeness is to a substantial extent conventionalised is supported by Hickey and Stewart's (2005) collection of literature on politeness in Europe. Even

more so, the question arises if politeness can be really regarded as a genuine interest in and respect for another person's feelings or rather as mere convention, as it was indicated by House (2005) (see above).

Janney and Arndt (2005: 25) point out that skills related to tact are relatively culture-bound which is why misinterpretations easily happen in intercultural communication. According to them, many problems and misunderstandings in intercultural communication are a result of the difficulty of expressing emotions and attitudes in a tactful way because members of different cultures usually express feelings differently (Janney & Arndt 2005: 27-30). Janney and Arndt doubt that strategies for tact can be universal. They regard the various maxims for being tactful that have been proposed by Lakoff, Leech and others as only "common-sense platitudes" and claim that even more elaborated frameworks for tactfulness in Anglo-American speech are probably not very useful for reducing intercultural misunderstanding because they are highly culture-specific (Janney & Arndt 2005: 29). According to them, the major function of tact is strategic conflict avoidance. Whereas Anglo-American tact is usually directed at minimising threats to the other person's personal face and maximising support of his/her interpersonal face (Janney & Arndt 2005: 35), tact in other cultures often works differently.

According to Janney and Arndt (2005: 39), there is not much sense in applying intracultural tact strategies in intercultural communication. Instead, they suggest becoming a member of a 'positive-reference group' and thus limiting conversation to common interests in order to avoid conflict and any danger of threatening the other's interpersonal face. Consequently, there is a greater danger of conflicts when people start discussing issues different from those that constitute the actual reason for speaking. Hence, Janney and Arndt (2005) stress that intercultural communication requires different strategies than the tact strategies applied in intracultural communication. They also maintain that recognising the difficulties and barriers in intercultural situations can be very helpful for successful interaction with foreigners.

Undoubtedly, the claim for universality of politeness, which is among others promoted by Brown and Levinson, is highly controversial. As we have seen, it has been criticised by many researchers. Some of them, for instance Janney and Arndt (2005), think that a more realistic approach towards linguistic politeness would not be based on universalistic claims. However, as has been mentioned above, even Watts admits that this claim still has something appealing, probably because something like the phenomenon denoted by the English term *politeness* is found in different cultures from all over the world. Evidence for this can be found in the study of very different cultures which all show some kind of politeness phenomenon, like for

instance Brown and Levinson's (1987 [1878]) comparison of English, Tzeltal and Tamil. Of course, there are many different terms for it, and the concept also differs from culture to culture. Nevertheless, something similar to what we understand as politeness is found in most, maybe even all, cultures. Sifianou (1992: 46) highlights this fact as follows:

It seems reasonable to assume that the concept of 'politeness', which represents an abstract, social value is most probably universal in some form or other, even though the way in which this concept is visualized and thus defined and how it is realized verbally and non-verbally will most probably be culture-specific.

Moreover, Sifianou (1992: 49) points out that although it is obvious that there is variation in what is regarded as polite behaviour in different cultures, there has to be something universal about politeness because otherwise learning a foreign language and translating from one language to another would hardly be possible. Sifianou (1992: 93) maintains that the concept of politeness appears to be universal, probably because it satisfies universal needs. According to her, what differs from culture to culture is the significance attributed to these needs.

Watts (2005: xvii) defines the search for universals of human behaviour as "an attempt to promote them to the scientific status of objects of knowledge lying outside individual experience", which is, as he calls it, the modernist approach to linguistic politeness. However, he seems to promote rather the postmodernist view of linguistic politeness – like that of Arndt and Janney (2005) -, which does not regard politeness as an object of knowledge and thus a static concept, but rather as a dynamic activity that is rooted both in praxis and being.

As has already been mentioned above, and as Kasper (1990: 195) emphasises, the claim for universality has been above all criticised by people studying 'non-Western' societies, for instance Ide (1989) and Matsumoto (1988) who both studied politeness in Japanese culture. Japanese, as well as other south-east Asian cultures, shows a collective rather than an individualistic orientation towards politeness. Consequently, the concept of negative face seems negligible and inappropriate for explaining politeness behaviour.

In summary, it seems undeniable that politeness phenomena can be found in most, if not all, societies and cultures, which can mostly be described as some kind of consideration for others and as strategies for maintaining good relationships with communication partners. Therefore, one could claim that in this respect the concept of politeness is something universal. The fact that politeness exists and plays a crucial role in societies can be said to be universal. However, this does not mean that politeness manifests itself equally in every culture. What kinds of behaviour are regarded as polite or impolite in which situation, what rules people have to

follow in order to be polite, and how much importance is attributed to certain aspects of politeness differs substantially from one culture to another.

3. Silence in communication

As Saville-Troike (1989: 146) puts it by quoting Searle, "[j]ust as '[o]ne can utter words without saying anything' (Searle 1969:24), one can say something without uttering words". This chapter will try to illustrate how this is possible by using examples and referring to the use and meaning of silence in particular cultures. Moreover, it will attempt to work out the significance of silence in communication and its meaning by looking at the functions and uses of silence in conversation, and investigating the concept of silence and its evaluation in different cultures. It is important to mention that this section deals, among other things, with stereotypes and, as an unavoidable result, also includes some generalisations. As a matter of fact, it would be very difficult to deal with this topic without working with some stereotypes and generalisations. Undoubtedly, the use and meaning of silence depends significantly on the individual. However, in this chapter the focus will rather be on the situational and especially on the cultural influences on the use and evaluation of silence in communication.

First, an attempt will be made to define the concept of silence in communication. Second, silence will be compared to speech, and some approaches towards the study of silence will be presented briefly. Then, typical situations in which silence is frequently used and different functions it fulfils will be discussed.

3.1. Defining silence

For a long time, no due attention has been paid to the significance of silence in communication within linguistics. Traditionally, silence was reduced to its boundary-marking function (showing the beginning and end of utterances) and defined predominantly negatively – simply as the absence of speech (Saville-Troike 1989: 146). However, this attitude toward silence in linguistics has been changing in recent years, as is pointed out by Jaworski (2005: 1):

Since the publication of the major collection of articles by Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985), a steady stream of monographs and anthologies on silence has continued to bring new titles.

Now, more research than in the past is dedicated to this issue, and more linguists and researchers are recognizing the importance of silence for human communication. Researchers like Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985) (see quotation above), Sifianou (1995) and Watts (1997) stress the significance of silence:

[...] silence is a complex and varied phenomenon, which is the result of the same strategic choices motivating speech act performance [...] and which plays an equally essential role in the management of communicative encounters as talk does. (Sifianou 1995: 96).

Silence is as much a part of our manipulation of the conventions of each marketplace as talk, and since much of discourse is silence, it deserves to be given as much interpretative attention as talk – or at least the relationship between talk and silence in linguistic and sociolinguistic research should not be uniquely tipped in favour of talk. (Watts 1997:112)

Also Jaworski (1993) emphasises the importance of silence for the study of communication. He describes silence as “a rich and powerful tool of communication” and argues for “the recognition of silence as a part of the communicative system comparable with speech” (1993: xii).

Defining the object of research is usually one of the most important things to do before being able to investigate a topic and find any results. In this case, this is by no means an easy and straightforward task because there are various instances of silence, depending on the communicative circumstances, the time and position in which silence occurs in a conversation, as well as on its length and the reason why it is applied by a speaker. Verschueren (1985) indicates that the difficulties begin already with the obscurity of linguistic expressions. He points out that the English language lacks a general expression for the absence of speech (1985: 76). According to him, the phrase *to be silent* is too general because it contrasts not only with speech but also with noise. Moreover, apart from the absence of speech it also denotes a habitual reluctance to speak, which is not a communicative act anymore. Thus, *to be silent* is a rather relative notion, which is confirmed by the fact that it can also be applied to situations where no absolute silence is involved, but for instance, when a person does not talk about a particular topic or when s/he is less talkative than expected. In a way, in these situations the expression has a similar meaning like the phrase *to be taciturn*. This lack of a general expression which Verschueren indicates could be regarded as one factor that makes it so difficult to give a straightforward definition of silence.

Similarly, Jaworski (1993: 71) and Sobkowiak (1997: 43) emphasise that the English lexicon does not encode the semantic difference between *acoustic silence* (the absence of noise) and *pragmatic* or *communicative silence* (intentional absence of verbal communication, withholding of information). Verschueren, Jaworski, and Sobkowiak all point to the fact that other languages make a better distinction between these different types of silence. For instance, in German the term *Schweigen* denotes pragmatic/communicative silence, whereas *Stille* refers to acoustic silence.

Sobkowiak (1997: 43) presents five different definitions of the English term *silence*, taken from the *Webster Collegiate* (1948), and he indicates which of them define pragmatic and which acoustic silence:

- the state or fact of keeping silent; a refraining from speech or from making noise (pragmatic/acoustic)
- absence of any sound or noise; stillness (acoustic),
- a withholding of knowledge or omission of mention (pragmatic)
- failure to communicate, write, keep in touch, etc. (pragmatic)
- oblivion or obscurity (pragmatic)

Also Sifianou (1997: 63) indicates that the term *silence* is used to describe a number of different phenomena, ranging from the total absence of noise to short, often unrecognized silences (pauses) within or between speech turns. According to her, “in its broad sense, silence usually refers to the absence of something which should be present” (Sifianou 1997:64). In her further argument, she relies on Saville-Troike’s distinction of silences.

According to Saville-Troike (1985), when talking about silence in communication, one has to make a basic distinction between two types of silences:

silences which carry meaning, but not propositional content and silent communicative acts which are entirely dependent on adjacent vocalizations for interpretation, and which carry their own illocutionary force. (Saville-Troike 1985: 6)

Thus, the first type of silence includes pauses and hesitations within and between turns of talking. They can mean a variety of different things but carry no propositional content. Their meanings are connotative and affective rather than denotative, but nevertheless symbolic and conventional, and therefore, they are interpreted differently in different speech communities. The second includes gestures or silence without any visual signals, e.g. silence in a telephone conversation in response to a greeting, question or request. Silences of this type constitute a kind of speech act which also carries illocutionary force. They are produced consciously and can reflect a range of different values and attitudes – both positive and negative (Sifianou 1997: 64, 65). According to Sifianou, such intentional absence of talk might function on the one hand, as a way of preventing disagreement and conflict, or on the other hand, it might point to the fact that there is some kind of conflict. Both these two types of silence classified by Saville-Troike will come up later in the paper, when examples from particular cultures are discussed. However, the focus in this thesis will clearly be on communicative silence.

When considering silence and its meaning in communication, Kurzon (1998: 8) points to the importance of speaker meaning and claims that silence has only meaning in the linguistic sense

if the speaker has an intention. Hence, he distinguishes *intentional silence* from *unintentional silence*. According to him, when being asked a question, the addressee can choose to answer either with speech or with silence, and it is this choice which creates meaning (Kurzon 1998: 25). Furthermore, similarly to Saville-Troike, he illustrates the possibility of regarding a deliberate act of silence as a speech act. In relation to *unintentional silence*, Kurzon (1998:33) refers to Sifianou (1995: 103) who claims that silence might be a result of a rejection to perform an act that threatens the speaker's negative face, for instance an acceptance of thanks. Besides, someone can be silent because of his/her embarrassment to admit ignorance, and in such a case silence might be regarded as a speech disfluency. Anyway, when talking about silence in conversations, Kurzon does not seem to take into account what constitutes the first type of silences in Saville-Troike's distinction (pauses and hesitations), but only deals with communicative silences.

3.2. 'Silence *versus* speech' or 'silence *and* speech'

Since silence has traditionally been defined as simply the lack of speech, this section will have a closer look at the relation between silence and speech, as well as at the characteristics and functions of both linguistic devices. Although there clearly was a tendency of defining silence as the absence or opposite of speech, in recent decades a number of researchers have pointed out that there is more about silence than this traditional definition suggests. For instance, Verschueren emphasises the significance and diversity of silence:

There is more to silence than the absence of speech. Silence can be golden, deathlike, tomblike, solemn, and even pregnant; but it is rarely neutral. (Verschueren 1985: 73)

However, he also points out that silence is regarded as marginal to linguistic action, which is probably the reason why theories of communication have in the past frequently neglected the aspect of silence:

Silence is no doubt the most marginal aspect of linguistic action imaginable. Yet it is certainly part of our talking about linguistic action. One would never make an assertion about someone's being silent unless he/she could have been expected to speak. (Verschueren 1985: 74).

Sobkowiak (1977) stresses the communicative function of silence, but maintains that communicative silence is highly marked in communication and not considered as normal or usual:

Communicative silence is quite clearly non-prototypical as a method (strategy, device) used for human communication. [...] Speech would clearly be in the centre of the cognitive category “human communication” [...]. (Sobkowiak 1997: 54)

Clearly, silence is not communicatively meaningless. As Jandt (2007: 11) puts it,

[r]ather than avoid communication, silence can communicate agreement, apathy, awe, confusion, contemplation, disagreement, embarrassment, obligation, regret, repressed hostility, respect, sadness, thoughtfulness, or any number of meanings.

Ephratt (2008: 1913) argues for the acknowledgment of what he calls *eloquent silence* – “an active means chosen by the speaker to communicate his or her message”. According to him, silence fulfils the same communicative functions that language does.

Also Jaworski (1993:3) emphasises the fact that silence in conversations can fulfil equally significant functions like speech. He points out that not only speech, but also silence can be used in conversation to convey a certain meaning and accordingly, to communicate a message. Therefore, it seems that both speech and silence can be applied to achieve the same effects and produce the same meaning in communication. This will later be illustrated by the example of silence in the Igbo culture. A similar claim has been produced by Saville-Troike (1989) who talks about the function of language as a means of social control – a way to tell people what to do or not to do. Furthermore, she stresses the fact that silence can equally well – and probably even more effectively – perform this task of social control.

Language most obviously serves a role in social control by providing a medium for telling people directly what to do, but it also allows for such indirect control forms as threats, curses, teasing and gossip. One of the strongest control forms in many societies is silence, or ‘shunning’, which is also part of the communicative system. (Saville-Troike 1989: 39)

These observations hint at an equality of speech and silence, and at a balanced significance of both linguistic devices in communication.

Jaworski (1993) draws attention to the fact that the ability to use silence appropriately and to interpret it correctly is a crucial knowledge that has to be acquired together with other linguistic abilities:

Our ability to use silence appropriately in our own speech and the adequate interpretation of the silences of others are indispensable for successful communication. Therefore, I believe children acquire the ability to use and understand silence very much in the same manner that they acquire all the other linguistic skills in the acquisition process. (Jaworski 1993: 4)

This is certainly not an easy task because in many cases, there are various possible interpretations of silence. Probably because of this, the use of silence in communication frequently leads to misunderstandings, troubles and as a result, to miscommunication.

This remark leads us to some characteristics of silence and its differences from speech. The interpretation of silence seems to be more difficult compared to that of speech. Even if the same interpretative process can be applied for silence and speech, Jaworski (1993:8) points out that in order to interpret and understand silence correctly, high participation involvement and a lot of filling in of information is necessary. Therefore, he maintains that the processing effort for the interpretation of silence is higher than that for the most forms of speech. Saville-Troike (1985: 119) emphasises that silence is more context-embedded than speech, and therefore, interpretation of silence must rely to a great extent on the context, which might be a cause for the higher difficulty of interpreting silence.

Another important reason for the higher processing effort probably stems from the fact that silence is highly ambiguous. Jaworski (1993:24) talks about silence as “probably the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms”. He claims that it is not only semantically ambiguous, which means that it is not always clear for the hearer what the speaker means with his/her silence, but also axiologically ambiguous because it can have both positive as well as negative effects on communication. Also Sifianou (1997:71) highlights the ambiguity of silence in the course of her discussion of silence and politeness. She points out that the use of silence instead of a verbal response which could possibly damage the interlocutor’s self-image can be interpreted in very different ways. She claims that “[s]ince silences are highly ambiguous, such responses can be perceived as either acceptances or rejections” (Sifianou 1997: 71).

Ambiguity seems to be a crucial characteristic of silence. It seems to be precisely this feature which contributes to the complex nature of it, makes its interpretation more difficult, and as a consequence, makes silence subject to misinterpretation. This is particularly the case when used in intercultural communication, where the cultural values of the interlocutors differ substantially and silence has different meanings in different cultures. Szuchewycz realises that there is no single and straightforward definition of silence, and recognises the difficulty of interpreting silence correctly:

Because of its inherent ambiguity an analysis of the meaning of silence requires a great sensitivity and awareness of the shared background knowledge, beliefs and expectations which permit consistent interpretations within specific cultural contexts. (Szuchewycz 1997: 247)

Now that the general characteristics of silence have been discussed, as well as the difficulty of defining and interpreting silence in communication, the next two sections will look at different approaches to the study of silence and various functions silence can fulfil in conversation.

3.3. Approaches to the study of silence

Jaworski (1993) adopts a *nonessentialist* and *relativist approach* to the study of silence in contrast to *absolutist* approaches of silence which describe silence as the opposite of speech and try to find one specific definition for it. Jaworski uses the term *essentialist approach* to describe approaches that claim to know what something (in this case silence) really is. Contrary to this, his *nonessentialist approach* does not make any attempts at a straightforward definition of silence (Jaworski 1993: 32). Many essentialist approaches regard silence as a discrete and clear-cut category and often consider it as the opposite of speech. Jaworski strongly rejects these views:

[...] I will claim that silence and speech do not stand in total opposition to each other, but form a continuum of forms ranging from the most prototypical instances of silence to the most prototypical instances of speech. (Jaworski 1993: 34)

Two other classificatory terms for approaches to the study of silence introduced by Jaworski (1993: 43) are *relativist*, which means that silence is treated as part of a continuum, and *absolutist*, which means that the nature of silence is regarded as invariant and its meaning as nonarbitrary. According to Jaworski (1993: 60), there is no definite answer to the question of what speech and silence are. He argues that the study of silence in a cross-cultural context requires a relativist approach:

The position that I have advocated here is that to study silence cross-culturally it is necessary to adopt a relativistic perspective as opposed to an absolutist one. (Jaworski 1993: 63)

Another interesting view on the study of silence has been presented by Enninger (1987: 286 ff). He argues for an approach that regards silences as kinds of speech acts. Referring to Searle's Speech Act Theory which distinguishes 'what is said' and 'what is done', he claims that one can utter a sentence with a certain propositional content and at the same time perform an illocutionary act and thus produce a perlocutionary effect in the listener. Like Saville-Troike (1985: 6) ("[...]one can say something without uttering words"), Enninger emphasises that it is also possible to produce a speech act without uttering any words at all and moreover, he stresses that this is culture-specific:

Empirical evidence shows a) that between-turn silences can also be the zero exponent of acts, and b) that what is done by silences varies across cultures. (Enninger 1987: 288)

3.4. Different uses and functions of silence in communication

Silence can occur in communication in many different situations and can be used for different reasons. Consequently, it can have different meanings. However, the use of silence in conversation is often related to the negotiation of power, treatment of delicate topics and emotionally loaded situations, avoidance of confrontation, disagreement and conflict, as well as to contemplation (although this use is more frequent in 'non-Western cultures', as will be shown later). These aspects will be discussed in the course of this chapter.

3.4.1. The preventive function of silence – avoiding conflict or offence

In many cases, silence is used to avoid conflict or potential damage to the interlocutor's self-image and the relationship between the interlocutors. Silence is often used as a conflict-avoidance strategy because, as Jaworski (1993: 25) puts it, "it is easier to undo silence than it is to undo words". This use is certainly related to the function of silence to keep the channel of communication open in situations in which speech most probably would have the opposite effect and endanger the relationship of the participants of the conversation. This function of silence is pointed out by Jaworski (1993: 48-49):

By choosing to withdraw from further verbal exchange of arguments, bitter accusations, and insults one may prefer to wait in silence for the mutual rage to pass, and then to restart the communication process without the need to repair whatever has been (unnecessarily) said during the argument. (Jaworski 1993: 49)

Jaworski refers to Tannen (1990) who identifies the so-called *preventive function* of silence – to avoid outburst and destructive conflicts. Thus, silence can be used to avoid confrontation or discussion of delicate and taboo topics, or also in situations in which an invitation or offer is rejected (Jaworski 1993:52). Since such a rejection necessarily threatens the face of the person who invites, silence, which is the most indirect way to perform this rejection, is often applied to reduce the risk of face loss. Brown and Levinson (1987:295) illustrate this with the example of Tamil speakers.³ In Tamil, the most polite way to refuse something is to say nothing and remain silent.⁴

³ Tamil is a Dravidian language spoken in India, Sri Lanka, Malaysia, Singapore, South Africa and Mauritius (Brown & Levinson 1987).

⁴ Interestingly, silence is also the most polite way of accepting something in Tamil. With regard to this, Brown and Levinson (1987: 295) briefly point to the use of 'carefully located silence' as a way of doing an FTA. They refer to the Tamil culture where polite acceptances can be conveyed by deliberate silence and give this example:

Already Saville-Troike (1985: 7) has pointed out that a silent answer can be applied in communication when delicate or taboo topics are touched or when feelings are involved:

Utterances are also commonly completed in silence when the topic is a particularly delicate one or the word which would be used is taboo, or when the situation is emotionally loaded and the speaker is 'at a loss' for words.

Similarly, also Jaworski (1997: 392) stresses that "[o]ne of the most important uses of silence in every society is maintenance of a taboo".

Moreover, silence can go beyond the limit of words and thus, it can be used in situations where words fail to express the matter adequately, for instance in psychologically extreme states (Jaworski 1993: 8). Jaworski (1997: 391) claims that "[i]t is especially common to talk about silence in such ways when it appears to mark extreme emotions such as awe, love, hatred, bereavement [...]".

3.4.2. Silence and power

A deliberate refusal of a verbal response to a stimulus of the interlocutor can be used as a tool of power. When someone suddenly remains silent during a conversation, this might make the conversation partner insecure because s/he might not know or understand the reason for the other's silence, and thus, the silent person can gain power over the other. A speaker can apply silence in order to end the conversation, change the topic or simply to make the interlocutor feel uncomfortable. Thus, using silence gives the speaker the power to control and regulate the conversation. This is emphasised by Watts (1997) who investigates the issue of silence and the acquisition of status in verbal interactions. He maintains that silence in conversation can be interpreted as communicatively meaningful. Moreover, it positively influences the status of the speaker.

[S]trategic use of silence may [...] significantly strengthen the status position of a participant and help to give her/him a position from which power may be exercised. (Watts 1997: 94)

A: Do you sing?
W: (silence)
A: Hooray! Give us a song!

The example illustrates that in this culture silence (and thus no verbal answer) is regarded as the most polite way of accepting something.

In relation to silence and power, Kurzon (1998: 35) points out that silence might be used as a weapon against the interlocutor, for instance, in situations in which one person has been humiliated by another. The humiliated person can use silence in order to gain power over the other and thus prevent the other from continuing his/her game. Jaworski (1993: 20, 21) emphasises the use of silence as a power tool, drawing on Gilmore's study (1985) of ritualistic displays of silence in classroom interactions. While teachers use silence to express disapproval of their students, to scold them or to try to bring order into the classroom, the silences applied by students indicated either compliance with or defiance of what the teacher said (Jaworski 1993:20). The latter type is called *stylized sulking* and is a typical pattern of behaviour of students to an authority. According to Jaworski, what the patterns of behaviour of both groups (teachers and students) have in common is the fact that silence is used to negotiate power:

The similarity lies in both teachers' and students' uses of silence in situations of negotiating power: exerting and displaying in the case of teachers; defying and claiming it in the case of students. (Jaworski 1993:21)

Thus, silence can be used as a tool both by the more powerful and the powerless party, as is confirmed by Sifianou (1995: 98):

Silence can function not only as a tool in the exercise of power by the powerful, as when a superior refrains from responding to an inferior, but also as an equally powerful tool in the hands of the powerless, as when an inferior refuses to respond.

In contrast to this, the silence of a participant in a conversation might also be interpreted as a sign of powerlessness, which seems to be frequently the case in 'Western cultures'. It can be viewed as a result of ignorance or helplessness, as a lack of ability of verbal expression, and thus, as a lack of power. As will be shown later, in the Athabaskan culture, for example, silence is typically used to emphasise the subordinate role and powerlessness of the speaker (Scollon & Scollon 1989).

3.4.3. Strategic use of silence

Silence can, of course, also be used in order to achieve a certain personal goal, for instance, to influence someone in a way that s/he does exactly what one wants from him/her. Frequently, this can be achieved by evoking a bad conscience in the other person. This might be done through the conscious use of silence in a situation which involves disagreement. Obviously, this is closely related to the previously discussed use of silence as a power device. Yet, this kind of silence is most often used in more intimate relationships because it usually requires very

good knowledge and prediction of the other person's thoughts and reactions. Oduro-Frimpong (2007: 298) defines the strategic use of silence as "the active employment of silence to achieve a desired end in a conflict situation". He has frequently observed this use of silence in conflict situations in intimate relationships and even calls it "psychological blackmailing" (Oduro-Frimpong 2007: 298) because this use of silence always involves some kind of psychological manipulation of the other person.

Without doubt, such a use of silence can have negative effects on the relationship of two people. This is stressed, for instance, by Tannen (1986) who points out that some people tend to apply more silence than is expected. Very often it is men who behave like this in communication with their wives or girl-friends. Women often find it very difficult to handle this behaviour. According to Tannen (1986: 116), for a woman this is "like a brick wall against which she is banging her head". When a woman in a long-term relationship is confronted with her man's silence, she feels helpless because she has the feeling that she cannot do anything against it. This clearly demonstrates the power of silence.

3.4.4. Silence as a contemplative tool

That silence is used in order to avoid conflict has already been mentioned. However, silence is not necessarily used to avoid a verbal answer or statement to a problematic question or claim. Instead, silence can also be applied in conflict situations as a contemplative tool that gives the interlocutor time for thought and thus, the possibility to give a more rational and reasoned response. This is confirmed by Oduro-Frimpong (2007: 294-295) who investigates silence as a conflict management strategy in intimate relationships:

The first use of silence in managing conflict is the use of silence as a contemplative tool through which the participants reflected upon the conflict situation. The contemplation delays a confrontation.

Silence gives the hearer more time to think about what s/he will say and hence, enables the speaker to answer in a way that prevents any damage to the relationship between him/her and his/her interlocutor(s). As Oduro-Frimpong (2007: 296) argues, the contemplative use of silence in a conflict situation can lead to the attenuation of a person's anger, which facilitates a more objective response.

3.4.5. Silence in religious context

One of the most frequent and conventionalised contexts in which silence is used is religious worship. Silence can be an important aspect in the relationship between a person and the God s/he believes in, as is indicated by Szuchewycz (1997: 239-260). Szuchewycz puts particular emphasis on the function of silence in the Catholic Charismatic Renewal (CCR).⁵ He claims that silence is used in religious context to express reverence, awe, or respect in many Western traditions. Yet, he also points out that it is not always associated with reverence in Christianity or among the different varieties of Protestantism (Szuchewycz 1997: 239).

Szuchewycz (1997: 240 ff) wants to show that there are different kinds, degrees and meanings of silence. Silence does not necessarily function as the opposite of noise, but can, in fact, also serve as a functional equivalent. Furthermore, he illustrates that the meanings of silence and noise are essentially arbitrary. He reports that many participants of prayer groups of the CCR stress that divine communication is most likely to occur in times of silence. Thus, we can see that an essential value is attached to silence in this religious community (Szuchewycz 1997: 245).

3.4.6. Silence in public versus intimate context

Cortini (2001) argues that how silence is used and which function it fulfils depends very much on the context, particularly on the number of participants of a conversation. Her hypothesis is that the number of participants in a conversation influences the kind of interaction substantially and thus, also the use and meaning of silence in communication. Moreover, Cortini (2001: 172) stresses that the use of silence in a conversation can function as both agreement and disagreement. She points out that it is necessary to distinguish between no response and real silence:

All no-responses could be classified in some sense as silence, but the contrary is not always true, that is to say that not all silences are classified as no-response. (Cortini 2001: 172)

Cortini emphasises that silence can be also communicative and, in fact, an action with a perlocutive effect. According to her, there is an essential difference between a silence constituted by context and a silence constituting the context. For instance, during a funeral

⁵ "The Catholic Charismatic Renewal (henceforth CCR) is part of the broad Neo-Pentecostal movement which first influenced mainline Protestant churches in the late 1950s." (Szuchewycz 1997: 240)

silence is not regarded as a lack of speech or absence of action, but it is an appropriate action that is required by the context (Cortini 2001: 172,173).

Cortini (2001) indicates that the extent to which silence can be used and its meaning in communication depend very much on the number of interlocutors and their relationship. She maintains that in intimate contexts a more flexible use of silence is possible, and here silence can function as an expression of agreement, as well as disagreement. The higher the number of participants, the more silence is used to express agreement (Cortini 2001: 175). Consequently, in these situations it is rare to disagree through silence. Furthermore, when the number of participants grows even more, it becomes very unlikely that all of them know one another equally well and share the same degree of formality and intimacy of the relationship. Therefore, they manage silence in communication in different ways. According to Cortini, the extreme cases are broadcast conversations where the number of recipients is enormous. In this context, silence is banished. Whereas silence is frequently used in conflictive situations among interlocutors that have a more intimate relationship, for instance to express disagreement, it seems that in broadcast conversations the use of silence is regarded as a sign of weakness and is therefore avoided:

Here, conflict needs some visibility, and the interactors never choose to disagree by being silent, because in broadcast conflict talk silence is the signal of losing, which ratifies the person who displays it as the weak part of a conflict, unable to react and to give counterarguments. (Cortini 2001: 176)

Silence in public television talk is evaluated negatively and regarded as weakness. Thus, television seems to be a major aspect that influences the negative evaluation of silence in communication in 'Western cultures' and contributes to what will be explained below as *Western bias*.

In summary, Cortini (2001) claims that silence says something about the relation of the interlocutors:

Silence talks about relation, and when we foresee the necessity of a particular managing of silence this means that we are involved in a formal situation. [...] Generally speaking, [...] we could say that every social interaction has its rules when managing silence. (Cortini 2001: 178)

Thus, in broadcasting contexts, longer silences are rarely found because silence is regarded as a sign of weakness. In contrast to this, in intimate contexts silence is more frequently used, partly also because it is more acceptable to display one's weakness towards a single intimate person than towards the broad public:

In public communication a person shows power by saying the 'last word' about a fact or a judgement, meaning that power seldom chooses the way of silence. (Cortini 2001: 178)

In contrast to the interpretation of silence in the public context, in an intimate context silence can also be used to express disagreement. Therefore, Cortini (2001) suggest that silence can be regarded as an index of weakness when it occurs in a conflictive situation between two people in the presence of other people or the public.

4. Silence and politeness

The relation between silence and politeness is very diverse and complex. It cannot be alleged that silence is either polite or impolite because this evaluation depends on a range of factors, such as context, cultural environment, and individual attitude. Eelen (2001) gives a pertinent example of the different possibilities of assessing silence according to its degree of (im)politeness, which are in this case due to different contextual situations:

[...] on many social occasions, not returning a greeting or simply remaining silent may be interpreted in terms of impoliteness, whereas in a library or church, talking aloud may be regarded as impolite and politeness involves refraining from speech. (Eelen 2001: iv)

In the course of his investigation, Verschueren (1985) takes a look at the causes of acts of silence. According to him, the major motives for silence are concealment, avoidance, indifference, and disappointment. Indifference as a motive for silence can definitely not be regarded as a politeness strategy, and being silent because of disappointment can probably neither be claimed as polite nor impolite. However, concealment and avoidance are somewhat more complex motives. They can be evaluated either positively or negatively. According to Verschueren (1985: 103), concealment is one of the most frequent causes of being silent, and is usually associated with the subsidiary reasons deception, solidarity, discretion, or mercifulness. Whereas deception is definitely negative, the last three motives mentioned are normally regarded as positive. As Verschueren (1985: 104) claims “they transform the acts described into cases of ‘white silence’”. Owing to this fact, in all three cases silence can be seen as a means of expressing politeness. For instance, if a person is silent in order to conceal a certain fact and thus, to protect another person because this fact would cause him/her problems or embarrassment, then silence can be regarded as an act of solidarity, discretion and mercifulness. Consequently, it can also be considered polite because it shows consideration for this person's face.

Sifianou (1997) has analysed the relationship between silence and politeness. She draws on Brown and Levinson's (1987) work on politeness phenomena. According to Brown and Levinson, any instance of talk threatens either the positive or the negative face of one or both participants in a conversation. What follows from this is that speech always constitutes a face-threatening act, and therefore, the generally most polite strategy is to remain silent. Sifianou (1997) agrees that it might usually be understood as polite to avoid saying something which would threaten the other person's face. However, she points to the fact that silence as a

response to a face-threatening act (for instance, an invitation that the speaker does not want to accept) is not necessarily the most polite way of acting, as this silence can be either interpreted as an acceptance or a rejection and thus, it often leaves the other person confused (Sifianou 1997: 71).

Hence, it seems that opinions on whether silence is polite or impolite differ substantially. A possibility to bring more clarity into this discussion is to take into account contextual, cultural, and individual factors. Whether silence in conversation is regarded as polite or impolite might be related to the fact that different cultures have different politeness systems, as is indicated by Scollon & Scollon (1989: 178 ff). This will be shown later in relation to Asian-English and Athabaskan-English intercultural communication. Indirectness, and accordingly also silence, may be considered polite in some selected, but certainly not all situations, as has been indicated by Eelen (2001) (see above). Apart from this, it is important to point out that the meaning of silence in particular situations is not always interpreted in the same way by different people, which indicates that silence does not only depend on the situation and the culture, but also on aspects of the individual person, which is stressed by Sifianou (1997):

When two people meet, the extent to which they feel socially obliged to produce or avoid silences varies culturally, situationally, and individually. (Sifianou 1997: 64)

Sifianou (1995) sets out to explore silence and its relation to politeness with regard to FTAs and Brown and Levinson's fifth superstrategy *Don't do the FTA* which they regard as the most polite strategy. Sifianou (1995: 96) contradicts Brown and Levinson's general claim that silence is polite. First, she emphasises that politeness is not the only reason for silence, and second, that silence becomes meaningful only in the particular context in which it occurs. Furthermore, she points out that this fifth superstrategy differs substantially from the others, which might be a reason why Brown and Levinson do not elaborate on it as they do with the other strategies. Moreover, she argues that this strategy is of restricted applicability because the diverse forms of silence could be better accounted for as realisations of the other superstrategies. According to Sifianou (1995: 103), *remain silent (Don't do the FTA)* should not be placed on the same scale as the other strategies, but rather be regarded as a manifestation of positive, negative, or off-record politeness. In addition, Sifianou (1995: 97) stresses that Brown and Levinson completely ignore the fact that silence can also be face-threatening and awkward, above all in cultures where phatic communion is valued.⁶

⁶ The concept of *phatic communion* will be discussed in more detail at a later stage of this chapter.

Moreover, Sifianou (1995: 99) argues that whether silence instead of the verbal expression of an FTA is polite or impolite depends substantially on the positive or negative effects on the receiver of this silence, as well as on the consequences for the relationship between speaker and addressee. Thus, in contrast to Brown and Levinson, she does not regard all communicative acts as face-threatening. For instance, acts like compliments, congratulations, or offers are, according to Sifianou, primarily face-saving or even face-enhancing for the addressee. Consequently, avoiding such acts has negative consequences on the relationship of the interlocutors, can be more face-threatening than performing them, and hence, is usually also considered inconsiderate and impolite. Therefore, Sifianou (1995: 99-100) stresses that silence is considered polite only when an act is avoided that clearly threatens the addressee's face and disadvantages the relationship of the interlocutors, but not when the act benefits the addressee or at least involves face-enhancing aspects.

This is also confirmed by Jaworski (1993: 25) who claims that failure to produce something expected can be regarded as a sign of hostility or stupidity. Silences as a response to questions, offers, invitations, and other verbal acts are frequently regarded as impolite, as so called 'dispreferred seconds' (Sifianou 1995: 101). Jaworski (1993: 85) argues that this negative evaluation probably stems from the ambiguous nature of silence. Although a silent response could express an acceptance, it is in fact usually interpreted as a refusal, rejection, or an indication that there is some kind of problem. This seems to be true in 'Western cultures'. However, this rather negative evaluation of silence is not necessarily found in other, 'non-Western' cultures and societies.

Sifianou (1995: 106) emphasises the complexity of the relationship between silence and politeness and the diversity of the meaning of silence:

In the same way that the forms and functions of politeness are not static but are entirely dependent on the particular sociocultural context, the meaning of silence too, is determined by the particular environment in which it occurs, even more so than speech.

Thus, silence can function as a face-saving strategy in some contexts, but also signal rudeness in others. In fact, Sifianou (1995: 107) argues that the study of silence might be more concerned with psychological factors than with politeness. Hence, she indicates that the use and interpretation of silence may be determined more by psychological aspects than by politeness considerations.

Regarding the issue of silence and politeness, Leech (1991: 141) reminds us of the adage "Don't speak unless you are spoken to", which was in former times usually said to children. It shows that silence was – probably sometimes still is – regarded as the only polite form of

behaviour for someone of lower status. However, Leech also points to the other side of the relation between silence and politeness and a situation where silence is not seen as polite anymore, but in fact as very impolite behaviour:

But if one has been engaged in conversation by someone else, silence is a sign of opting out of a social engagement to observe the interpersonal rhetorical principles, and is hence in many circumstances a form of impoliteness. (Leech 1991: 141)

This again illustrates how ambivalent silence is. Depending on who uses it in what kind of situation and in which culture, it is either considered polite or absolutely impolite. Furthermore, Leech's statement draws attention to the close relationship between politeness and speaking for the purpose of maintaining sociability. This kind of talk was called *phatic communion* by Bronislaw Malinowski. Phatic communion is not only avoidance of silence, but also serves to increase the participants' common ground of experience and agreement. Therefore, Leech argues for an additional maxim of politeness – the metalinguistic *phatic maxim*. Although Leech admits the 'uninformativeness' of such language, he claims that phatic communion can be attributed to other conversational principles and thus does not reduce the validity of the cooperative principle (Leech 1991: 141, 142).

It seems that the phatic maxim already exists in our society subconsciously.⁷ It becomes particularly obvious in communication with relative strangers or nodding acquaintances. In contrast, less importance is attached to the phatic maxim in intimate relationships. Here, silence is tolerated and does not signal any opting out of communication or have any negative effect on the relationship of the people involved. Now, the question arises why this is the case. Leech (1991: 144) offers a possible answer to this question when discussing irony and banter and their relationship to politeness. While being 'overpolite' can signify superiority or ironic distance, being 'underpolite' can have the function of establishing or maintaining a bond of familiarity. According to him, the reason for this, and at the same time also for the tolerance of silence in intimate relationships in our society, is a correlation between the amount of authority and social distance on the one hand, and politeness on the other hand:

A low value on the scales of authority and social distance [...] correlates with a low position on the scale of politeness; that is, the more intimate the relationship, the less important it is to be polite. Hence lack of politeness in itself can become a sign of intimacy; and hence, the ability to be impolite to someone in jest helps to establish and maintain such a familiar relationship. (Leech 1991: 144)

⁷ The expression *our society* is predominantly used in this paper to refer to European societies, in particular the German-speaking one. Yet, owing to common values with regard to communication, it also includes English-speaking cultures, such as the British and the US-American culture. It is mostly used as a synonym for 'Western culture'.

Undoubtedly, the kind of relationship of the interlocutors has a substantial influence on the tolerance and evaluation of silence. There seems to be a close connection between the degree of intimacy of the relationship and the extent to which silence is tolerated, and regarded as polite or impolite. Interestingly, it seems that in 'Western cultures' silence is totally accepted towards strangers as well as towards close friends and family members, as it is confirmed by Sifianou (1995: 98):

One does not usually talk to strangers, and when one does, there are limits as to how much and what kind of talk is permissible. At the other extreme, in close relationships silences are not only tolerated but are also an indication of shared experience and solidarity.

Thus, silence can function as an indicator for the closeness of the relationship between the interlocutors. In contrast to this, it is frequently considered awkward or embarrassing in the presence of not so close friends. Such instances of 'awkward silence' are often avoided through small talk.

5. Silence and culture

In this chapter, attention will be drawn to the fact that the meaning of silence depends substantially on the culture in which it occurs, and a Western bias towards speech rather than silence in communication will be pointed out. In addition, a few examples of the use and meaning of silence in some western cultures will be provided. Finally, silence in other, 'non-Western' cultures will be investigated by looking at selected examples. The studies that will be observed and discussed in this chapter have been chosen because all of them display very specific and sometimes extraordinary uses and evaluations of silence in communication.

5.1. Silence as a culture-dependent issue

It is important to keep in mind that it is extremely difficult to propose an absolutist concept of silence and its meaning and functions. As has been already pointed out previously, silence is highly ambiguous and its interpretation is difficult. Saville-Troike (1985: 10) argues that silence means what it conveys, and as both silence and speech are symbolic, the meaning of silence is derived by convention in specific speech communities. Remaining silent during a conversation, for instance when a delicate topic comes up, or when the speaker wants to reject an invitation, or for any other reasons, might not always be interpreted as polite. Sifianou (1995: 102) claims that it is frequently polite to avoid expressing disagreement, disapproval or contempt verbally. Yet, she stresses that there are cultural differences. Referring to Blum-Kulka (1992: 226), she highlights that in Israeli society it can be regarded as polite to express disapproval or disagreement because this reflects the speaker's sincerity, which is highly important in this culture. Moreover, Sifianou indicates that disagreements are seen as reinforcing solidarity among Greeks and speakers of East European Jewish background, as has been demonstrated by Tannen and Kavaka (1992), and Schiffrin (1984).

In fact, silence can be evaluated positively or negatively. Which kind of evaluation is applied, is not only influenced by the situation and people's individual speech behaviour, but is also significantly culture-dependent. Different cultures tend to have different concepts of silence and its meaning in communication, distinct evaluations of the use of it, and vary in tolerance towards the amount of silence in a conversation. Referring to Basso (1990) who highlights that among the Apache it is common to greet another person by keeping silent for a longer period of time instead of using a number of verbal formulae, Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997: 233) point out that silence is an issue that shows very well that similar verbal forms can have

strikingly different functions in different cultures. They claim that “[s]ilence sounds the same in any language, but its interpretation differs widely”. Another example with which they support this claim is the Japanese belief that the real essence of an experience disappears when it is expressed in words.

Sifianou (1995, 1997) stresses the fact that norms and values regarding silence vary from culture to culture:

[...] as many ethnographic studies have convincingly shown, taciturnity and volubility are assigned different values and are appropriate in different contexts in different societies. (Sifianou 1995: 108)

[...] within any culture, there are norms and values regulating the amount of talk or silence required in particular contexts. [...] There are also norms determining the meaning of particular instances of silence in each culture. (Sifianou 1997: 74)

Furthermore, Jaworski (1993: 22) emphasises that silence is subject to cross-cultural misinterpretation, which “may lead to interethnic miscommunication and conflict, and give rise to negative stereotyping of individuals and even whole communities” (Jaworski 1993: 23). Houck and Grass (1997: 285) highlight the fact that cross-cultural communication is an area where misinterpretation of a speaker’s intended message is frequent, and that although they regard silence as being able to carry meaning, they acknowledge that different cultures apply silence for different reasons.

Saville-Troike (1985: 10-11) reminds us of a rather tragic consequence of the misinterpretation of silence which occurred around 1980 during a time of military tension between Egypt and Greece:

Egyptian pilots radioed their intention to land at an airbase on Cyprus and the Greek traffic controllers reportedly responded with silence. The Greeks intended thereby to indicate *refusal* of permission to land, but the Egyptians interpreted silence as *assent*. The result of the misunderstanding in this case was the loss of a number of lives when Greeks fired on the planes as they approached the runway. (Saville-Troike 1985: 11)

Owing to such difficulties and the danger of misinterpretations, Jaworski (1993) seems to be in favour of a relativistic approach to the study of silence rather than an absolutist one. This approach regards silence as a fuzzy concept whose prototypical meaning depends on the community in which it occurs, and moreover, it recognizes the fact that attitudes towards silence and evaluations of the importance of silence and talk vary across cultures (Jaworski 1993: 45).

With regard to the amount of silence which is tolerated in conversation, there are significant cultural differences. This can be observed particularly in the case of inter-turn silences or

pauses. The length of these pauses varies considerably across cultures. Watts (1997: 93 ff) considers the significance of inter-turn pauses, taking into account various studies on this topic. He claims that inter-turn silences which are longer than 1.5 seconds are perceived as conversational dysfluency in North American communication, whereas, for example, inter-turn silences of approximately 2 seconds are necessary for fluent interaction in the Canadian Athabaskan Indian community (Watts 1997: 93). He furthermore maintains that

[...] in a verbal interaction in which the primary activity of the social interaction is talk, an inter-turn silence of around 1.5 seconds is indeed a convenient boundary between perceived fluency and dysfluency in Western/North American cultural frameworks. [...] any inter-turn silence above this rough borderline will be open for interpretation. The silence, in other words, will be in some significant sense meaningful. (Watts 1997: 94)

Enninger (1987: 280) points out that Old Order Amish people show a great tolerance for longer between-turn silences. While in American conversation longer pauses without a previous notification like “hold” or “wait a minute” are not normally tolerated, among Old Order Amish people longer, sometimes even 50 seconds or more, are tolerated without any notifications. This shows us that different cultures evaluate instances of silence in totally distinct ways. Enninger also emphasises that as a result of the Amish people’s timing of gaps and lapses in communication, American mainstream society has attributed uncooperativeness and taciturnity to this culture.

Hence, it seems that there are very clear norms and conventions as far as the length of inter-turn silences in conversation is concerned, and any deviation from these norms has a certain meaning, as well as an impact on the fluency of the conversation. Therefore, it influences the interpretation of the speaker’s behaviour significantly, which is also emphasised by Scollon & Scollon (1995):

[...] even very small differences in the timing of interturn pauses can lead conversationalists to develop negative attitudes toward each other. (Scollon & Scollon 1995: 63)

They stress the importance of these pauses in interactions and maintain that such silences in a conversation need as much interpretation and reaction as speech (Scollon & Scollon 1995: 94).

Enninger (1987) investigates what he calls “non-phonations at transition relevance places in the speaking behaviour of various cultures” (1987: 270).⁸ He suggests that whether silence is meaningful or not depends on *where* it occurs in a conversation:

The basic assumption [...] is that non-phonations are meaningless and insignificant nothings only before, between, and after interactive periods and that, by contrast, all non-phonations during interactive periods are significant absences and therefore have the status of zero signs, or rather of zero signifiers [...]. The second assumption is that the universally available signmaterial called non-phonation is universally made to serve essential and quite diverse functions in discourse and action systems. (Enninger 1987: 271)

Enninger also provides a quaint example of a specific situation in which silence is used in Sweden and points to the fact that in Sweden boiling sausages is associated with non-talk:

The parallel between the sausage ceasing and the human intestinal tube leads to the taboo of speaking and breaking wind at the other end of the intestinal tube, because breaking wind at either end might break the sausage skin. (Enninger 1987: 272)

As he highlights, this example does not only show that silence is highly culture-specific, but also that it frequently occurs in critical situations because it is often considered the most cautious method which entails least risk.

Apart from this, Enninger assumes that non-phonations in communication are very likely to cause cross-cultural miscommunications. In this respect, he cites Scollon and Scollon (1981: 12) who point out that what causes most problems in cross-cultural communication is to understand not *what* people say but the reason *why* they say something. This is a tricky task as the discourse systems, which usually give information about how a message should be interpreted, differ from culture to culture. However, while speech is at least semantically transparent, the task is even more difficult with silence, as the listener has to find out additionally what this instance of silence means before s/he can think about the reason for it. Furthermore, he claims that a frequent reason why silences often cause misunderstandings in cross-cultural communication is that we do not expect people from different cultures to use silences – which Enninger describes as “material nothings” – in another way than we do. This shows that silence, like politeness, is often misinterpreted as universal, which it clearly is not. Enninger (1987: 297) emphasises that politeness does not only underlie universal motives and reasoning, as Brown and Levinson (1978) have convincingly argued, but that cultural relativity does play a crucial role. Accordingly, he concludes that also the use of silence, which is frequently associated either with politeness or impoliteness, cannot be regarded as universal:

⁸ Throughout his paper, Enninger consistently uses the term *non-phonation* instead of *silence*.

The universally available material called non-phonation which is “homophonous” across cultures is supposedly particularly treacherous sign “material” because such nothings are often not even suspected of being sign carriers, and if so, not expected to vary across cultures, neither materially, nor semantically, nor pragmatically. (Enninger 1987: 297)

With regard to the potential of silences to function as communicative acts, Enninger (1987: 290) claims that this potential is most apparent in turn-pairs, such as greetings and farewells or questions and answers. When the expected second part of such a pair is replaced by silence, this is an instance of a significant silence. Moreover, in intra-cultural communication, where interactants share the expectations regarding the second pair-parts, the replacement of these by silence is frequently interpreted as loaded silence and as socially marked behaviour. For instance, in European cultures, it is obligatory to answer a greeting. If the answer, the second part of the pair, is deleted and replaced by silence, this is considered as socially marked and gives information about the often problematic relationship of the participants (Enninger 1987: 291). This pattern might lead to problems in cross-cultural communication with members of cultures where greetings are not paired by an obligatory rule. With regard to this, Saville-Troike (1982: 6) cites White who reported in the 1880's that the Apache do not seem to have any common form of salute or greeting when meeting or leaving someone. He describes a specific situation he observed:

In this instance the Indian simply rode up to his little brush dwelling and dismounted. One of his wives took charge of the horse. (He) approached the fire along side of his hut where his family were collected without exchanging a word with any of them – not even to the wife who had taken the horse. There he stood motionless and speechless for some ten or fifteen minutes when at last he took a seat on the ground and engaged in ordinary conversation without having observed any form of greeting. (White quoted in Saville-Troike 1982: 7)

Of course, one could argue that this situation could have been a unique or rare situation for the Apaches and White might have made a generalisation. However, also Basso presents similar facts about the Apache of Arizona regarding situations when children return home after having been away for a longer time, usually for a term in a boarding school:

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. (Basso 1990: 310)

With regard to questions and answers, Enninger (1987: 294) indicates that these pairs are less tightly prestructured. However, Japanese culture is an exception here. In the Japanese

discourse system, dispreferred answers, like refusals or declines which would threaten the interlocutor's face, are not expressed verbally, but instead silence is used. In contrast to 'Western cultures', such as the mainstream Anglo-American culture, where people are supposed to clearly express their wishes, desires and thoughts, and thus self-assertion is encouraged, the Japanese culture does not encourage people to clearly state their wishes, preferences and desires and opinions (Wierzbicka 2003: 76).⁹ A reason for this is one of the most essential Japanese values called *enryo*, which means something similar to 'restraint' or 'reserve'. Nakane affirms this tendency:

One would prefer to be silent than utter words such as 'no' or 'I disagree'. The avoidance of such open and bald negative expressions is rooted in the fear that it might disrupt the harmony and order of the group. (Nakane 1970: 35)

This also reminds us of Leech's *Pollyanna Hypothesis* according to which people verbalise positive things rather than negative.

In general, the evaluation of silences in conversation seems to be closely related to a culture's politeness system and its orientation towards interpersonal politeness. According to Scollon & Scollon (1995: 39), more talk and volubility is an involvement strategy, whereas less talk and taciturnity constitutes an independence strategy¹⁰. Therefore, longer pauses are usually associated with independence politeness strategies, shorter ones with involvement politeness strategies (Scollon & Scollon 1995: 65). As has been already mentioned in a previous chapter, they distinguish two different politeness systems: a solidarity face system and a deference face system. In each of those, the orientation towards silence and politeness is a different one:

[...] in a solidarity face system, the pauses tend to be shorter; in a deference face system, there is a difference in the use of pauses by the person in the higher position and the person in the lower position. (Scollon & Scollon 1995: 65)

Thus, depending on the cultural pattern and a community's orientation towards politeness and human interaction, more or less silence is tolerated.

Scollon & Scollon (1995:66) illustrate this with the example of communication between Asians and Westerners, which often poses difficulties for Asians. Since Asians regard deference as the right attitude to take when talking to a stranger, and deference is usually associated with longer inter-turn pauses or even complete silence, the amount of silence applied by them in

⁹ Wierzbicka (2003: 72 ff) contrasts the Western cultural script which is based on "individuality, autonomy, equality, rationality, aggression, and self-assertion" with the traditional Japanese model that Lebra (1976: 257) describes as consisting of "collectivism, interdependence, superordination-subordination, empathy, sentimentality, introspection and self-denial".

¹⁰ For a more detailed explanation of the terms *independence* and *involvement politeness* see above (chapter 2.1.5.).

conversational interactions is rather high. In contrast to this, Westerners put emphasis on expressing solidarity in interpersonal relationships, and therefore, typically apply involvement politeness strategies which are characterised also by shorter inter-turn pauses. Based on their culturally shaped assumptions, both parties most frequently interpret the behaviour of the other negatively. While the Westerner may conclude, for instance, that the Asian is less competent linguistically or impolite and hostile because of the large amount of silence applied, the Asian might regard the Westerner's behaviour as pretentious and intrusive.

Similarly, Sifianou (1997: 75) argues that "societies with a negative-politeness orientation will value silence more than societies with a more positive-politeness orientation".¹¹ Western societies attach great importance to talk, not only for referential, but also for social and affective purposes (Sifianou 1997: 74). As a consequence, if somebody's use of silence in conversation is greater than usual, this mostly triggers negative feelings and interpretations in the interlocutor. This attitude towards silence could be called a typical feature of 'Western cultures'. The next section will have a closer look at this issue.

5.2. Western bias

Western cultures show a clear preference for speech over silence in conversational interaction. Consequently, they also display a tendency for evaluative stereotyping of groups whose behaviour differs from the western norm. Although silence is to some extent regarded as a possible means of communication, which can be seen in proverbs like the English *Silence is golden* or the German *Sprechen ist Silber, Schweigen ist Gold*, too much silence in conversations is evaluated negatively. As a result, silence in communication is mostly avoided:

Therefore, we accelerate our conversations with others and avoid pauses at all cost, because we think that whatever silences occur in discourse they inevitably indicate lack of mutual rapport between the interlocutors. (Jaworski 1993: 6)

Thus, silence in conversations is interpreted as indicating a lack of harmony or solidarity in the relationship of the speakers, and this is what Jaworski (1993:7) calls the "Western bias in favour of speech rather than silence".

One aspect in which some 'non-Western cultures' often differ from mainstream 'Western cultures' is in what Malinowski called *phatic communion* and what we often refer to as *small*

¹¹ *Positive politeness* here means volubility as a strategy of involvement, whereas *negative politeness* refers to taciturnity as a strategy of independence (Sifianou 1997: 75).

talk. With respect to this, Enninger (1987: 288, 289) refers to Samarin's (1965) study of the Gbeya and his finding that when a sick person is visited by friends or family, they usually express their sympathy by sitting next to the patient in silence. Furthermore, he cites Hymes (1975) who investigated the Wishram culture and also found a striking difference between the patterns of visits and talk in this culture in contrast to mainstream American culture:

That talk was not mandatory is more dramatically clear by contrast to our own society in what might constitute a visit. A friend could come to one's house, sit, and leave without a word being exchanged. One would later report, "So-and-so came to see me yesterday". That he had taken the trouble to come was communication enough. A visit need not include talk, if nothing needed saying. (Hymes 1975: 134 quoted in Enninger 1987: 289)

Jaworski (1993) draws on Scollon (1985) who discusses this kind of bias and illustrates the association of negative qualities with silence, slower speech, and longer pauses with a metaphor. He refers to mainstream U.S. society and its conceptualization of humans who are compared to machines. Thus, as long as the machine is constantly humming, it is regarded as working perfectly, whereas silence is perceived as a defect or breakdown of the machine. In other words, if a person applies too much silence during a conversation, this is regarded as a lack of ability to communicate and maintain social interaction and social engagement (Jaworski 1993: 46). This is also confirmed by Sifianou (1995: 95):

[...] in many Western cultures, silence has a rather negative connotation. In these cultures, 'phatic communion' (Malinowski 1972), i.e. talking simply for reasons of sociability, is desirable behaviour for competent language users.

Similar results were presented by Giles et al. (1992: 220) who claim that Westerners usually talk for affiliative purposes, for recreation, and to fill silences which are regarded as stressful. In contrast to this, Easterners talk mainly for instrumental purposes, and can also feel comfortable during silence. Goddard and Wierzbicka (1997: 237) point out that in Japanese culture verbalism is suppressed, and as a result, there is a higher tolerance towards silence. They quote Doi who highlights a major difference between Japanese and Western cultures:

Western tradition is suffused with an emphasis on the importance of words. In Japan, this tradition does not exist. I do not mean to suggest that traditional Japanese thought makes light of words, but it seems to be more conscious of matters that words do not reach. (Doi 1988: 33)

He also points out that silence was traditionally more valued in Eastern societies, such as India, China, Japan, than in Western societies where it has been usually regarded as socially

disagreeable. Thus, in the U.S. silence is commonly interpreted as a lack of attention and lack of initiative. Participation and verbal performance is emphasised (Jandt 2007: 113).

Although there is undoubtedly a certain bias towards speech rather than silence in 'Western cultures', the tolerance of silence in communication varies even within these cultures. As Sifianou (1997: 74) indicates, there are differences even within Europe, as silence is significantly less tolerated in Mediterranean cultures than in Northern European cultures. According to Jaworski (1993: 54 ff), this is related to the different amount of small talk required in different communities:

It appears that in different cultures and among different members within one culture, variations exist in the degree of necessity felt to engage in various forms of small talk. For some people (cultures), to maintain the impression of the existence of good rapport among individuals, a greater amount of small talk is required than for others. To those who find too much small talk superficial and devoid of true communicative value, remaining in silence in each other's company will probably not be marked as a lack of social contact and integration. (Jaworski 1993: 54)

Consequently, different requirements for the amount of small talk lead to a different tolerance of silence in communication, and thus also to different meanings attached to the use of silence in interactions.

5.3. Silence in 'Western cultures' – selected examples

This section will present selected examples of the role of silence in different 'Western cultures'. On the one hand, by using examples that to a certain extent deviate from the previously discussed Western bias, it aims at showing that there is still a considerable amount of variation even within this cultural group. On the other hand, it should demonstrate a general tendency of the use and evaluation of silence in communication in contrast to 'non-Western cultures'.

5.3.1. Silence in Greek, English, Swedish and Irish societies

Sifianou (1997: 63 ff) compares Greek and English societies with regard to silence and its use to express politeness. Silence is evaluated differently in these two cultures. While in England it is used as a negative politeness strategy - to avoid intrusion -, and is therefore assessed positively, in Greece and many other Mediterranean cultures silence is regarded as a distancing device and thus has a negative value (Sifianou 1997: 74). Greek society puts a lot of

emphasis on volubility, and as a result, tolerance for silence in interpersonal relationships is rather low, except for in very intimate relationships. A taciturn person is often considered indifferent, unfriendly, snobbish, or sly and dangerous (Sifianou 1997: 76).

In contrast to this, English society attaches more importance to individualism and privacy, is concerned about face saving, and does not like to express negative emotions in front of others, which leads to a higher tolerance of silence (Sifianou 1997: 77). Sifianou (1997: 78) refers to Tannen's (1984) concept of conversational style continuum, with high-involvement on one end and high-considerateness at the other. According to her, Greek society can be regarded as having a high-involvement style, whereas English society can be positioned on the other end of the continuum, with a high-considerateness style (Tannen 1984: 29, 30).

Although both Greek and English are European cultures, silence has a different meaning and evaluation in each society, which can, of course, lead to conflicts and misinterpretations in interactions between these two communities. This shows us that in order to understand the meaning of silence in a culture, one always has to consider its main values, which is also stressed by Sifianou (1997: 79):

Looking at silence cross-culturally, it is instructive to consider the predominant values of a society as they relate to talk and silence.

In relation to this, Stedje (1990) talks about *cultural patterns* and *patterns of thinking* of societies. She compares the Swedish cultural pattern to the German one and highlights *Zurückhaltung* ('reticence') as the quality which is typically associated with Swedes (Stedje 1990: 33). In the Swedish society, reticence is evaluated positively, whereas German speakers consider it as rather negative. The Swedish cultural pattern of reticence puts emphasis on two aspects. First, one should try not to attract too much attention and second, one should show respect for other people's privacy (Stedje 1990: 34). The fact that reticence is highly valued in Sweden substantially influences the Swedish behaviour, including speech behaviour in conversation. As a consequence, the Swedish pattern of interaction is characterised by a high tolerance of silence and a low willingness to participate in the conversation (Stedje 1990: 35). Of course, one should not forget that this pattern can be subject to regional variation.

Another example of a Scandinavian community that makes extensive use of silence in communication is that of the Lapps. Jaworski (1993: 54) quotes Reisman (1974) and his experience of social interaction with Lapps.

The extreme silence of my own experience was with some Lapps in Northern Sweden... We spent some days in a borrowed sod house in the village of Rensjoen ... Our

neighbours would drop in on us every morning just to check that things were all right. We would offer coffee. After several minutes of silence the offer would be accepted. We would tentatively ask a question. More silence, then a “yes” or a “no”. Then a long wait. After five or ten minutes we would ask another. Same pause, same “yes” or “no”. Another ten minutes, etc. Each visit lasted approximately an hour – all of us sitting formally. During that time there would be six or seven exchanges. Then our guests would leave to repeat the performance the next day. (Reisman 1974: 112, 113)

This passage illustrates the great difference of attitude towards silence in two cultures – the Lapp culture and the central European culture. Reisman calls the silence that occurred during the meeting “extreme” because it was something totally unknown and unfamiliar to him. This shows us the difficulty of interactions between people from different cultures – in this case cultures whose attitudes towards silence differ from each other to such a great extent.

In Ireland silence plays an important role in the discussion of politeness. Negative politeness is valued and silence is considered a basic face need (Kallen 2005: 130-131). Silence is not regarded as the mere absence of speech or noise but as an interactive mode:

Silence as a part of the construction of face needs may include complete restraint from speaking; quite commonly, though, it allows indirect strategies for achieving discourse goals. These indirect strategies highly value off-the-record utterances (e.g. understatement, irony, rhetorical questions, ellipsis, etc.) and may even provide ways for speakers to accomplish certain discourse goals when they choose not to perform an explicit act of discourse at all. (Kallen 2005: 133)

Furthermore, according to Kallen (2005: 133), ‘silent’ ways of asking a face-threatening question are quite frequent. An example for this would be the question *You’re not from this part of the country?* which implies the question *Where are you from?*

5.3.2. The silent Finn

‘The silent Finn’ is a common and well-known stereotype. The general opinion about Finnish people is that they are rather taciturn and not very talkative conversation partners. Of course, this is a generalisation. Yet, silence is without doubt an issue that comes to the mind of many people when they think about Finns. Hence, it is a strong stereotype which has for some time influenced our thinking about the Finnish society. This chapter will look at the issue of silence in Finnish interaction and at the meaning silence has for Finns, as well as for outsiders from this culture. The information is mainly based on Sajavaara and Lehtonen’s works (1985, 1997) on this topic.

Whether the stereotype reflects the truth or is rather a myth is difficult to say. The problem lies in the measurement of the amount and tempo of speech. Lehtonen and Sajavaara

(1985:197) claim that “[p]hysical measures of speech rate and pauses do not necessarily serve as ‘objective’ parameters of time and tempo”. They point to the need of a set of common denominators to evaluate the amount of talk and non-talk and thus compare different cultures (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1997: 278). What seems to be a fact is that Finns’ use and tolerance of silence differs from that of other cultures, which is attested by the experience from intercultural encounters of Finns and other Europeans (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985: 194). No matter if true or not, the image of ‘the silent Finn’ is popular both outside and inside Finland. The impression outsiders have of Finnish people – that of a silent culture – probably stems from the fact that Finns have particular values and conceptions of what appropriate speech behaviour is. These differ from the values and conceptions of most of the other European societies, and this can lead to conflicts and misinterpretations in intercultural communication, and, as a consequence, to the creation of stereotypes.

Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1997: 196) discuss three typical Finnish interaction strategies that can lead to problems and misunderstandings. First, the Finnish conception of ‘active participation’ includes delayed turn-taking, disfluency, slow speech and silent observation of discourse. Second, Finns usually engage in silent participation, which may often make the Finn as a conversation partner less attractive and interesting for others. Finally, Finnish interactional behaviour frequently consists of a complete withdrawal from the discussion, which is frequently interpreted in cross-cultural communication as hostility towards the group. The silence of the Finn in a conversation may result in a variety of negative interpretations by the non-Finnish conversation partner. The Finn might be regarded as indifferent, sullen and hostile, which might cause a breakdown of communication.

However, in the Finnish culture silence seems to have a significantly different weight in communication and a different meaning than in other western, central and southern European cultures. According to Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985: 194), the length of silences that are tolerated in conversation is much longer than in America or central Europe. This is probably due to the fact that silence is socially acceptable in Finland to a different degree than in America or central Europe, where talk often serves the sole purpose of avoiding silence (ibid.: 199). In Finland, the opinion towards people who speak little is positive because it is regarded as sensible to think thoroughly before uttering words (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985: 193). Thus, people are only expected to talk when they really have something to say, and consequently, too much talk is evaluated negatively (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1997: 271). Furthermore, silence in unknown situations or towards strangers is used by Finns as a strategy of passive information gathering. As Finnish politeness is passive, it is regarded as polite and considerate to leave other people in peace, which is a similar attitude to that in Sweden observed by Stedje

(1990). Valma Yli-Vakkuri (2005: 201) confirms Finns' tendency to remain silent towards strangers:

Finns are seldom the first to speak in unfamiliar company and seldom start arguing or disagreeing with others' opinions; rather, they acquiesce, remain silent or change the subject.

As a result of this tendency, people outside the Finnish culture often misinterpret the language behaviour of Finns as impolite. Moreover, Finns consider listening a privilege. The listener has the right to listen and this conception manifests itself in quiet listening, without much vocal backchanneling. Long pauses are usual and absolutely acceptable. The speaker is given the right to speak and it is regarded as impolite and inconsiderate to interrupt (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985: 196).

The Finnish values and conceptions about silence in communication are passed to the new generations by means of education and early acquisition of the patterns of silence in social interaction. In Finland, children are not expected to participate in the conversations with adults, unless the adults clearly ask them to do so. Furthermore, it is not usual – as it is in many other European cultures – to engage in conversations during meals (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985: 199, 200). In contrast to this, in our central European culture it is often regarded as unpleasant or even impolite not to engage in talk while eating together. This emphasises the fact that silence in the Finnish culture does not have the same meaning or results in the same interpretations as in many other European cultures.

All in all, silence is regarded as harmonious in the Finnish culture. Being together without speaking is accepted and not connected with any negative associations (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1997: 274, 275). As a result of these attitudes and values of the Finnish society, silence in interaction has a special significance for Finns and a range of meanings that are totally different to those in cultures of western and central Europe. A reason for this might lie at least partly in historical circumstances. In the past, the rural population in Finland did not live in villages but in separate houses (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985:200). As a consequence, social interaction was rather rare and the amount of social contacts was quite small. However, it is likely that globalisation and the impact of international contacts might considerably change the 'silent' Finnish culture, as is also acknowledged by Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985: 200).

5.3.3. Silence in Italian culture

Italian culture is certainly one that is not known for its reticence or silent behaviour in social interaction, and therefore, one would probably not necessarily expect Italians to attribute a lot

of importance to silence in conversation. Saunders (1985) investigated silence as one possible emotion management style in Italian culture by conducting a fieldwork in the alpine Italian village Valbella. He points to the popular stereotype of Italians as being “emotional, expansive, noisy, ‘warm’ or ‘hot’ people” (Saunders 1985: 165). However, silence plays an important role and has a special meaning in Valbellan society. Saunders demonstrates that Valbellans make particular use of silence in social interaction in certain situations – situations in which strong emotions are involved, as well as in ambiguous and very serious situations. Of course, one might argue that a single example taken from a small alpine village is not representative for Italian people in general. This is certainly true, and no such attempt at a generalisation will be made here. As a matter of fact, the Valbellan case can be either seen as an excellent example of how stereotypes can be undermined by facts or as an exception that proves the general rule.

In emotionally conflictive situations, which are mostly experienced in the family context, Italians use two different strategies to manage these feelings: either they display effusive, vociferous emotionality, and thus, in other terms, make a lot of noise, or they show a reluctance to talk and lapse into silence (Saunders 1985: 176.177). It is considered more sensible to remain silent when having strong, problematic emotions, rather than saying something that could cause a serious conflict and possibly lead to a separation from family members or other people (Saunders 1985: 179).

Silence, in sum, is a common strategy for the management of tense situations. It is especially appropriate when people are highly emotional (as Valbellans often are), particularly when fully satisfactory solutions to the issue are unlikely. Silence helps the individual to control the emotion, and may at times also allow the passive expression of discontentment without the dangers of a direct challenge. (Saunders 1985: 181)

The use of silence in this context is related to what has been mentioned previously. It relates to what Tannen (1990) called the ‘preventive function of silence’ and what Jaworski (1993) referred to as the function of silence to keep the channel of communication open and avoid conflictive responses in order not to damage the relationship between the participants of the conversation. Silence here is used as a security device – as a kind of refuge in tense, ambiguous and insecure situations, and as a conflict-avoidance strategy. In the case of the Valbellan people this use and meaning of silence is probably even more remarkable because Italians are generally considered a very open, spirited and emotional people. Nevertheless, silence is valued as an important strategy in social interaction.

Owing to the generally high emotionality of Italians, silence seems to be necessary to handle these strong feelings. This emotionality is probably to a great extent ‘learned’ and a result of

education and socialisation of children. However, children are not only shown how to be able to express their feelings, but also how to control them. They are taught to use silence for this purpose, as well as in ambiguous, embarrassing, and very serious situations, and in encounters with strangers and adults.

The socialization of children involves training for both the expression and the control of emotion. One aspect of this training – the strong emphasis on formal, respectful relations with strangers and unrelated adults – is particularly relevant for learning to be silent in problematic situations. [...] A properly educated child learns to remain embarrassedly silent as long as the situation remains ambiguous. (Saunders 1985: 172, 173)

Thus, it seems that silence is in a way used to protect oneself from potential harm as well as to show respect for others, particularly social superiors, like in the relationship child – adult. The appropriate use of silence is part of the cultural knowledge of Italian people and is already learned very early, simultaneously with the acquisition of the ability to be noisy and very emotional:

The 'silent style' [...] is learned in childhood along with the dramatic, noisy style; and it is specifically introduced in the context of ambiguity, strangeness, and potential difficulty. (Saunders 1985: 173)

As a result, children learn to value silence as an important device in social interaction and soon acquire knowledge of its meaning and interpretation.

Another interesting aspect of the Italian culture is the attitude towards the silence of others. People usually respect the right of others to remain silent in conversation, probably because they recognize the seriousness of the situation when a participant applies silence (Saunders 1985: 178). This illustrates the fact that in this Italian society the use of silence in social interaction is regarded as a significant and meaningful act which is carried out because of a certain reason and with a specific purpose. The Valbellan case clearly shows that silence in social interaction does not always mean a lack of emotions, as might often be thought. In fact, it can indicate conflicting and problematic emotions which would most probably have serious consequences if they had not been controlled through the use of silence (Saunders 1985: 175).

5.4. Silence in 'non-Western cultures' – selected examples

In contrast to the Western bias that has been discussed previously and which is prevalent in most Anglo-American and European cultures, silence has often a different value in other cultures. While silence in 'Western cultures' is often regarded as undesirable behaviour, the

opposite evaluation might be the case in other cultures. In this respect, Jaworski (1993: 23) refers to Enninger (1983, 1987) who gives an overview of cross-cultural aspects of silence in communication. He offers some examples of deviations from the low tolerance of silence of mainstream European and American cultures. Enninger (1987) provides evidence for the fact that silences in conversation are much longer among the Amish than among most mainstream white Americans. Furthermore, he claims that in some cultures silence may take over functions of speech. For instance, among the Amish it is acceptable to use silence for the purpose of greeting:

[...] it is acceptable for an Amish person entering the home of an Amish neighbour not to knock on the door and not to salute a host. After sitting down, the guest may remain silent for a while before starting to talk. (Jaworski 1993: 23)

Another culture where silence takes over functions of speech will be discussed later, in relation to the Igbo people of Nigeria.

With regard to the role of silence in the teaching process, Jaworski (1993: 21, 22) points out cross-cultural differences regarding the use and evaluation of silence between Native American and Anglo-American schoolchildren. He claims that the Anglo-American culture puts a lot of emphasis on children's verbal skills, and therefore, teaching is characterised by a great amount of interaction between the teacher and the children. In contrast to this, in the Navajo culture the visual and quiet exploration of the world is essential for children's learning process, and less importance is attributed to verbal skills.¹² As a consequence, this often leads to major difficulties and disadvantages of children of Native-American origin in Anglo-American schools. In the following sub-chapters similar examples of cultures where silence plays a particular role will be presented and discussed in more detail.

5.4.1. Silence in the Athabaskan culture and Athabaskan-English interaction

Another example for a culture in which silence has a different value and meaning than in 'Western cultures' is the Athabaskan community – a group of indigenous peoples from North America (mainly Alaska and northern Canada). Scollon & Scollon (1989) investigated Athabaskan speech behaviour in social interaction, particularly with respect to interethnic communication between Athabaskans and English-speaking people, and pointed out the difficulty of interaction between those groups and the confusion and misinterpretations that typically occur in these situations.

¹² The majority of the Navajo people live in Arizona, Utah, New Mexico and Colorado.

One major problem lies in the different values attached to taciturnity and volubility:

One of the first observations people make about Athabaskan-English conversations [...] is that Athabaskans do not talk as much as English speakers. (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 14)

From the English point of view, Athabaskans are very silent and do not talk enough, whereas Athabaskans regard English-speaking people as very talkative and often have the feeling that they talk too much. While English speakers frequently use speech in order to get to know people, Athabaskans have a different attitude. For them, individuality is very important, and therefore, they show a high degree of respect for one's own, as well as the individuality of others (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 15), which is one explanation for a higher amount of silence in their interactional behaviour. Exceptions to this are situations in which the participants of the conversation know each other very well. In these situations Athabaskans are quite talkative, in contrast to English speakers who regard situations like these as the only instances where talk is not necessary. Thus, the Athabaskan attitude seems to constitute the precise opposite of the English perception of the relationship between taciturnity and intimacy.

Silence in Athabaskan culture is used when meeting strangers, because of the high degree of respect for individuality. This can be seen in relation to the Athabaskan politeness system, which is a deference politeness system.

The essence of Athabaskan communicative style is respect for the autonomy and independence of other individuals. [...] Athabaskan communicative style is a deference politeness system. (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 179)

Scollon & Scollon (1989: 179) describe the main values of this system as first, the assumption of a low power difference between members, and second, an assumption of a high distance between members. Non-intervention in interaction – and thus silence – can be seen a consequence of the second assumption. In contrast to the Anglo-American solidarity system with its communicative style, the Athabaskan one is a deference politeness system in which a high distance between the members of a conversation, especially towards strangers, is regarded as essential (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 179). Hence, the crucial cultural values for communication are different to those in Anglo-American cultures where a rather low distance between members of a conversation is assumed (solidarity system). In conclusion, Scollon and Scollon (1989) point out that the difficulties that occur in Athabaskan-English communication stem from the fact that people with different politeness systems, and thus different values, interact with each other.

Another situation where Athabaskans usually apply silence is when the speaker finds him/herself in a subordinate role in relation to the interlocutor who is superordinate.

According to Scollon & Scollon (1989: 18) “[t]he Athabaskan point of view is that the person in the superordinate role should do most of the speaking”. This perception applies to the education of children, as well as, for instance, to job interviews, where Athabaskans think that since they are in a subordinate position in relation to the interviewer, they are expected to be rather silent and let the person in the superordinate position do the talking. This attitude again reflects the exact opposite to traditional Western cultural norms in such situations. Here, Athabaskans use silence in social interaction to express respect for the superordinate position of another person.

Moreover, the issue of presentation of self poses a serious problem in Athabaskan-English interaction. While it is common and even required from English speakers to show all their abilities and qualities through talking, Athabaskans avoid such self-displays because it is regarded as inappropriate and as bringing bad luck to present oneself in a good light (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 20, 21). As a result, when it comes to self-presentation in social interaction, Athabaskans rather remain silent because of their belief that it brings bad luck and is not seen as appropriate behaviour to praise oneself in the way in which English speakers do this.

Finally, another problem concerning the use of silence that arises in intercultural communication between Athabaskans and English speakers is the length of pauses between turns. Athabaskans usually apply slightly longer pauses than English speakers, which leads to problems in communication because the English speaker usually interprets these longer pauses as a sign that the Athabaskan has finished his/her contribution to the conversation and therefore, takes over the turn and starts speaking (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 25). Without doubt, expectations about how long a speaker is allowed to be silent between turns are different in these two cultures. In contrast to the attitude of English speakers, in Athabaskan culture speakers are allowed to take as much time as they need to develop an idea. Thus, a longer silence at one turn does not necessarily mean that the speaker has finished what s/he wanted to say. Pausing in interaction fulfils important functions in Athabaskan communication. It plays an essential role in information structure and in indicating difference between background and foreground information. Moreover, pauses are used to express emphasis. In sum, pauses in Athabaskan communication are longer and more frequent than in English speech (Scollon & Scollon 1989: 31), and they obviously carry different meanings than they do in English speaking cultures.

All the conversation patterns that have been described here are conventionalised and hence, cannot be changed easily. For an Athabaskan it would be a very difficult task to get used to and also apply English patterns of conversation. Scollon & Scollon (1990: 285) emphasise that the

way a person talks says a lot about his/her personal traits as well as the conventions and values of his/her culture:

We believe that discourse patterns are among the strongest expressions of personal and cultural identity. [...] Discourse patterns are very closely tied up with a person's personality and culture.

Therefore, they argue, to suggest that a person changes his/her way of talking implies a requirement to change his/her personal and cultural identity. As a consequence, if an Athabaskan is supposed to be less indirect and speak more about him-/herself and future plans, this means that the person would have to be less Athabaskan (Scollon & Scollon 1990a: 285). This underlines that different cultures have distinct conventions of talking and different discourse patterns, and this is precisely what makes cross-cultural communication such a difficult and delicate issue.

5.4.2. Silence among the Igbo people

This chapter deals with the Igbo society of Nigeria. In this community, silence plays a significant role in communication and is used for very specific purposes. Through the use of silence, this society expresses a variety of different things. Silence has very particular meanings in this culture and is at least as communicative as talk. Nwoye (1985) studied the use of silence among these people and called it *eloquent silence* because in this society it fulfils communicative functions which are usually fulfilled by speech in many other cultures. This is even more extraordinary when taking into account that in traditional Igbo society face-to face conversations were of major importance and as a consequence, oratory is still a highly valued art form in this culture (Nwoye 1985: 185). Moreover, Igbos are usually very extravert in personal interactions. This open and extravert disposition and the high value that is attached to oral communication make the use of silence in this culture even more special:

It is against this background of ebullient loquacity and vivacity that the ominous meaning of silence among the Igbo can be interpreted. For a people with this type of disposition, silence is a highly marked form of behaviour. It is not regarded merely as the absence of speech, but in almost all instances, silence is interpreted as having significant communicative functions. In short, silence can be very eloquent. (Nwoye 1985: 185)

Some of these functions of silence in social interaction of the Igbo people will be mentioned below.

One context in which silence is typically used is in the case of bereavement. Bereaved persons are avoided for some days after the death of a family member (Nwoye 1985: 186). After a few

days it is usual to visit them and express condolences. However, this is done in a very particular way:

Sympathizers walk in, go straight to the bereaved, stand before them for a short time, then find a seat somewhere among some other mourners and join them awhile in mutual silence. When they feel they have stayed long enough, they again approach the bereaved, repeat the process of showing themselves to them, and take their leave as silently as they came in. (Nwoye 1985: 186)

Igbos do not use speech in such a situation because they regard it as unnecessary to utter words, as everyone knows what happened, and because they think words would only increase the grief of the bereaved. Despite the fact that no words have been uttered, quite a lot of communication has taken place. Silence in this situation is used by Igbo people to express condolence and to sympathise with the bereaved.

Silence is also used in many ritual contexts, for instance, when a sacrifice is performed. This can be done for various reasons, mostly in order to thank or solicit aid of certain spirits or elements. In any case, during this sacrifice the person carrying it out has the obligation to be silent. Also, other people do not greet or speak to this person. If the condition of silence is violated, the sacrifice has to be repeated and in addition, the person has to do another sacrifice (Nwoye 1985: 186). Another ritual which requires silence is the so-called *Ichu iyi nwa* ritual, which is part of the naming ceremony that takes place on the 28th day after the birth of a child. The mother takes a ritual trip to a stream and is not allowed to speak a word during her way to the stream and back, which is made even more difficult by the fact that people who meet her on the way tease her (Nwoye 1985: 186).

Apart from the use of silence in ritual contexts, there are instances of group-determined silence in the Igbo culture. Silence can be as used as a sanction against the incorrect behaviour of a member of a village community. In such a situation, the whole village community stops talking to him/her and also to the family of this person. This is carried on until the person acknowledges the incorrect behaviour and apologises for it. Then, the silence is broken (Nwoye 1985: 188). Thus, silence is used as a means of punishing unacceptable behaviour and making people show repentance. Here we can see a parallel to our 'central European culture', where silence is also used to some extent to punish another person and refuse to communicate with him/her, frequently because this person has done or said something offensive. However, silence in this context is usually used on an individual basis, only by one person and not by a whole community. Therefore, the extent to which silence in European cultures is really used as a sanction and a method of punishment differs significantly from that in the Athabaskan culture.

Interestingly, silence in the Igbo culture is traditionally applied when a man proposes to a woman (Nwoye 1985: 189). The woman is expected to answer with silence. If she accepts, she simply goes away, if not, she simply keeps standing still until the man leaves. In this culture silence is often interpreted as meaning consent. However, another meaning of silence among the Igbos, which might also be the reason why women are not expected to say anything when a proposal is made to them, is respect:

The young should listen while the old speak, and females generally should defer to males by remaining silent, unless asked to speak. (Nwoye 1985: 189)

Hence, there is a hierarchical structure of relationships in Igbo society, and silence is used to show respect for the other's higher position in this hierarchy. The use of silence in order to express respect is something we have already encountered in the traditions of other cultures, for instance in the case of the Italian culture, where children are taught to remain silent while adults are conversing. Similarly, this function of silence is also common in the Athabaskan culture where people in subordinate positions are expected to be silent.

Furthermore, silence in Igbo society can function as "a pragmatic instrument for avoiding misfortune" (Nwoye 1985: 190). Morning greetings are of high significance in Igbo culture. Igbos think that the person they meet first in the morning determines their day. Therefore, people are very careful whom they greet in the morning. If they encounter a person of whom they think s/he would bring them bad luck, they simply do not greet this person and remain silent, and thus, do not acknowledge his/her presence (Nwoye 1985: 189, 190).

As we have seen, silence is used for a variety of purposes in the Igbo culture. According to Nwoye (1985: 191), "it serves both as a medium of communication in itself and as a context for communication through nonverbal channels". Hence, the meaning of silence in this culture encompasses many different things – things that are usually expressed through speech in other cultures.

5.4.3. Silence among American Indians

At the beginning of his paper Basso (1990) presents the typical stereotype of American Indians. He claims that they use silence extensively and are generally reluctant to talk – features that are frequently erroneously attributed to things like 'impoverished language', 'lack of personal warmth' or 'instinctive dignity' (Basso 1990: 303, 304). He points out the fact that little attention from linguistic and anthropological research has been paid to cultural interpretations of silence and the typical contexts where silence occurs. Basso conducted a research of silence

between 1964 and 1969 in the Western Apache settlement of Cibecue, near the centre of the Fort Apache Indian Reservation in east-central Arizona. In the course of his paper, Basso lists several contexts in which silence is typically used among the Western Apache. These will be shortly presented in this section.

He claims that the crucial factor which influences the Apache's decision for either speech or silence is the relationship to other people (Basso 1990: 306). Thus, he confirms what has already been pointed out in previous chapters, namely that the use and evaluation of silence is closely connected to the relationship of the interlocutors. As we have seen, influencing factors are the power distance and social distance between the interactants, and the degree of intimacy of the relationship.

The Apache use silence when meeting strangers – no matter if those are Apaches or non-Apache – in order to signal social distance:

[...] “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. (Basso 1990: 307)

In the Western Apache culture an introduction of strangers is neither required nor expected, which poses a striking contrast to Anglo-American or European cultures where strangers are usually either introduced to others by a person who knows them, or they introduce themselves to the rest of a group or to another single person. That this is not the case among the Western Apache is illustrated by this quote of one of Basso's informants:

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 40 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.

The Western Apache assume that strangers will eventually start talking to each other. It is never known when this will be the case, but the choice is left to the individuals and nothing is forced. This constitutes a sharp contrast to mainstream Anglo-American and European conventions of communication, where this kind of behaviour would be regarded as very impolite. However, in the Western Apache culture strangers who start talking quickly are regarded with great suspicion (Basso 1990: 308). Thus, it is obvious how conflicts in cross-cultural communication between members of this cultural group and members of another group, for instance the Anglo-American culture, can arise.

Another situation where the Western Apache keep silent is during the initial stages of courtship, when the young man and the young woman still do not know each other very well. In this context they consider it as more sensible to remain silent instead of risking saying something that might sound silly or offend the other person. In general, silence in courtship is regarded as a sign of modesty and too much talk at this stage is interpreted as the couple's willingness to engage in a sexual relationship (Basso 1990: 309). The guiding principle in the Western Apache culture seems to be not to talk about just anything, which again constitutes a sharp contrast to the emphasis on small talk in Anglo-American and to a certain extent also European cultures. In these cultures, small talk is highly valued and regarded as a sign of good rapport, respect, and politeness towards the interlocutor. It signals that people are willing to engage in a conversation. Not talking to a person one is supposed to find attractive signals a lack of interest and would mostly result in no further contact with this person. Hence, the mainstream Western concept of politeness and the values attached to it are completely different from those in the Western Apache culture.

Moreover, as has been already mentioned above, Apache parents keep silent when their children, who have been away for a considerable time, come home. It is regarded as inappropriate to immediately interrogate the children, as the parents do not know how much and in what kind of way those have changed and if they want to talk to their parents at all (Basso 1990: 310). The contrast to Anglo-American and European cultures is obvious, as in these cultures a reunion of such a kind would not pass without a long questioning of the child who has returned. However, what seems to make a crucial difference between the behaviour of Anglo-American and European culture and the Western Apache culture is that in the latter returning children are initially seen as some kind of strangers again and the parents first wait before talking in order to find out if they have really changed drastically or not. On the contrary, in 'Western cultures' children are usually always regarded by parents as their children, no matter how long they have been away and how much they might have changed.

Another situation where Western Apache typically use silence is towards people who are enraged. Words are considered as useless and are thought to make the situation even more dangerous. If A insults B, often without reason, B usually keeps silent and waits until A's rage has passed (Basso 1990: 311, 312). This clearly demonstrates the conflict-avoidance function of silence and the role of silence as an emotion management strategy. Similarly, silence is applied when being with people who are sad. First, verbal communication is regarded as unnecessary in such a situation. Second, speaking is thought to require a great effort from the person who is very sad or grieving for somebody. Besides, intensive grief is often thought to

produce a negative change in personality which is feared very much among the Western Apache (Basso 1990: 312, 313).

Apart from this, silence is also used in ritual contexts and during ceremonial treatment (Basso 1990: 314, 315). In these contexts proximity to the supernatural is assumed. The supernatural is strange and unknown and hence, implies danger and causes fear among the Western Apache. Therefore, silence is used because it is regarded as the best protection against the supernatural.

Although there are different situations in which silence is typically used and conventionalised among the Western Apache, Basso (1990: 315) argues that the underlying determinants of silence are the same, namely ambiguity and/or unpredictability of the relationship of the interlocutors. Thus, Basso (1990: 317) concludes that “keeping silent among the Western Apache is a response to uncertainty and unpredictability in social relations”. Finally, he points to the fact that there are similarities between the Navajo and the Western Apache in their use of silence and that his hypothesis might therefore be valid also for other American Indian cultures (Basso 1990: 318).

Basso’s account of silence among Western Apache Indians and his suggestion of similarities to other Indian tribes seem to show that the use of silence in communication in American Indian cultures is much more predetermined than it is the case in ‘Western cultures’. Situational determinants decide whether silence or speech is to be used. The use of silence is rather an issue of cultural conventions than of individual choices. Furthermore, in many cases it seems to be rather a protective device which is applied in order to avoid harm for oneself, by empowering the speaker and giving him/her some kind of security, rather than a politeness device.

Phillips (1990) analyses the way in which talk is regulated in Anglo interaction, as well as in interaction among Indians of the Warm Springs Reservation. With regard to the amount of silence and talk in these two different cultures, she observes that Indians frequently make longer pauses between speaker turns than Anglos do. Furthermore, silence is more tolerated among Indians than among Anglos; Indians do not interrupt so often and they do not usually speak at the same time as others, as it is frequently the case in Anglo-interaction (Phillips 1990: 337).

Another interesting issue Phillips observes is that while it is essential and expected to answer questions in Anglo culture, this is not necessarily the case among Warm Springs Indians,

particularly not among elder people.¹³ Questions do not have to be answered and above all, they do not have to be answered immediately, but the answer can follow some time after the question has been raised (Philips 1990: 339, 340). While it is considered impolite not to answer a question immediately in Anglo culture, there is much more freedom in this respect among the Warm Springs Indians. This seems to confirm again that in the Anglo culture more value is put on talk, and speech is much more tied to connotations of politeness than this is the case in some other cultures, such as the Warm Springs Indian culture.

Philips (1990: 342, 343) explains this through the observation that Anglos and Indians have a different approach to the incorporation of utterances into the sequence of the interaction. In Anglo interaction it is often the case that more than one person speak at the same time. As a result, an immediate response is important because it functions as an indicator of whether a speaker has been heard or not. This is not so among Warm Springs Indians where it is regarded as given that the speaker has been heard even if a response does not follow immediately. A reason for this is that overlap of different speakers is not usual in conversation.

Thus in general, in Anglo regulation of talk, the presence or absence of immediate response carries more weight than among Warm Springs Indians in indicating to those present that a particular utterance is being recognized, received as a message, and incorporated into the sequence of talk. (Philips 1990: 343)

5.4.4. Silence among indigenous versus white people in Australia and New Zealand

Eades (2003) investigates Aboriginal English in the Australian legal system and thus identifies crucial differences in discourse practices by Aboriginal English speakers and white Australian English speakers. Misinterpretations of Aborigines' different discourse practices frequently result in legal discrimination of these people. One of the most salient differences between the discourse patterns of white Australians and Aboriginals is the use of silence. Eades (2003: 202) maintains that silence is an essential and positively evaluated aspect in Aboriginal communication. It is common to sit together in silence for a certain period of time and still enjoy the other's company. Silence is frequently used in order to think about topics of discussion, also in more formal settings. Accordingly, the contemplative function is common and highly valued in Aboriginal communication, and silence also serves as an indicator for good rapport:

¹³ This might have changed in the last years due to increasing global influence.

Thus in many Aboriginal contexts, silence signals that the conversation is working well and that the rights and needs of individuals to think in silence are being respected. (Eades 2003: 202)

In contrast to this, Eades draws attention to the fact that in mainstream Western societies, such as in the white Australian community, long and frequent silences in communication are usually not tolerated:

On the other hand, in western societies silence is often negatively valued in conversations, as well as in formal or semi-formal contexts, such as meetings or interviews. It has been found in many studies of conversation (both formal and informal) in mainstream western English-speaking societies that interlocutors feel uncomfortable with silences which are longer than about one second. (Eades 2003: 220)

Eades (2003: 203) points out that silence is often regarded as a breakdown of communication, the only exception being conversations between close friends or family members. Moreover, she stresses that these differences in the use and evaluation of silence in Aboriginal English as opposed to mainstream white Australian English communication have a serious influence on police, lawyer and courtroom interviews of Aboriginal people because silence is frequently misinterpreted in these situations as, for instance, evasion, ignorance, insolence, or guilt.

In relation to this, Kurzon (1995) claims that the usual reaction to the silence of someone who has been asked a question is the assumption that this person has something to hide. As has been indicated in a previous section, Kurzon (1995: 62) argues that a distinction has to be made between unintentional silence and intentional silence. The first is the result of some kind of psychological state, like shyness or embarrassment, and is therefore also interpreted as being a consequence of psychological inhibitions. The second receives modal interpretations, and as a result, conclusions are drawn about the person being silent. Kurzon states that if shyness or a similar psychological inhibition of the person being silent to a question can be excluded, this silence is usually interpreted to the disadvantage of this person, which is frequently the case in court hearings:

And the most natural way as far as silence is concerned is, if the jury discount shyness, that the silent witness or accused has something to hide. The silence would be interpreted, to say the least, to the detriment of the silent addressee. (Kurzon 1995: 68)

As a consequence of these observations, Eades argues (and so confirms what has already been assumed) that the understanding and adequate interpretation of silence in a certain situation is only possible if cultural differences are taken into account:

To understand silence in any particular interaction requires an understanding of contextual presuppositions which include these culturally different assumptions about the way that relationships are built and the ways in which personal privacy is assured, as well as the relative priority placed on time and the ways in which important issues are thought about. (Eades 2003: 203)

Mushin and Gardner (2009) conducted a study of silences in communication in remote Aboriginal communities and compared length, distribution and interactional management of silences in Aboriginal talk in contrast to Anglo-American talk. They consider and test Walsh's (1991) claim that the Australian Aboriginal conversation style is *non-dyadic*, which refers to the fact that speakers usually do not address a particular person, and *continuous*, which means that people start talking whenever they want to say something, without much consideration for what others might be doing (Mushin & Gardner 2009: 2035-2036). As a result of these two factors, longer periods of silence can occur in communication without any pressure to maintain talk. In contrast to this, the conversational style of white Anglo-Australians is dyadic and non-continuous, which implies that longer silences are less tolerated because directed talk requires immediate responses (Walsh 1991 referred to in Mushin & Gardner 2009: 2036).

Mushin and Gardner contradict Walsh's claim that Aboriginal talk is *non-dyadic and continuous*. One conclusion they draw from their data is that there are situations in Aboriginal talk in which particular participants are addressed by a speaker. Another thing they point out is that in those situations responses normally follow within the next 1,5 seconds, rarely later. However, they admit that if no speaker has been selected and the floor is open to anyone, silences between turns are more frequent and often longer (Mushin & Gardner 2009: 2042). Moreover, they emphasise that these longer silences are tolerated and regarded as absolutely ordinary, and that there is less pressure than in 'Western cultures' to take the floor immediately during a conversation (Mushin & Gardner 2009: 2049).

A similar difference between the conversational patterns of indigenous and white people can be found in New Zealand. Holmes (2003) deals with differences between the Maori and the Pakeha cultures in New Zealand. While the indigenous Maori constitute approximately 14 per cent of the country population, the greater part is made up of people of European, particularly British, descent. Those predominantly white people are referred to by the Maori as *Pakeha* (Holmes 2003: 174). According to Holmes, a potential source of miscommunication between members of these two cultures is the use of silence. Maori people put more emphasis on non-verbal signals and less on verbalisation. As a consequence, in the Maori culture silence in conversation is not evaluated negatively. It is frequently used as a negative politeness device

because it avoids imposition and shows willingness to listen until the speaker has finished talking (Holmes 2003: 176).

5.4.5. Communicative silence in indigenous Akan society

Agyekum (2002) has investigated the role of communicative silence in Akan, an ethnic linguistic group of West Africa.¹⁴ He points out that silence is used to organise and regulate social relationships among Akan people (Agyekum 2002: 34). Hence, one of the most frequent functions of silence in this society is the expression of reverence, love, or awe. Agyekum stresses that silence in communication is regarded as the norm among the Akan, similarly to Igbos, Native Americans, and aboriginal cultures of Australia and New Zealand. It is usually employed when a verbal answer would threaten the listener's face, or when the topic is especially delicate or taboo (Agyekum 2002: 37, 38). Moreover, silence is used in situations that are emotionally loaded. It can be an expression of extreme emotions.

Agyekum (2002: 38) emphasises that silence is very effective among the Akan, which is why he talks about *eloquent silence*. He argues that there are situations in Akan society which require eloquent silence. For instance, situations in which people violate socio-cultural norms demand the use of group silence which serves as a form of punishment for this violation:

One of the most uncomfortable situations for any Akan is everybody refusing to talk to her/him. Punishment of a miscreant is achieved by group silence. It is possible for all members of a household to refuse to talk to a person who has shown some aspects of immorality, misconduct or disrespect. (Agyekum 2002: 39)

Here we can see an analogy to the Igbo culture, where silence is used in the same way.

In Akan society there are many cases of institutionalised silence. For instance, silence is applied when someone dies and people suffer from bereavement, analogously to the conventions of the Igbo and American Indian people. When people come to condole and mourn with the bereaved, they are expected to keep silent and not increase the grief by any verbal reference to the event of death. Furthermore, silence is the norm during religious worship and in ritual contexts (Agyekum 2002: 40). Silence in ritual practices is used to express reverence, awe, or respect, and it is considered as the appropriate medium for communication with God and the deities because their spirit can only descend in periods of silence (Agyekum 2002: 40, 41).

¹⁴ Most Akan people live in Ghana and south-eastern Côte d'Ivoire. The estimated population is 4 million. (<http://www.uiowa.edu/~africart/toc/people/Akan.html> 14.01.2011).

During some festivals there is a ban on noise and producing sound, and silence is obligatory in performing rituals and sacrifices:

Absolute silence is a prerequisite for the efficacy of rituals and sacrifices and when silence is violated, the sacrifice is repeated and the offender has to make an additional sacrifice. (Agyekum 2002: 41)

Moreover, silence is the norm at the palace. On the one hand, it is considered a form of respect and reverence to the chief. On the other hand, it is also applied by the chief, and thus indicates power, authority, rank, and status. Most of the verbal communication at the palace is carried out by the chief's spokesmen (Agyekum 2002: 42). However, Agyekum also stresses that people can communicate even through silence, not only through talk:

[...] silence has pragmatic implications, meanings and social roles, and marks the identity and personalities involved.

Silence is also used by lovers. During the initial stages of courting they are not allowed to talk to each other. Instead, the talking is done by intermediaries. Only when the lovers are married, they start talking to each other. Yet, Agyekum (2002: 43) points out that this practice of silence is quickly disappearing in modern Akan society.

Among the Akan, public speech is the prerogative of men. Women are expected to keep silence in such contexts. Moreover, wives are supposed to remain silent in the presence of their husbands, thus expressing their subordinate status. Women who talk too much are disrespected (Agyekum 2002: 47). Children are early taught how to use silence appropriately:

It must be used to communicate respect, comfort, bereavement, support, disagreement, or uncertainty. The children are prohibited from saying or doing certain things, especially before adults. In certain situations, children are not allowed to express their view. [...] During certain conversations, the children may not even be in the vicinity, let alone participate in the conversation by talking. (Agyekum 2002: 48)

Children who are able to keep silent when adults speak are praised. Those that are talkative are rebuked. Agyekum emphasises that knowledge about the appropriate use of silence is part of the socialisation process among the Akan, which demonstrates the importance of silence in this culture.

As can be seen from the situations in which silence is used, the frequency with which it is applied, and the diversity of what it can express in this culture, silence among the Akan is a form of communication. Similarly as in the Igbo society, among the Akan silence can fulfil many of the communicative functions that are usually fulfilled by speech in other cultures.

Therefore, one could say that in the Akan culture more importance and a more positive evaluation is attached to silence than in many 'Western cultures'.

It seems that cultures like the Native American, Igbo, Athabaskan, and Australian Aboriginal culture are more tolerant towards silence in communication than 'Western cultures'. They do neither expect nor employ much empty talk (small talk) and have fewer difficulties with silence in communication. Agyekum (2002: 31) highlights the different values of silence and talk in different societies:

In some societies silence is preferred to what is considered to be idle chatter. In others such idle chatter is positively evaluated as "phatic communion", as communication for social interaction.

6. Empirical study – Investigating attitudes towards silence and politeness in German and English

The previous chapter has presented selected examples of the role that silence plays in different cultures. Obviously, it would go beyond the scope of this diploma project to conduct a study of silence and its relationship to politeness in different cultures from all over the world. Therefore, this thesis will attempt a more feasible investigation. It will analyse attitudes towards silence in German and in English, and thus compare two languages that are related and cultures which are rather close to each other.

The following chapter will consider differences with regard to politeness patterns in English and in German. Due to the relatedness of the two languages, no completely opposing and striking differences are expected. Nevertheless, as every language and culture differs from other languages and cultures, it is assumed that members of the English speech community will display different evaluations of silence and its degree of politeness than German speakers.

6.1. Theoretical considerations: Politeness patterns in German and English

Although German and English are both Germanic languages and hence closely related, there are nevertheless differences as far as politeness patterns are concerned. This chapter will draw on literature comparing these two languages in terms of politeness, and accordingly prepare the ground for the empirical study which has been conducted.

House (2005, 2006) investigated the differences between German and English with regard to politeness and communicative styles. She aims at answering Weinrich's (1986) question "Lügt man im Deutschen, wenn man höflich ist?" which refers to a quotation from Goethe's *Faust*. In her empirical work she analyses and compares the discourse of German and English native speakers. Her findings show that Germans are in general less likely and less willing to engage in small talk and they usually avoid 'empty speech'. Furthermore, Germans tend to use more content-oriented strategies rather than being concerned much with interpersonal accommodation, i.e. they introduce topics explicitly and expand them, and they use fewer anticipatory moves than English speakers. In German, more *ad hoc* formulation can be found, whereas in English more emphasis is put on conversational routines (House 2005: 20). Moreover, House claims that Germans are more direct than English speakers when complaining or making requests, and apologies in German usually are more verbose and include more self-directed strategies which stress the speaker's responsibility for an offence. To sum up, House (2005: 21) identifies the following pattern:

German subjects tend to interact in ways that are more direct, explicit and verbose, more self-referenced and content-oriented; they are also less prone to resort to verbal routines than English speakers.

House displays this pattern by means of five dimensions along which the differences can be analysed:

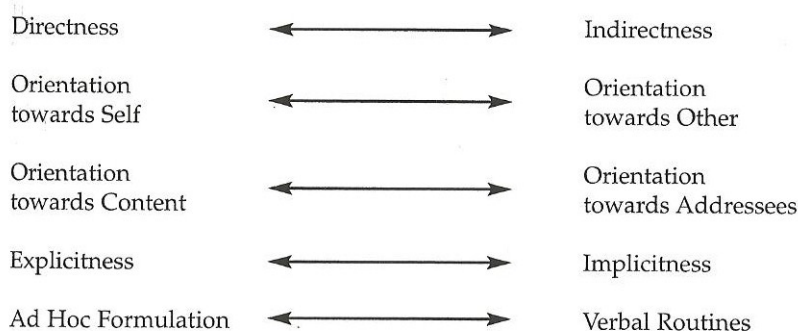


Figure 3: Dimensions of cross-cultural differences (German vs. English) (House 2005: 21)

According to House, these dimensions operate on level 3 (where cultural and behavioural norms are captured) and level 4 (where these norms are embodied in the language system) of her multilevel politeness model which has been described previously in Chapter 2.1.5. Thus, she claims that although there are universal aspects of politeness which operate on level 1 and 2 in both languages, these universals are interpreted and negotiated differently in German and English, and it is on levels 3 and 4 where this variation occurs.

With regard to the German preference for directness, House (2005: 22) refers to Hofstede's (1984) investigation of differences in national cultures and his dimension of *uncertainty avoidance*.¹⁵ According to Hofstede, Germans score high on uncertainty avoidance values. As a

¹⁵ Many cultural groups tend to evaluate other cultures negatively simply because they are afraid of the alien and uncertain of the foreign culture. Hofstede and Hofstede (2005: 165) claim that ambiguity causes anxiety, and different societies deal with this ambiguity or uncertainty in different ways. There are societies which tolerate uncertainty to a considerable extent and societies which tend to avoid uncertainties at all costs.

Hofstede and Hofstede (2005: 166 ff) refer to a research by Hofstede (1984) which has investigated, among other things, the *uncertainty avoidance index* of different countries, and thus shown that in certain countries anxiety levels and consequently also uncertainty avoidance are higher than in others. They define *uncertainty avoidance* as "the extent to which the members of a culture feel threatened by ambiguous or unknown situations" (Hofstede & Hofstede 2005: 167). Cultures with high uncertainty avoidance have a tighter system of norms and rules. Interestingly, this is also reflected in language, as languages in these cultures have more rules, for instance different modes of address for different persons, like *tu* and *vous* in French or *du* and *Sie* in German (ibid.: 175). As ambiguity causes uncertainty which is difficult to handle, we also should consider the issue of silence in communication from this point of view.

result of this tendency of uncertainty avoidance, they try to avoid any ambiguity and therefore, usually opt for direct and explicit expressions. Taking into account that, as Jaworski and others have stressed, silence is an extremely ambiguous device, the tendency towards directness and uncertainty avoidance might also be the reason for a lower tolerance of silence in communication. It will be investigated and discussed in chapter 6.3. (Results & Analysis) whether silence in communication is really less accepted, and considered more impolite in German than in English.

House (2006: 249) points out that these cross-cultural differences in communicative styles between German and English speakers often lead to misunderstandings in intercultural communication and to mutual misinterpretation of the other culture as being (im)polite. As a result of the German politeness pattern, Germans are frequently judged as unfriendly and impolite by Anglophones. Things like, for instance, the 'naked' infinitive that demonstrates the preference for directness, and the absence of conversational routines and conventionalised verbal concern about others are frequently equated with unfriendliness (House 2006: 255). However, House (2006: 262) stresses that while conventionally indirect speech acts are often regarded as polite, non-conventionally indirect acts are frequently considered less polite, which may be due to a higher processing effort that those acts impose on the hearer. Hence, she emphasises that indirectness cannot be simply equated with politeness.

In summary, House (2005) highlights that the answer to Weinrich's question is definitely "no". One does not lie when being polite in German. In fact, there is such a thing as politeness in German. However, being polite in German certainly differs from being polite in English. House (2005: 24) refers to Lakoff's (1973) rules of politeness "Don't impose", "Give Options", and "Be friendly", which are all interpreted differently in German-speaking and in Anglophone cultures. The first rule is regarded differently owing to a preference for higher directness levels in performing speech acts in German, the second due to the fact that Germans prefer more straightforward and explicit expression of content, and the third because content is preferred over concern for the addressee in German. As a result, House (2005: 25) describes politeness in German in the following way:

[...] it often involves saying what one means and meaning what one says; engaging more or sooner in 'serious talk' than carefully preparing the ground with 'small talk'; it may mean referring in detail to matters relating to both self and the topic in hand, and it may mean omitting all-purpose formulae in favour of improvising and providing links to the particular speech event being shared with one's interlocutor.

With regard to linguistic politeness in Britain, Stewart (2005) investigated typical features of British communication patterns. She bases her findings on a study involving feedback provided

by monitors to tutors on a high-level Spanish distance-learning course. All feedback was given in English, although most of the monitors and tutors were Spanish native speakers. The English native speakers in this study only served as a control group to gain more insights into some aspects of British politeness (Stewart 2005: 119).

Stewart focuses on two features which are typically associated with 'Britishness': the preference for negative rather than positive politeness strategies, and the use of off-record politeness – which is also called 'non-conventional indirectness'. The results showed that off-record indirectness and pragmatic ambivalence are typical characteristics of the feedback given by British English native speakers, and were hardly ever used by non-native speakers. This indicates a strong preference for off-record indirectness in British English (Stewart 2005: 122). Stewart (2005: 128) stresses that the acceptance of off-record strategies differs from culture to culture and that British society seems to show a relatively high tolerance thereof.

Furthermore, Stewart (2005: 123) points out that further typical features of British politeness are hedges, the use of modal *could*, the defocusing of the criticism from the tutor by putting emphasis on the student. British native speakers show a clear preference of the use of conventions, such as the use of past tense (*I was wondering...; I didn't think you'd...*) and the displacement of hedges into the past tense (*I felt you tended slightly towards generosity...*), which is an example of conventional indirectness (Stewart 2005: 124-125). They also usually detach themselves from the addressee, which constitutes an example of negative politeness. The emphasis on negative politeness in the English language has been already discussed and highlighted by Sifianou (1997) (see above in chapter 5.3.1.). Thus, on the whole, it seems that what Stewart (2005) identifies as typical features of British politeness is in line with what House (2005) claims to be the general tendencies of politeness in English.

Following Sifianou's (1997) argument that negative politeness plays a crucial role in the English language, and Stewart's (2005) claim that off-record indirectness and pragmatic ambivalence are typical for British English talk, it is supposed that English speakers in this survey will assess silence as more positive or neutral than German speakers in situations in which it replaces any kind of utterances that would threaten the addressee's negative face (see situations (5) and (10) of the survey), as well as utterances which could harm the interlocutor's self-image, e.g. expressions of disapproval or disagreement (see situations (1) and (2)). In contrast, it is expected that silence will be regarded as more impolite in the English language than in German in situations in which silence replaces small talk (see situations (3), (4), and (7)) owing to House's (2005, 2006) observation that German speakers do not value small talk as much as English speakers do. Moreover, taking into account Hofstede's statement that German

speakers show a relatively high uncertainty avoidance, which means that they usually try to avoid ambiguity and therefore prefer directness and explicitness in conversation, which is also confirmed by House (2005), it is assumed that German speakers will evaluate silence more negatively in situations in which this silence produces some kind of ambiguity or lack of clarity (see situation (8)).¹⁶

6.2. Methodology

The following sub-chapters describe the research conducted here. They will provide information about the aim of the study, the type of research, the informants, and the outline.

6.2.1. Aim of the study and type of research

The aim of this study is to investigate and test common assumptions and claims made by researchers about silence and its relation to (im)politeness – in other words, the extent to which silence in communication is regarded as polite or impolite – in mainstream ‘Western cultures’. All of these general assumptions and claims have been presented in the previous theoretical chapters. In this study, they will be applied to the German and the English speech communities. It will be investigated whether German and English speakers differ in their attitudes towards silence and politeness, despite the relatedness of the two languages and the relative similarity of these cultures.

The data collection method used for this project is a questionnaire survey. In the beginning, two methods were considered as appropriate and possible for this research: interviews and questionnaires. Eventually, the questionnaire was chosen and there are a number of reasons that influenced the choice of this particular method. First, a questionnaire is more anonymous than, for instance, an interview. As a result, respondents are usually more willing to answer the questions honestly. They can take their time, are normally not as apprehensive as in an interview situation, and thus, they tend to be more uninhibited. Second, a questionnaire allows a collection of uniform data because all respondents are confronted with exactly the same questions. Consequently, the data can be processed and compared more easily, and conclusions are likely to be clearer. Another reason for this choice was that questionnaires

¹⁶ With regard to situations (6) and (9), which have not been mentioned above, major differences in the results of German and English speakers are not expected. More information about assumptions and expectations will follow further below, in the chapter on results.

facilitated data collection of English native speakers because they could also be distributed electronically.

This study involves a mixed-methods research, combining quantitative with qualitative data. Although the questionnaire consists predominantly of multiple-choice questions which provide quantitative data, it also includes a number of open-ended questions. The responses to those questions will be analysed qualitatively.

6.2.2. Informants

Two groups of informants were interrogated for this study. One group consisted of 20 native speakers of German, the other one of 20 English native speakers. Both groups comprised female and male respondents. While there was an equal distribution of women and men in the German-speaking group, there were slightly more male than female (12:8) English-speaking informants. This difference will, of course, be taken into account in the analysis of the results. Percentages will be calculated in a way that allows comparison of female and male responses. Mother tongue and gender are the two factors which are assumed to have a potential influence on the answers of the informants. Aspects like age and occupation are not expected to play a significant role in the investigation of attitudes towards silence. Nevertheless, respondents were asked for information about these two factors as well.

6.2.3. The questionnaire

The questionnaire consists of ten short descriptions of particular situations which all include an instance of silence. These ten situations are followed by at least one multiple choice question, whereby in most cases three options can be chosen. Altogether, there are thirteen multiple choice questions, as three of the situations involve two of these questions. Moreover, five of the ten situations also include open questions which follow the multiple choice question and serve to gain more information about the preceding answer of the respondent, and leave space for explanations, side remarks and comments by the informants. Overall, the questionnaire comprises six open questions, as one situation consists of two multiple choice and two open questions. Accordingly, respondents were confronted with ten situations and nineteen questions they were supposed to answer.

The questions in this survey are simple and straightforward. The aim was to confront informants with situations that are common and occur in every-day life, and to produce questions which are also understandable for people who are not professionals in the field of

linguistics. As the purpose of this study was to investigate attitudes towards silence and politeness, the informants were asked to answer spontaneously and honestly.

The situations described in the questionnaire all refer to general assumptions about silence and its relation to politeness in 'Western cultures', such as the German- and the English speaking culture, and to more specific claims and suggestions produced by researchers that have investigated this topic. These claims will be discussed shortly in the next section together with the analysis of the survey's results.

6.3. Results and Analysis

This chapter will discuss the ten situations included in the questionnaire and the particular questions – both multiple choice and open questions. After the presentation of each situation and the claims and assumptions it is based upon, the results of the survey will be analysed.

6.3.1. Situation 1

(1) Sarah (33) meets her friend Anne (32) for a coffee right after having been at the hairdresser. Sarah likes her new haircut and is waiting for Anne to comment positively on it. Anne immediately notices the new haircut but she doesn't like it at all. When Sarah finally asks "How do you like my new haircut?", Anne remains silent and then changes the topic.

How would you evaluate Anne's behaviour in the conversation? Choose one of the following options:

☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

This situation refers to Brown and Levinson's (1987) fifth strategy for doing an FTA (*Don't do the FTA*), which demonstrates their view that silence is the most polite strategy for FTAs. Moreover, this view is also adopted by Sifianou (1995: 102) who claims that "[i]t is polite to avoid expressions of disagreement, disapproval, contempt or any other such act [...]". In our particular case, an act of disapproval is avoided, and therefore, it is assumed that the informants of this survey regard Anne's silence as polite.

However, the responses to the question in (1) showed different results than expected. Sifianou's claim that silence is more polite than expressing disapproval could not be confirmed by the results of this survey. In both groups (English and German native speakers) the majority of informants regarded the silence in this situation as impolite. Among English speakers, 85% chose the response option *impolite*, while it was 70% among German speakers. The responses

by English native speakers were slightly more definite than those by German native speakers. Only 10% of the English-speaking informants regarded this instance of silence as polite, whereas 20% of the German-speaking people opted for this response option. Thus, it seems that the silence in situation (1) is evaluated slightly more positively in German than in English, but the difference is definitely not crucial. The following figure displays the results, comparing responses of English speakers with those of German speakers.

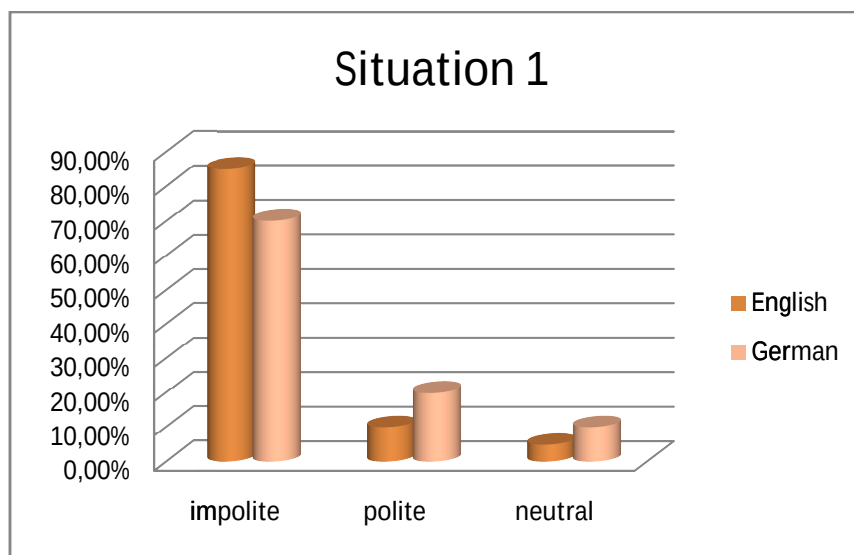


Figure 4: Situation 1 (English vs. German)

As far as differences between male and female informants are concerned, there were hardly any within the group of English native speakers. In the German-speaking group, male responses differed to a small extent from female responses. While the clear majority of men (80%) viewed the silence in situation (1) as impolite, and only 20 % considered it neutral, fewer women (60%) chose the option *impolite*, and a considerable amount (40%) even regarded this instance of silence as polite. Accordingly, among the German-speaking informants of this survey women seemed to be more tolerant towards this instance of silence than men.

6.3.2. Situation 2

(2) John (20), 2nd year student of Medicine, tells his brother Mark (28) that he has decided to give up his studies and look for a job because he has realised that he is not willing to spend the next 6 or more years studying. Mark thinks this is a foolish und immature decision and tells John so. John is disappointed and offended and they separate.

A week later both meet at a family celebration. John is still offended and expects an apology from his brother because he insulted him and did not even try to understand the reasons for his decision. Mark still thinks John is making a mistake and even though he knows John is waiting for an apology, he is not at all willing to apologise. However, he does not want to start another fight in front of all relatives. Therefore, he remains silent in John's presence.

How would you evaluate Mark's decision to keep silent instead of telling John that he is not going to apologise? Please choose one of the following options:

☐ polite ☐ impolite ☐ neutral

The second situation is clearly an example of what Tannen (1990) refers to as the 'preventive function' of silence and what Jaworski (1993: 49) describes as the function of silence to avoid outburst and serious conflicts which would harm the relationship of the interactants. Hence, both Tannen and Jaworski regard silence in such a situation as positive and more polite.

Yet, the results of this survey do not match these views. In both groups, the majority of respondents chose *neutral* as their answer – 60% of the English speakers and 55% of the German-speaking informants. A quarter of the respondents in both groups regarded the silence in (2) as polite, whereas 15% of the English and 20% of the German-speaking people opted for *impolite*. Hence, there was no significant difference between attitudes of German and English speakers, as can be seen in Figure 5.

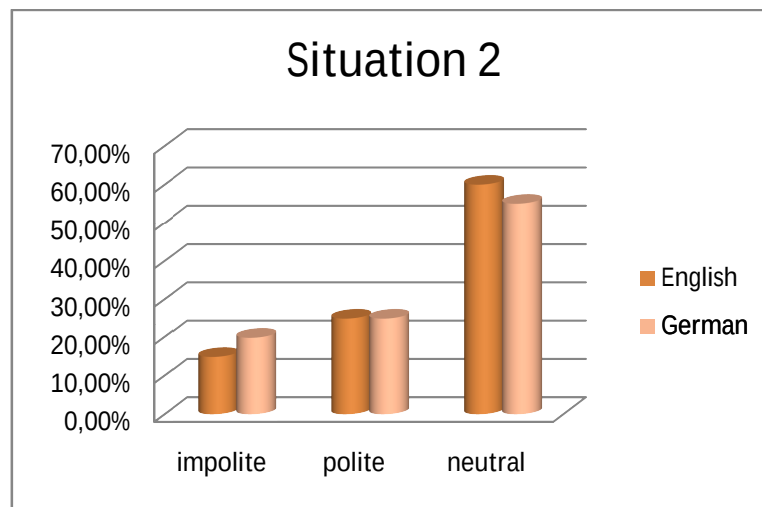


Figure 5: Situation 2 (English vs. German)

The results in Situation 2 show clear differences between male and female responses within both groups, as well as opposing tendencies of both women and men in the English-speaking in contrast to the German-speaking group of informants. The following two figures will display these differences.

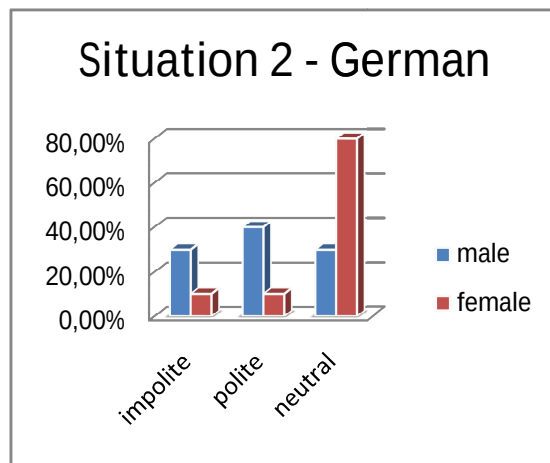
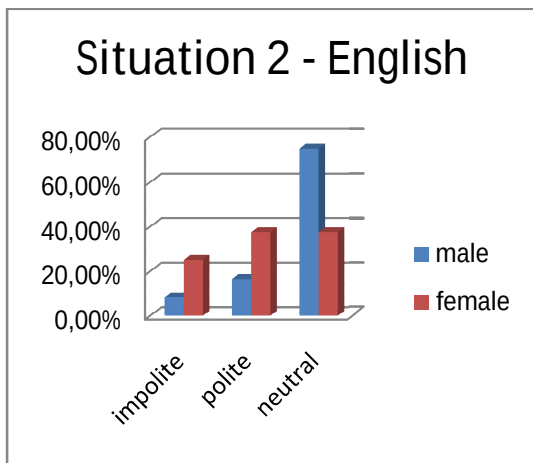


Figure 6: Situation 2 (English: male vs. female) Figure 7: Sit. 2 (German: male vs. female)

Among English speakers, male responses were more unequivocal. The clear majority (75%) of the English-speaking male respondents considered the silence in (2) as *neutral*, while only approximately 8% chose the response option *impolite*, and around 17% chose *polite*. In contrast to this, the answers of the female English-speakers were on the whole definitely more ambiguous. An equal number of those informants opted for *polite* and *neutral* (37,5% in both cases), and a slightly smaller number claimed that the silence in this situation was *impolite*.

In contrast, among German speakers attitudes toward the silence in (2) seem to be the other way round. In this group female informants showed a clear preference for the response option *neutral*, which achieved a score of 80%. 10% respectively chose *polite* and *impolite*. The male respondents in this group seemed to be rather undecided with regard to the question whether they consider the silence in (2) as *polite*, *impolite*, or *neutral*. The options *impolite* and *neutral* both achieved a score of 30%, while 40% of the male German speakers viewed the silence in this situation as *polite*.

Accordingly, among English speakers men showed a more well-defined attitude towards this instance of silence, while female responses were very diverse. In other words, a higher number of male than of female respondents chose the same response option and thus, there was more consistency in the answers of men. Within the group of German native speakers it was precisely the opposite.

6.3.3. Situation 3

(3) Tom (35) works as an engineer in a big company in the city of Vienna. It is Saturday and Tom is on his way to the tennis club to enjoy his leisure time. In the underground he suddenly meets a colleague (Joseph, 38) from work. Both see and greet each other. Tom and Joseph do not know each other very well and they do not have much in common on social grounds. After

having said “hello” both men stand in silence next to each other until one of them gets off the underground.

How would you assess the silence between the two men? Choose one of the options below.

- ☐ polite ☐ impolite ☐ neutral

Situation (3) is an example of what is commonly referred to as ‘awkward silence’. Two people who know each other, but only to a certain extent, meet by chance and then do not know what to say. In such a situation, silence is frequently regarded as embarrassing because one knows each other, which is why it is not acceptable to ignore the other person. Yet, one does not know each other well enough to regard silence as comfortable and absolutely tolerable. It is usually rather interpreted as a disruption in communication or as a general lack of ability to communicate. This situation aims at finding out whether respondents really see this in the same way and if they also consider this instance of silence as impolite.

As has been mentioned above, particularly English-speaking respondents were expected to consider this instance of silence impolite rather than polite or neutral because small talk is usually highly valued among English speakers. However, the results of this survey turned out to be completely different than expected. Undoubtedly, the respondents of this survey did not regard this instance of silence as ‘awkward silence’. The most frequent answer in both groups was clearly *neutral*. 70% of the English native speakers and 80% of the German speakers chose this option. The rest of the German respondents opted for *impolite*. 10% of the English informants regarded the silence as impolite, and 20% as polite. Overall, English and German respondents showed the same tendency. Yet, surprisingly, English speakers seemed to tolerate this instance of silence slightly more than German speakers. No German respondent considered the silence as polite, and 20% claimed it was impolite. The results are illustrated in Figure 8.

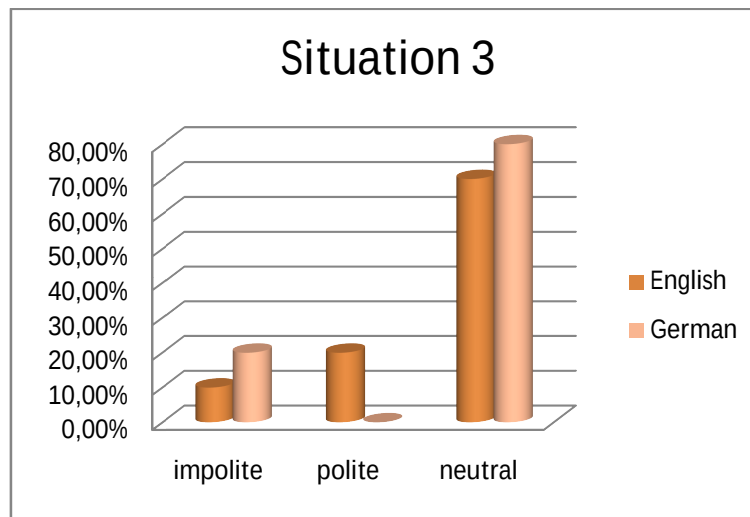


Figure 8: Situation 3 (English vs. German)

With regard to male and female responses, there were only minor differences. In both language groups (English and German) women produced more definite results than men, as a clear majority (90% of the female German speakers and 87,5% of the female English speakers) chose the response option *neutral*. Among the German-speaking informants, more men than women considered the silence as impolite, and nobody regarded it as polite. Among the English speakers, more men than women claimed that it was impolite or polite. Yet, the majority of both genders opted for the response option *neutral*. The differences are presented in the following two figures.

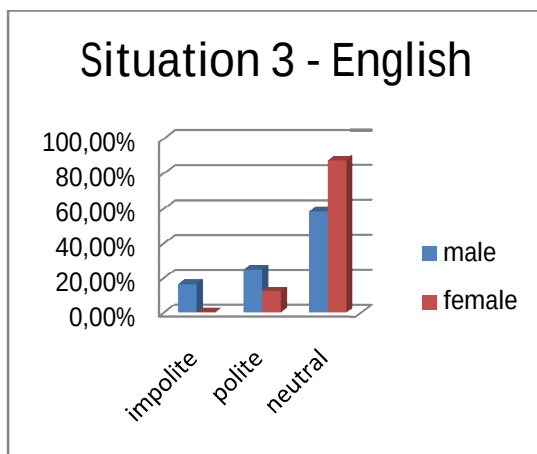


Figure 9: Sit. 3 (English: male vs. female)

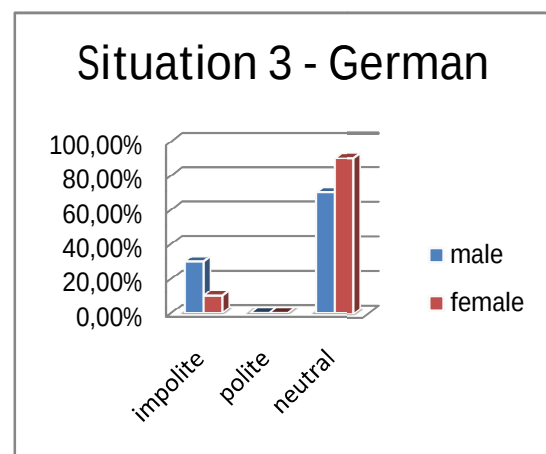


Figure 10: Sit. 3 (German: male vs. female)

In summary, the responses did not confirm the assumption that silence instead of small talk in this situation is regarded as awkward and consequently assessed as impolite. It was expected that especially English speakers, who have been said to highly value small talk, would consider this instance of silence as impolite. Yet, the silence was clearly tolerated in both groups and not associated with (im)politeness.

6.3.4. Situation 4

(4) July (23) and Mary (22) are both students of English literature and they are waiting in front of the classroom for a course they both attend. They know each other from this course, and while they are both waiting, they start a conversation. They talk about their professor, what they expect from the course, and how they like it. Then, they cannot think of another topic and fall silent.

How would you describe the silence in this situation? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ perfectly normal and comfortable
- ☐ uncomfortable
- ☐ awkward/embarrassing

What would you do if you were in this situation? Please choose one of these options:

- ☐ Sit silently next to each other until the course begins because you cannot think of another topic you really want to talk about with the other person.
- ☐ Try to find another topic and then talk about something like, for instance, the weather, university in general, or other courses.

Similarly to the preceding example, this one demonstrates a situation where two people meet who know each other, but have no intimate relationship, and then start talking. Yet, after some time they run out of topics of conversation, which again can result in the so-called 'awkward silence'. The results of the survey will show whether this situation is really regarded as awkward or uncomfortable by the respondents. Furthermore, the second multiple choice question asks for their own behaviour in such a situation.

Sifianou (1995: 98) points out that whether silence is regarded as polite or impolite and whether it is tolerated or not, depends on the relationship of the interactants. Silence among mere 'acquaintances' and not so good friends is frequently evaluated negatively (see also situation (3)). It can signal a lack of interest, hostility, embarrassment, rejection, or lack of verbal skills (Sifianou 1995: 95). Moreover, as has been mentioned previously, silence usually has a negative connotation in 'Western cultures', and phatic communion is highly valued instead. This has been stressed, for instance, by Scollon (1985) with his comparison of silence in communication to the breakdown of a machine.

Accordingly, it is supposed that most informants, especially those in the English-speaking group, consider this instance of silence as uncomfortable or awkward/embarrassing, and that the majority would consequently try to find another topic. Figure 11 presents the results of this survey.

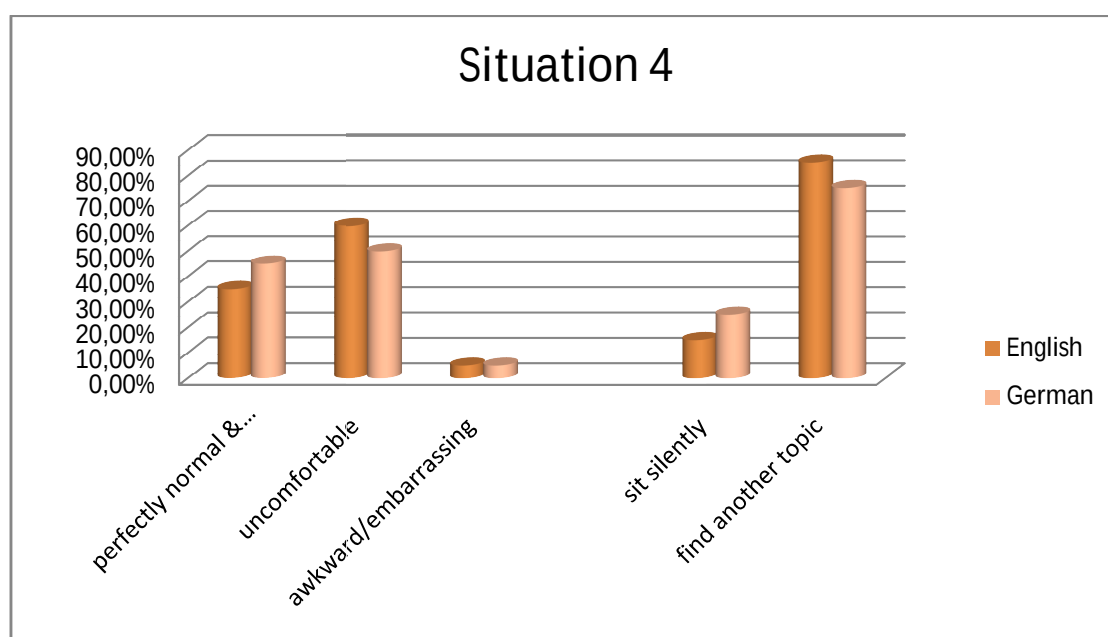


Figure 11: Situation 4 (English vs. German)

The most frequent response option chosen in both groups was *uncomfortable*. 60% of the English-speaking and 50% of the German-speaking informants decided in favour of this answer. As a matter of fact, only a very small percentage of respondents opted for *awkward/embarassing* (5% in both groups), and a surprisingly high number of people claimed that they considered the silence in (4) perfectly normal and comfortable (35% among German speakers and 45% among English-speaking informants). Nevertheless, the clear majority of respondents (85% of the English and 75% of the German speakers) would try to find another topic of conversation if they were in this situation.

Summing up, a slightly higher number of English- than German-speaking people regarded it as uncomfortable and would try to find another topic. Fewer English than German speakers considered this instance of silence normal and comfortable, or would sit silently next to each other if they were in this situation. However, these are only slight differences and thus, the previously mentioned expectations (that English speakers show a clearly more negative attitude towards this instance of silence) were not met. As far as differences between male and female responses are concerned, there were only minor and negligible differences in both language groups.

Overall, the results were not precisely as assumed. Few people really claimed that they considered the situation as awkward or embarrassing. Yet, the majority regarded it as uncomfortable. Against previous expectations, a considerable number of respondents maintained that the situation was normal and comfortable. Strangely, some of the German informants (25%) chose *perfectly normal and comfortable* as the answer to question 1 of

situation (4), and then opted for *try to find another topic* in question 2. This seems like an oxymoron because one would usually expect people who find this instance of silence perfectly normal and comfortable to endure the silence, and not to try to find another topic of conversation. This might indicate a certain extent of indecision of those informants with regard to this question.

6.3.5. Situation 5

(5) You are on the way to a friend. While you are sitting on the bus, a woman takes a seat next to you. Although she takes notice of you, she does not say anything and after a few stops she leaves the bus wordlessly.

How do you consider the woman's behaviour? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

Why? Please give reasons for your choice.

Situation (5) shows two strangers on a bus who sit next to each other but do not speak to each other. It has already been pointed out that the evaluation of silence depends substantially on the relationship of the interlocutors. In this case, the people do not know each other, and thus, they do not really have a relationship. Saville-Troike (1985: 4) argues that strangers on public transport systems who do not initiate any verbal interaction only maintain a certain social distance. Thus, responses for this situation are expected to indicate no negative evaluation of silence.

As has been assumed, the results of this situation were unequivocal. A clear majority (80% among English speakers, 95% among German speakers) considered the silence in (5) as neutral, thus indicating that not talking to strangers on public transport systems is nothing special or unusual, and is not necessarily associated with politeness or impoliteness. Only 20% of the English-speaking informants and nobody of the German-speaking respondents claimed that this instance of silence was polite. This might hint at a higher value of negative politeness in the English language. Figure 12 shows the results for this situation in both language groups. There were no significant differences between male and female responses.

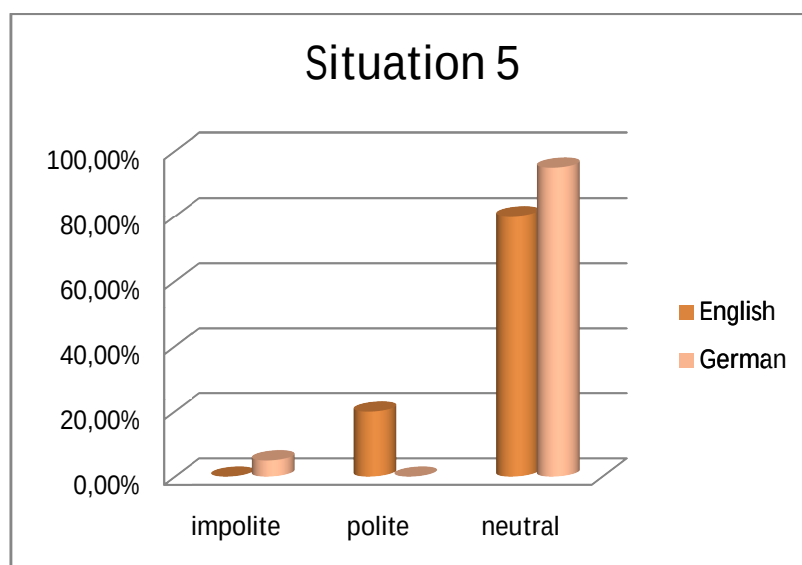


Figure 12: Situation 5 (English vs. German)

The informants' answers to the open question in this situation confirm the results of the multiple-choice question. One of the most frequent reasons for the choice of the response option *neutral* was that the woman in this situation is a complete stranger and therefore, there is no reason to talk to each other. Respondents in both groups emphasised that talk with strangers is not expected. Moreover, the fact that this situation occurs on public transport is another reason why many informants did not regard the silence in this situation as polite or impolite – because it is not expected to talk to other passengers on public transport. It seems that it is the combination of the two factors (stranger + public transport situation) which contribute to the fact that this silence is clearly regarded as neutral, and thus acceptable.

Among the German speakers participating in this survey, only one female respondent claimed that the reason why she would not talk to another person in such a situation is that she would be afraid of disturbing the other person, as s/he might want to keep his/her social distance. Another German-speaking woman maintained that she would actually feel uncomfortable if another passenger on public transport would initiate a conversation with her. Responses of this kind were much more frequent among English speakers. In fact, a quarter of the English-speaking informants (both men and women) indicated that they considered silence in such a situation as some kind of right or privilege, and that they would regard a conversation as uncomfortable or disturbing. Here are some examples of these comments:

2. You do not know the woman, so would not expect her to say anything. I would probably feel more uncomfortable if she forced conversation.
3. I think everyone is entitled to be quiet [...]

4. I am not usually looking to strike up a conversation with every stranger that sits down next to me. I actually would have been relieved she did not want to chat.
5. I would never expect strangers to strike up a conversation with me in this situation. In fact, it would be more polite not to do so and not to invade another's personal space.

Hence, it seems that English speakers are more concerned about their social distance and their right to keep silent in the presence of strangers than German speakers. This confirms Sifianou's (1997: 74) and Stewart's (2005: 124-125) claim that negative politeness is highly valued among English speakers and silence is in some situations preferred as a negative politeness strategy.

6.3.6. Situation 6

(6) Michael (28) has recently finished his PhD thesis and his last exam, and he is very proud of his achievements. A week after his exam he meets with his friend Peter (31) in a bar to have a beer. Peter knows that Michael has reason to celebrate because he has finally finished his studies. Nevertheless, although Michael would expect Peter to say something about his PhD and at least congratulate him, Peter does not say anything about this because he personally thinks that this is not a great achievement. After the greeting and a few moments of silence he starts talking about another topic.

How would you assess Peter's behaviour in this situation? Choose one of the options below.

- ☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

Why did you choose this option? Give reasons.

This example shows a situation in which two friends meet and one of them (Michael) expects the other one (Peter) to congratulate him to his recently achieved PhD title. However, Peter does not fulfil Michael's expectations. He does not say a word about his friend's achievements but remains silent instead. With regard to this, Sifianou (1995: 99) argues that whether silence is regarded as polite or impolite in comparison to speech depends on the kind of act that is avoided – whether this act benefits the speaker and disadvantages the addressee or the relationship of the interlocutors, or whether it benefits the addressee and disadvantages the speaker. According to Sifianou (1995: 100), when silence replaces a verbal act which would clearly benefit the addressee, as it is the case in our sample situation (6), then this avoidance will usually hurt the addressee and present the speaker as inconsiderate and impolite.

The results of this survey clearly confirm Sifianou's (1995) statement. In both groups, the results were identical. There were no significant differences between male and female responses, neither among English nor among German-speaking respondents. English and German speakers gave exactly the same responses. 95% of each group of informants regarded the silence in (6) as impolite, no one considered it as polite, and only 5% chose *neutral* as their answer. Figure 13 depicts these results.

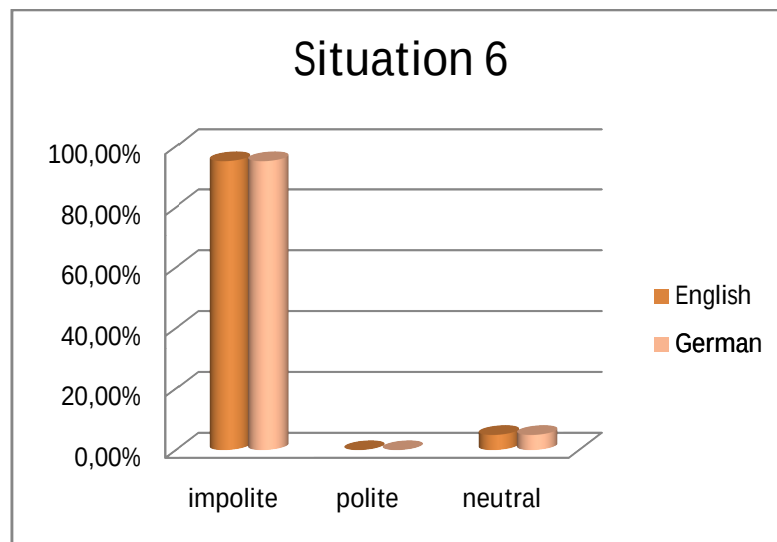


Figure 13: Situation 6 (English vs. German)

Thus, it seems that the respondents completely agreed on the fact that Peter's silence in this situation is definitely impolite. Their explanations why they regarded this instance of silence as impolite included the arguments that congratulations should not be avoided and that it is rude, thoughtless and selfish not to congratulate somebody for his/her achievements. The general attitude was that accomplishments should be acknowledged, no matter what the person who is expected to congratulate thinks about them, as it is impolite and disrespectful to ignore them. Moreover, many informants emphasised that it is especially important to congratulate in this situation because the two men are friends. Respondents stressed that it is essential to consider the feelings of one's friend, recognise what is important to him/her and then act accordingly. Here are a few comments which illustrate informants' negative attitudes towards Peter's silence:

6. Here, Peter's choice is between silence or congratulating Michael and making him happy. In this case, the silence is 'impolite'. A quick sentence acknowledging that Michael has completed his work would suffice to make it 'neutral'. Ignoring what Michael considers a great achievement smacks of arrogance.
7. I believe it is impolite to ignore people's achievements, regardless of your opinion of the value of the achievement. In a way he is belittling his achievement by ignoring it.

8. [...] you should be able to recognize what is important to your friend and commend him on making a big accomplishment in his life, even if it's not important to you.
9. Peter is aware that Michael has finished his PhD thesis and has reason to celebrate, so no matter what he personally thinks, congratulations are always in order. To not congratulate someone in this situation is rude and thoughtless.
10. Egal ob man es nicht für eine große Leistung hält, gratuliert man einem anderen Menschen (insbesondere wenn es ein Freund ist), wenn dieser etwas geschafft hat – sich mit jemanden zu freuen gehört zu den ersten und wichtigsten Eigenschaften eines Freundes. [No matter if oneself regards an accomplishment as great or not, one should congratulate another person (especially if it is a friend) when s/he has achieved something. It is one of the most important characteristics of a friend to be able to be happy for the other person.]
11. Auch wenn man selbst die Leistung nicht bewundert ist diese für den anderen wichtig. Als Freund sollte man seinen [sic] Gegenüber schätzen und sich mit ihm freuen. Alles andere ist herablassend. [The accomplishment is important for the other person, even if oneself does not admire it. As a friend, one should appreciate the other one and celebrate with him/her. Everything else would be condescending.]

6.3.7. Situation 7

(7) Kathy (26) and Marcus (27) have been a couple since more than a year. As they think it is time that the parents of both get to know each other finally, they arrange a three-course-dinner for them. The evening begins quite well: Kathy's and Marcus' parents greet each other, exchange a few words and sit down at the table. Kathy and Marcus are nervous but also happy that the meeting seems to be nice. After the first course is finished, suddenly it seems as if the topics of conversation are exhausted, and silence spreads across the room.

How would you feel in this situation if you were Kathy or Marcus? Please choose one of the following options.

- | | |
|---|--|
| ☐ perfectly normal and comfortable | ☐ uncomfortable |
| ☐ awkward/embarrassed | |

Can you comment on your choice?

This situation again presents an example of 'awkward silence' and thus, a breakdown of communication. In this case, the situation is even more delicate and loaded. On the one hand, people meet who do not know each other at all. On the other hand, they are expected to get along together well because their children are in love with each other. What the young couple hopes is that their parents communicate and have a good evening together. The responses to the questions in (7) will show whether informants would feel uncomfortable in this situation or if they would regard such a situation as unproblematic.

The results clearly show that respondents regarded this situation as either uncomfortable (50% among English speakers, 55% among German speakers) or as awkward/embarrassing (50% English, 40% German), which is in a way only an intensified version of *uncomfortable*. Only 5% of the German informants chose the response option *perfectly normal & comfortable*. Hence, there are no significant differences between German and English responses, which is demonstrated in Figure 14.

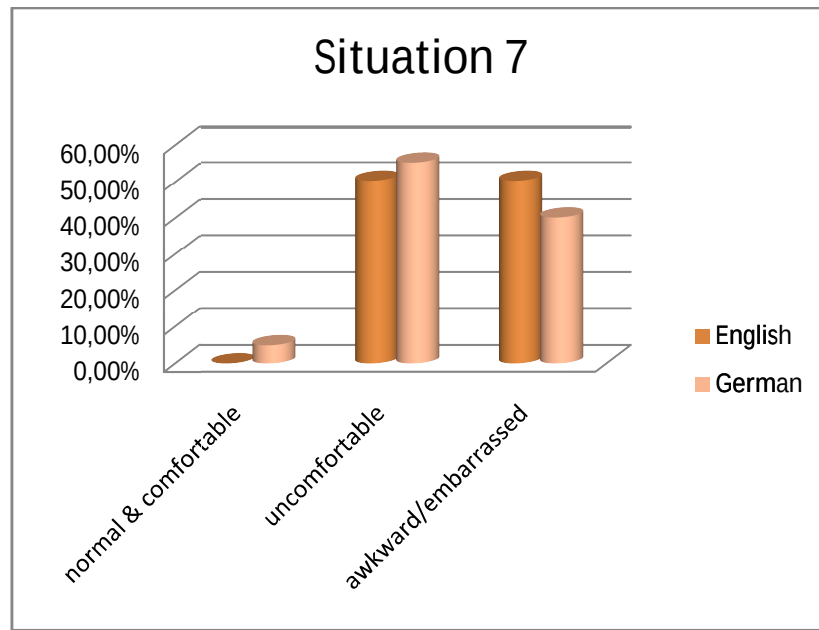


Figure 14: Situation 7 (English vs. German)

With regard to differences between male and female answers, women considered the silence in this situation more awkward or embarrassing than men (who mostly chose the response option *uncomfortable*). While among the English speakers 62,5% of women chose *awkward/embarrassed*, only approximately 42% of men opted for this answer. Among the German-speaking informants half of the female respondents claimed that they would feel awkward or embarrassed if they were in Kathrin and Marcus' situation, while only 30% of the men in this group chose the same response. Thus, one could infer from this that women had a more definitely negative attitude towards the silence in this situation than men, of whom the majority would feel uncomfortable in this situation but not necessarily awkward or embarrassed. The following two figures display the gender differences in both language groups.

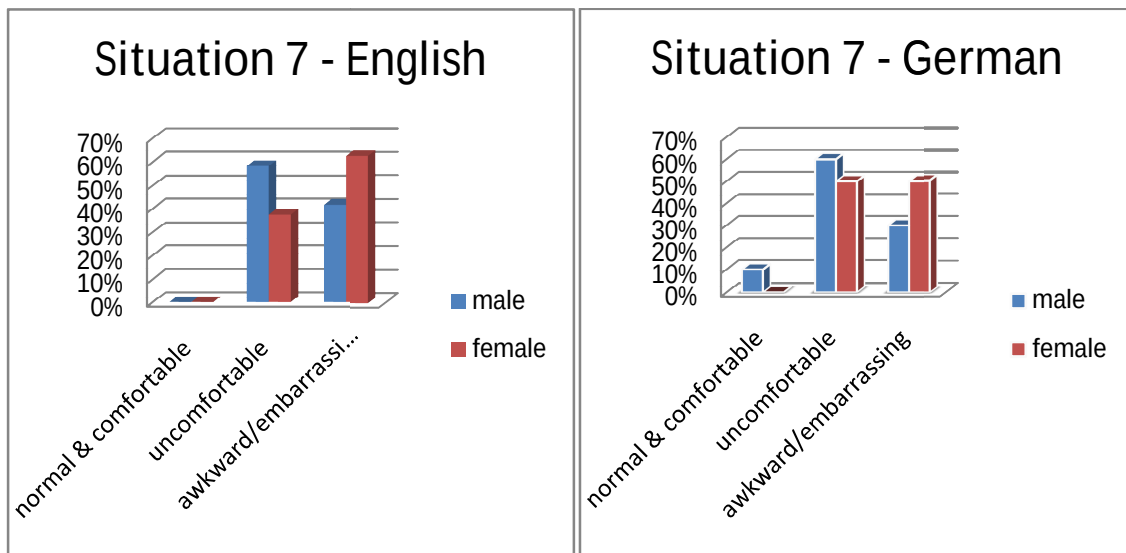


Figure 15: Sit. 7 (English: male vs. female)

Figure 16: Sit. 7 (German: male vs. female)

The responses to the open question in situation (7) showed very similar views about this instance of silence. The overall assumption was that the young couple would prefer a fluent conversation because this would indicate that the parents get along and like each other. The majority of the informants admitted that silence in such a situation signals that the parents do not like each other very well. According to the comments, in this situation conversation is necessary for the expression of sympathy and interest for the other party. In contrast, silence is interpreted as an indicator of something negative. For instance, one English-speaking respondent claimed that no talk indicates a lack of effort and thus a lack of interest in the others. Another one maintained that the silence shows that the parents are either uncomfortable with each other or with the relationship between Kathy and Marcus. A German informant pointed out that silence makes the situation uncertain and uncomfortable. Another one commented in the following way:

12. Naja, wenn sich die Eltern zum ersten Mal kennenlernen, will man schon irgendwie eine angenehme und nicht gesprächsstille Situation haben, sonst bekommt man den Eindruck, die Eltern mögen einander nicht. [Well, when parents meet for the first time, one would prefer an agreeable and communicative situation. Silence would leave the impression that the parents do not like each other.]

Many respondents, particularly English speakers, referred to the situation itself and argued that it produces a feeling of 'uncomfortability', or that it does not allow silence. A few claimed that the situation is awkward because people meet who do not know each other at all but are still expected to get along well and like each other. One person said that "this is a situation where there clearly should be dialogue and it's awkward when that's difficult". Some indicated

that Kathy and Marcus are the hosts, and therefore it is their duty to care for a fluent conversation. This assumption is demonstrated, for instance, in the following two comments:

13. A good host/hostess should know how to maintain a comfortable flow of conversation and be prepared to offer interesting information about their guests to the other guests. This will allow conversation to be started. Kathy and Marcus should ensure that uncomfortable silences do not happen.
14. As hosts, it is Kathy's and Marcus' responsibility to keep the conversation flowing and everyone happy. When this fails, it can be perceived as a small social failure, and therefore [as] embarrassing.

Undoubtedly, silence is evaluated negatively. An English respondent claimed that she would force some kind of conversation in this situation rather than accept silence:

15. It would just be very awkward as you know your parents have more interesting things to say than this, and your partner must know the same of his parents. Forcing conversation out of them seems rude, but then silence seems more awkward than forced conversation! [...].

Many people stressed that silence is awkward because it shows that people are unable to find an appropriate topic of conversation, or because it is a sign of maturity or intelligence to keep a conversation flowing. A German-speaking woman even pointed out that silence within company is always uncomfortable:

16. Stille in Gesellschaft ist immer unangenehm.

6.3.8. Situation 8

(8) Imagine you do not own a car but desperately need one to pick up the new dresser you have ordered. In the evening you are invited at a friend's place for dinner. You know that s/he has a car and while eating dinner you ask him/her if you could borrow it for a few hours. Although you know that your question has been heard and understood, your friend does not answer, but just goes on eating the meal in silence and after a few minutes starts talking about something else.

How do you interpret your friend's absence of response? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ as a rejection
- ☐ as consent to lend you the car
- ☐ as indecision/hesitation

How do you consider his/her behaviour in the situation? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ impolite
- ☐ polite
- ☐ neutral

In (8) the respondents are confronted with silence instead of a verbal answer to a question which implies a request for help. As has been stressed in the previous chapters, silence is extremely ambiguous. The questions in this situation will show whether informants interpret this silence as a rejection, an expression of consent, or as indecision, and moreover, if they consider the silent answer as polite, impolite or neutral. It will also be interesting to see whether there is some consistency in the answers given by the respondents. Sifianou (1995: 100) argues that silence instead of a verbal response to a face-threatening act (in our case the request for help) is not always the best and most polite way of handling such a situation. According to her, producing some kind of verbal answer is more polite than being silent. The survey will show whether this assumption is confirmed by the respondents or not.

The results of this situation were unambiguous. The majority of respondents in both language groups interpreted the silence in (8) as a rejection and regarded it as impolite. Figure 17 displays the results in the two language groups.

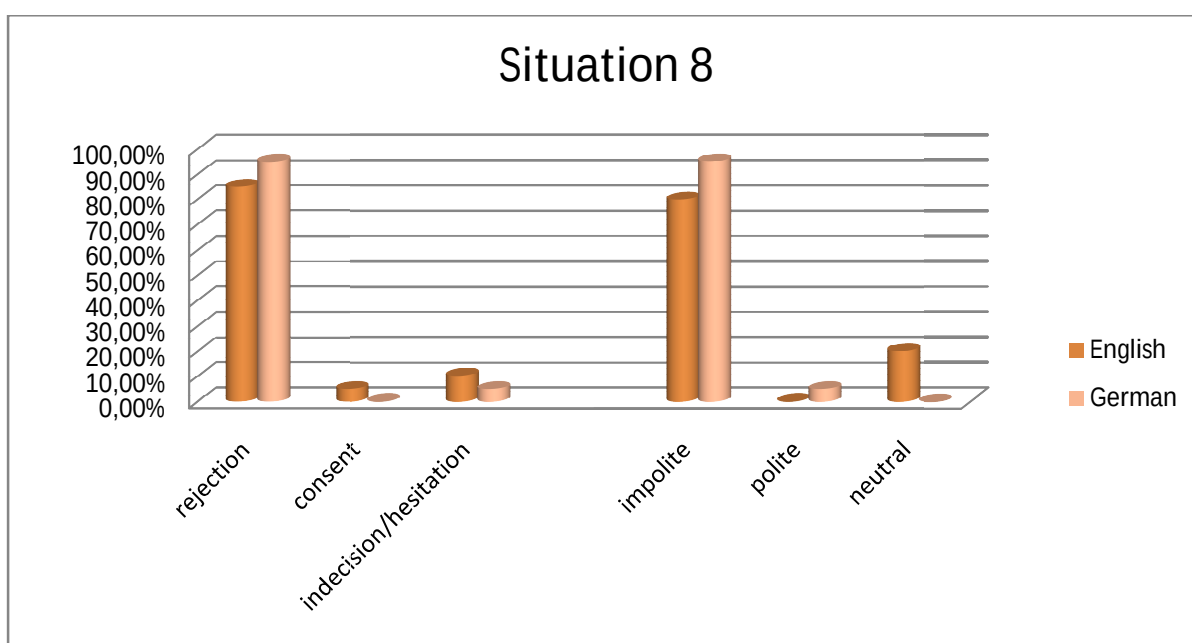


Figure 17: Situation 8 (English vs. German)

There was only a slight difference between German and English speakers. While 80% of the English speaking respondents opted for *rejection* and 80% of them considered the silence as *impolite*, 95% of the German native speakers chose the response options (*rejection* in question 1 and *impolite* in question 2). Thus, the answers in the German-speaking group were a little more consistent than in the English group, where, for instance, 10% of the informants interpreted this instance of silence as indecision, and 20% assessed it as neutral. However, this

minor difference does not really justify any claims at a higher tolerance towards silence among English native speakers. Overall, there were no significant differences between male and female respondents. Hence, Sifianou's (1995: 100) claim that in a situation like (8) a verbal answer would be regarded as more polite than mere silence has been confirmed by the respondents of this survey.

6.3.9. Situation 9

(9) After work you are planning to stay home and spend the evening with your boyfriend/girlfriend. You decide to cook something and then watch a movie. After you two finished preparing the meal, your boyfriend/girlfriend falls silent and so you eat your dinner in silence.

How do you feel in this situation? Choose one of the options below.

- ☐ perfectly normal and comfortable
- ☐ uncomfortable
- ☐ awkward/embarrassed

Please give reasons for your choice.

How do you regard your boyfriend's/girlfriend's silence during dinner? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ impolite
- ☐ polite
- ☐ neutral

Please give reasons for your choice.

Situation (9) shows an instance of silence between boyfriend and girlfriend – two people who know each other very well and who have a very intimate relationship. As has been mentioned already in the discussion of situation (4), whether silence is tolerated or not depends on the kind of relationship of the interactants. It is a common assumption that silence is tolerated in 'Western cultures' when it occurs among people who know each other very well, like family members, very close friends, or couples – as is the case in this situation. Responses to the questions in (9) will indicate whether this assumption is true. Furthermore, they will disclose the informants' reasons for regarding this silence as (un)comfortable/awkward and (im)polite/neutral. Figure 18 illustrates the results for this situation.

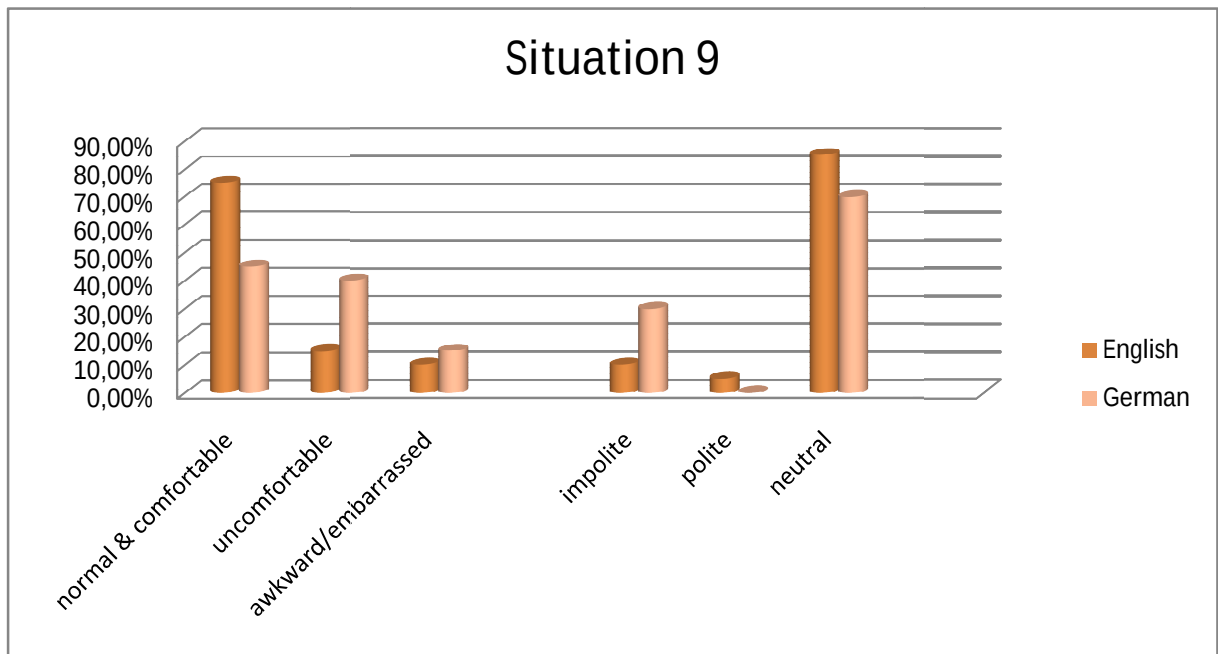


Figure 18: Situation 9 (English vs. German)

Both language groups showed the same tendency. Most informants (75% of the English-speaking and 45% of the German-speaking respondents) claimed that they would feel perfectly normal and comfortable, and the clear majority (85% among English speakers, 70% among German speakers) regarded the silence in this situation as neutral. However, there was a considerable difference between responses of English native speakers and those of German native speakers. This is particularly the case in question 1, where three quarters of the English-speaking respondents opted for *perfectly normal and comfortable*, whereas only 45% of the German speakers gave the same answer. In addition, 40% of the German speakers considered the situation as uncomfortable, whereas only 15% of the English-speaking informants felt the same way. Thus, among German speakers almost as many respondents claimed they would feel uncomfortable in this situation as those who maintained that they would feel perfectly normal and comfortable.

The responses to question 2 differed to a smaller extent. As has been pointed out above, in both groups the clear majority regarded the silence in (9) as neutral. No German speaker and only 5% of the English speakers considered it polite. Only 10% of the English respondents opted for *impolite*, whereas 30% of the German-speaking informants chose the same option. Accordingly, among English speakers the tolerance towards the silence in this situation (a couple sharing dinner in silence) seems to be a bit higher than among German speakers. The higher acceptance of such an instance of silence in the English language could be attributed to English speakers' general preference for negative politeness. The lower tolerance in the

German-speaking group of informants could be regarded as a result of the ambiguity of silence and Hofstede's (1984) (see above) statement that German speakers show high uncertainty avoidance. Moreover, it could be ascribed to German speakers' emphasis on directness and explicitness of expression – characteristics of the German language which have been described by House (2005) (see above).

As far as differences between male and female responses within both groups are concerned, there are only minor differences among English-speaking informants. Only in question 1 there was a divergence of approximately 20%. While 66% of the male respondents claimed they would feel perfectly normal and comfortable in this situation, 87% of the women gave the same answer. More men (30%) than women (0%) said that they would feel awkward or embarrassed, which could indicate that overall, women tolerate this instance of silence more than their male counterparts. The following two figures compare male and female responses within both language groups:

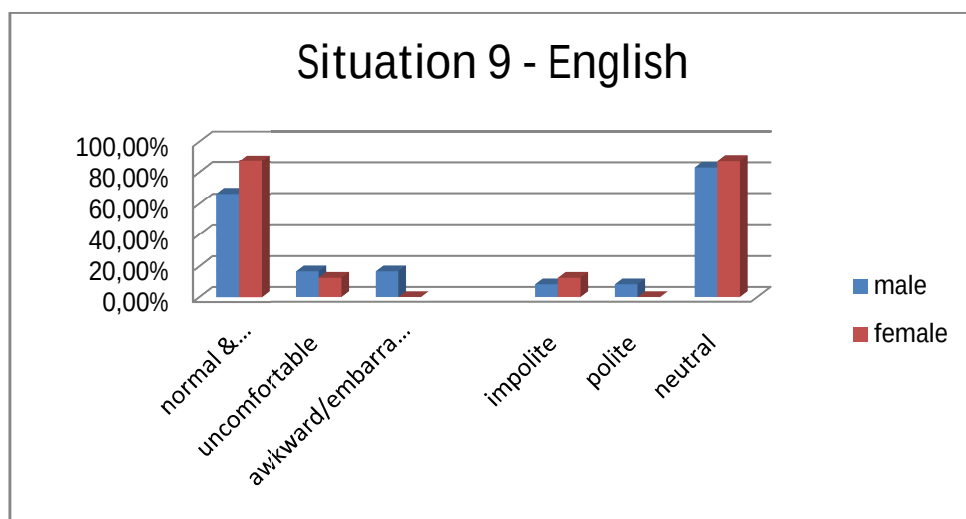


Figure 19: Situation 9 (English: male vs. female)

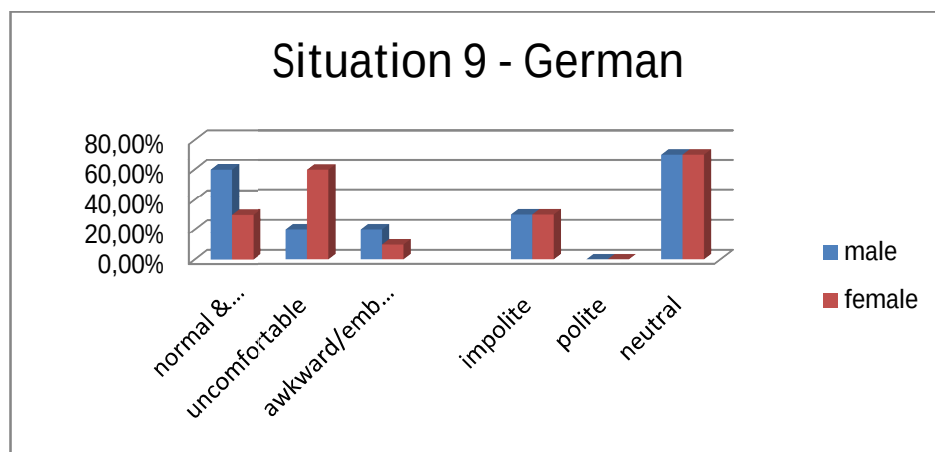


Figure 20: Situation 9 (German: male vs. female)

In the German-speaking group the differences between male and female responses were clearly more significant – however, only with regard to question 1. Here, men and women did not agree on whether they considered situation (9) as normal and comfortable or as uncomfortable. While 60% of the male respondents opted for *perfectly normal & comfortable*, only 30% of the female informants chose the same answer. In contrast, 60% of the women in this group argued that they would feel uncomfortable in such a situation whereas only 20% of the men would feel the same. Hence, as it is displayed in Figure 19, male and female views on the silence in (9) differ to a considerable extent. While the majority of men (twice as many as women) regarded the silence in (9) as normal, the majority of women (three times as many as men) indicated that they would feel uncomfortable in this situation. Thus, it could be inferred that German-speaking men have a higher tolerance towards this instance of silence (when it occurs among people who have an intimate relationship) than female German speakers.

Interestingly, while English-speaking men are more likely to feel uncomfortable or awkward/embarrassed in such a situation and women are more comfortable with it, it is the other way round among German speakers. The German-speaking group of informants of this survey left the impression that men are clearly more comfortable with silence in a situation like (9) than women, who consider it uncomfortable. Thus, in the case of German speakers, Tannen's (1986) claim (see above) that women view their men's silence as a negative thing – as something like a brick wall with which they are confronted – seems to apply.

The responses to the open question confirmed that overall English speakers evaluated the silence in (9) as more positive than the German-speaking informants did. Those few who claimed that they would feel awkward and uncomfortable in this situation argued that a couple should not have problems to keep up conversation because one should share thoughts and experiences, and silence would indicate that a person has something to hide. Yet, most of those people still regarded the silence as neutral, because they assumed that the person being silent had a reason for this, or at least no bad intentions. Some also argued that silence is not necessarily bad, maybe only a bit unfriendly.

Some respondents stressed that whether they would feel uncomfortable or embarrassed depends very much on how long the couple have been together. They claimed that the situation could be uncomfortable with a young couple, but completely normal and comfortable with a couple who have been together for a longer period of time. Two respondents also pointed out that how they would assess the situation depends on the reason for the silence. This view is expressed in the following comment by an English-speaking woman:

17. Well, I guess it depends on the reason the boyfriend is silent. I can hang out with my husband without talking and it is very comfortable and relaxed. But if he was silent because he was mad about something or at me, then I would say it would be uncomfortable.

This response reminds of Oduro-Frimpong's (2007) discussion of the 'strategic use of silence' which can be used to manipulate others psychologically (see above).

However, as has been already mentioned, the majority of the English speakers considered the situation as perfectly normal and comfortable. In general, they had similar reasons for this view. Many argued that girlfriend and boyfriend have an established relationship in which silence is unproblematic and indicates that both partners are comfortable with each other in every situation. Some respondents showed understanding for people's exhaustion at the end of the day and emphasised that it is not necessary to talk all the time, or that dinner time is maybe the only time for introspection. Others maintained that eating dinner with one's boyfriend or girlfriend is a very familiar situation, and that it is not essential to talk in order to have a good time with one's partner. Many informants even stressed that the ability of being together in silence is an indicator of a good relationship, as it is expressed in the following two comments, the first coming from a male and the second from a female English-speaking respondent:

18. The mark of a good relationship is that you can be silent together and feel under no obligation to talk. I would not feel that I was being snubbed and would ask what the matter was.
19. With a boyfriend or girlfriend, silence does not always carry meaning like it does with people you don't know so well. Maybe it is a sign that you are both just happy in each other's company and don't feel the need to make conversation for conversation's sake. I, personally, like it when a friendship or relationship has reached this stage.

Taking a closer look at the comments and explanations of informants in the German-speaking group, it becomes obvious very quickly that the attitudes towards the silence in (9) vary to a great extent. Those who claimed that they would feel uncomfortable in this situation often also considered the silence as impolite, for instance because it shows that there is a lack of confidence in the partner when a person is not willing to talk. People who opted for the response option *uncomfortable* frequently said the silence signals something negative or that it is strange or sad if partners are not able to make some kind of conversation because such a relationship relies on communication. Here are two examples which illustrate this view. The first one has been expressed by a male, the second by a female German-speaking student. Both are answers to the first open question (which refers to the first multiple-choice question

of situation (9)). Both respondents afterwards indicated that they regarded the silence of the partner as neutral.

20. Kommt drauf an – vielleicht ist etwas nicht in Ordnung mit ihr, vielleicht braucht sie im Moment einfach ihre Ruhe. Im Allgemeinen würde ich es aber eher als traurig empfinden, wenn sich Paare nichts mehr zu sagen haben (egal ob jetzt nach 3 oder nach 30 Jahren). [It depends – maybe there is something wrong with her, maybe she just needs some peace and quiet. Yet, in general I think it is sad when couples don't have anything to say to each other (no matter if this is the case after 3 or 30 years).]
21. Tendenziell ist die Situation unangenehm – wenn mein Freund nichts mehr sagt, weiß ich, dass irgendetwas nicht in Ordnung ist, z.B. dass er einen schlechten Tag hatte oder ähnliches. [I would rather say that the situation is uncomfortable – if my boyfriend does not say anything, I know that something is wrong, for example that he had a bad day, or something like that.]

Another female German-speaking respondent who regarded the situation as uncomfortable explained this feeling with the argument that silence causes ambiguity and uncertainty:

22. Weil es durch die Stille Unklarheiten gibt und damit eine Unsicherheit entsteht.

This argument confirms Hofstede's (1984) claim (see above) that German speakers in general try to avoid uncertainty, as well as House's (2005) observation that they put a lot of emphasis on directness and explicitness of expression. Most of those who maintained that they would feel awkward or embarrassed in this situation stressed that some kind of conversation would be appropriate because this is what is expected from a boy/girlfriend, and everything else would be impolite. Furthermore, a few pointed out that silence is awkward because one should talk about problems (and thus implied that silence signals some kind of problem).

In contrast, a considerable number of respondents regarded the situation as normal and comfortable. Some argued that eating in silence is normal after a long and maybe exhausting day. Others indicated that there are people who simply like to enjoy their meal in silence. Many emphasised what had also been stated by a great number of English-speaking informants and what had been assumed before analysing the results of this survey – that continuous conversation is not necessary among people who know each other very well, and that communication is also possible without words. This view is expressed, for instance, in the following response by a male German speaker:

23. In einer gefestigten Beziehung sind nicht immer Worte notwendig (oder sogar möglich). ‡ Nonverbale Kommunikation. [In an established relationship words are not always necessary (or even possible). ‡ nonverbal communication.]

6.3.10. Situation 10

(10) On a weekend evening you meet a friend whom you haven't seen for a couple of months. You have decided to watch a movie at the cinema. After having bought your tickets, you drink a coffee and chat about different things. Suddenly you hear a strange sound. After a few seconds you realise that s/he has just belched, because you see a bit of embarrassment in his/her face.

What would you do? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ don't say anything about it and do as if you haven't noticed it
- ☐ make a joke about it

Why do you do that?

The last situation of the questionnaire aims at investigating whether silence as a response to a faux-pas – an event that is face-threatening for the other person – is preferred to a verbal answer. In other words, it will be attempted to find out whether ignoring or acknowledging the embarrassing event is favoured by the informants. It has been claimed several times, for instance by Brown and Levinson (1987), Tannen (1990), and Jaworski (1993), that silence can be applied in communication to maintain the face of one of the interlocutors. Sifianou (1995: 104) points out that in a situation like (10) silence as a response expresses negative politeness, whereas making a joke about it would be an expression of positive politeness. As has been mentioned above, English speakers are assumed to prefer negative politeness strategies (Sifianou 1997, Stewart 2005). Therefore, it is expected that the results of this situation will reflect and confirm this assumption.

In summary, the results were surprisingly different than expected. The responses of English speakers differed substantially from those of German speakers. While the majority (60%) of the German-speaking informants claimed that they would not say anything, 70% of the English-speaking participants of this survey would rather make a joke about the other person's faux-pas. Accordingly, these results seem to indicate that English speakers would opt for a positive rather than a negative politeness strategy in this situation, whereas the opposite is the case among German speakers. Thus, the claim that negative politeness is preferred over positive politeness in the English language could not be proved right in this situation. The following figure illustrates this:

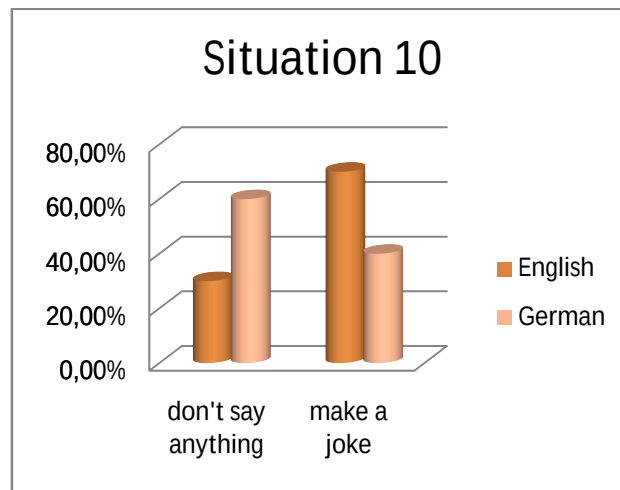


Figure 21: Situation 10 (English vs. German)

With regard to difference between men and women, there are no striking divergences. In both groups, more men than women claimed that they would make a joke. In the English-speaking group there was only a slight difference. Within the German-speaking group of respondents half of the male participants opted for *don't say anything about it and do as if you haven't noticed it* and the other half for *make a joke about it*. The majority of the female German speakers (70%) preferred silence over joking. Figures 22 and 23 display male and female answers in both language groups.

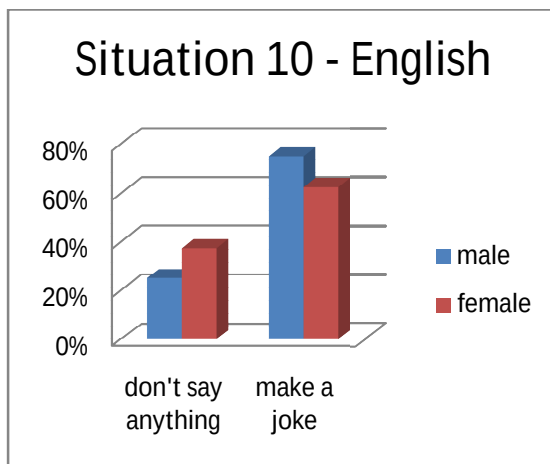


Figure 22: Sit. 10 (English: male vs. female)

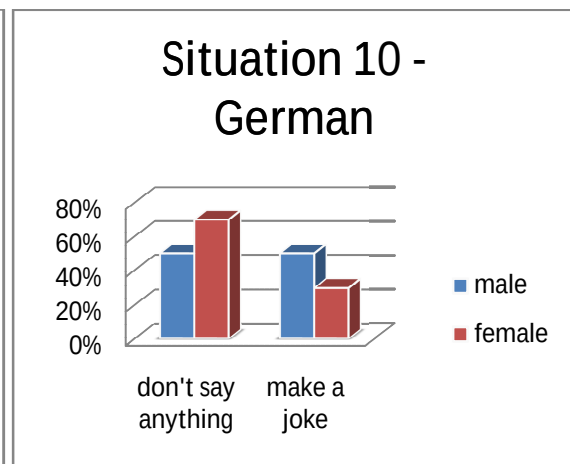


Figure 23: Sit. 10 (German: male vs. female)

Interestingly, this is the only situation of the questionnaire which evoked such divergent results from English and German speakers. However, when taking into account the responses to the open question in (10), it becomes clear that things are not as straightforward as it may seem at first sight. Those English speakers who would remain silent about the belching pointed out that they would thus want to avoid further embarrassment, and that there is no reason to dwell on something that cannot always be controlled and that is clearly embarrassing for the

other person. This view is expressed, for instance, in the following comment by a female respondent:

24. She is clearly embarrassed and anything I say will increase the embarrassment.

A few English-speaking people stressed that whether silence or a joke is the better solution depends on the relationship to the other person – if it is a close friend or not. With close friends joking was regarded as the better strategy. Two informants also claimed that they would apply silence towards a woman and make a joke if the other person was a man.

The majority of the English informants, however, opted for the positive politeness strategy – joking about the belching. Those people emphasised that belching is absolutely natural and nothing to be embarrassed about. Many argued that a joke would relieve the situation and make it less embarrassing. Some maintained that silence in such a situation would be even more embarrassing. This view is put into words in the following two responses, the first by a female, the second by a male English-speaking informant:

25. It would be more awkward pretending you had not heard, so I would make a light joke about it.

26. If it was a friend, I wouldn't want them to feel embarrassment, and a joke would perhaps alleviate my friend's embarrassment.

The responses of the German-speaking informants of this survey clearly illustrated that the majority preferred the negative politeness strategy of keeping silent about the faux-pas. Those few who opted for *making a joke* claimed that laughing together is easier and better than being silent together, that belching is human and natural, and that it could happen to anyone. Some people in this group also stressed that they would only joke about the event if the other person was a close friend.

In summary, it seems that all of the respondents of this survey wanted to show the other person that s/he does not have to be embarrassed. Yet, the arguments for silence and against joking were definitely more frequent and numerous within the German-speaking group. A large number of informants claimed that one shouldn't emphasise something that causes the other person embarrassment, which is illustrated, for instance, in this answer by a female respondent:

27. Weil ich bemerke, dass es meiner Freundin ohnehin schon peinlich ist und ich deshalb nicht noch darauf herumreiten möchte. [Because I notice that this is embarrassing for my friend, and therefore, I do not want to dwell on it.]

Many people maintained that commenting on the event would cause further embarrassment and therefore, they would try to avoid this by not saying anything and ignoring the faux-pas completely. One person stressed that talking about it would increase the other person's insecurity, which again reminds us of Hofstede's (1984) claim about the high German uncertainty avoidance. Interestingly, a considerable number of informants presented the same arguments for silence like people who were in favour of making a joke – that belching is natural, can happen to everyone, and is therefore not a reason for being embarrassed.

In conclusion, German and English speakers produced very similar comments, with the difference that the majority of the German-speaking respondents argued for silence and the majority of the English-speaking informants regarded joking as the appropriate strategy. Situation (10) is one of the few which showed clearly different attitudes of people from these two language groups.

6.4. Summary of the results

To sum up, the assumptions and claims about silence and politeness have been confirmed in six out of ten situations. Yet, even in these situations not every aspect was assessed by the respondents as it has been anticipated beforehand. Plus, the number of situations which produced results that refuted the claims of researchers and the general assumptions was considerable.

In the first three situations, the results were not as expected. In situation (1), silence replaces an expression of disapproval or disagreement, and thus is used in order to reduce the face-threat for the addressee. Although respondents were expected to regard this silence as polite, they did the opposite. The results were unequivocal and demonstrated that this instance of silence was clearly considered impolite. Similarly, the silence in situation (2) is applied in order to avoid public conflict and outburst, and hence, was assumed to be seen as polite. However, the majority of informants of this survey opted for *neutral* instead. Accordingly, it seems that the preventive function of silence is not really acknowledged, and in fact, also assessed as impolite rather than polite – both among English and German speakers.

Situations (3), (4), and (7) involved instances of 'awkward silence', which were expected to be evaluated negatively owing to the high value of phatic communion in 'Western cultures'. It was assumed that such 'awkward silences' would be regarded as impolite, particularly in the English language where small talk plays a more crucial role than in German – according to

House (2005). The results of situations (4) and (7) showed that respondents clearly considered such a silence as uncomfortable, sometimes even as awkward or embarrassing. The results for situation (4) were partly surprising, as a considerable amount of informants claimed that the sudden silence between the two students who are waiting for a course was perfectly normal and comfortable. Yet, many of those people still indicated that they would try to find another topic rather than sit in silence. In contrast, the results of (7) were as expected – almost all respondents perceived the silence at the dinner table with the parents and the young couple as uncomfortable or awkward. The responses for situation (3) indicated that ‘awkward silence’ is not necessarily associated with (im)politeness. Even though people might perceive such silence as uncomfortable, this does not mean that they also assess it as impolite. It seems that that ‘uncomfortability’ or awkwardness are not equated with impoliteness.

(5) and (6) were the two situations with the most definite results. Situation (5) clearly confirmed the claim that silence among strangers, particularly on public transport, is absolutely normal and neither regarded as polite nor impolite but as neutral. In situation (6) Peter did not congratulate his friend Michael for this PhD although Michael expected a few appreciative words. This silence was unequivocally considered impolite, probably because it replaces an act that would benefit the addressee. Over 90% of the respondents of this survey chose this option. Moreover, the results of German- and English speakers were perfectly identical in this situation. This shows that there was general consensus among the informants of this survey with regard to this instance of silence.

In situation (8) the silence replaces a verbal answer to a question which implies a request for help. According to Sifianou's (1995) claim that silence instead of a verbal answer is not necessarily the most polite strategy, respondents were expected to interpret this silence as a rejection and consider it as impolite. The results of this survey clearly met these expectations and confirmed Sifianou's statement. Situation (1) involves an instance of silence which substitutes a verbal response that would definitely threaten the face of the addressee. Although it was expected that this silence would be assessed as polite, this was not the case. The results of these two situations indicate that in general, silence that replaces a verbal answer to a question is assessed as impolite in both language groups.

Overall, in most situations (eight out of ten) there were hardly any or only minor differences between the responses of English and German speakers. As has been mentioned above, in situation (6) the results were even identical. However, situations (9) and (10) produced different answers by English- and German-speaking informants. Situation (9) involves silence between boyfriend and girlfriend – two people who have a very intimate relationship. The

results indicate that this instance of silence is tolerated more among English speakers. More English speaking informants perceived it as perfectly normal and comfortable, and evaluated it as neutral. The lower tolerance of German speakers could be partly attributed to their high uncertainty avoidance and the high emphasis they put on explicitness and clarity of expression. Moreover, one could argue that the higher tolerance among English speakers maybe stems from the general preference for negative politeness in the English language. Yet, apart from situation (5), this preference could not be detected in the results of the other situations. Hence, the question arises whether Sifianou's (1997) claim about the high value of negative politeness in English is still valid today. Even in situation (10), which presents the choice between a negative and a positive politeness strategy as a reaction to an act that threatens the face of the interlocutor, the majority of English speakers chose the positive politeness strategy, whereas German speakers showed a preference for the negative politeness strategy (silence).

On the whole, significant differences between male and female answers were rare. Only in two situations ((2) and (9)) women's responses differed to a certain extent from those of men. In (10) there were only slight differences, and in the other situations there were hardly any differences, let alone significant differences. As has already been mentioned above, the age of the respondents was not assumed to constitute a significant influence on their responses. Even though the informants were asked for information about their age, differences in the answers of members of different age groups could not be detected. However, in order to investigate such potential differences properly, further research which would specifically target an equal number of respondents of different age would be necessary.

In conclusion, the results of this survey have shown that there are hardly any significant differences in the attitudes towards silence and politeness between English and German speakers. There were only hints at typical characteristics, such as the English preference for negative politeness or the German tendency of avoiding ambiguity. Yet, a number of claims and assumption, for instance that English speakers highly value small talk, could not be confirmed. Even more general views about silence, for example that it is seen as polite when used to avoid conflict, disapproval, or any kind of face-threatening response, or that silence instead of small talk was regarded as impolite, could not be proved right in this survey. This indicates the necessity of further and more extensive research in this area.

7. Conclusion

In the course of this thesis, various aspects of silence and politeness have been discussed. First, different politeness theories have been presented, and it has become clear that there is no definite and stable definition of politeness because it is an abstract concept which, according to Watts (2005: xiii) will always be slippery and indefinable. In fact, it has been pointed out that there are striking differences between what is regarded as polite or impolite in different cultures (see among others Leech 1991, Hickey & Stewart 2005, Sifianou & Antonopoulou 2005). Although politeness seems to be a general human trait – something which is universal in the sense that it exists in all cultures –, its precise realisation differs substantially from one culture to another. Furthermore, it is not only subject to change across cultures, but also through time (Watts 2003: 13). Another important point that has been observed is that politeness is a highly conventionalised phenomenon and does not necessarily have anything to do with genuine consideration for others (see House 2005: 14).

Silence in communication has been investigated, and similarly to politeness, it has turned out that also in this case there is not a single, clear-cut definition. On the contrary, there are various instances of silence and accordingly, a number of different definitions. It has been indicated that silence is not only the absence of speech. As a matter of fact, it can fulfil many different functions in communication, and it can be used in various ways to pursue certain communicative goals. The most crucial characteristic of silence is that it is highly ambiguous, which makes its interpretation very difficult.

After this, it has been discussed whether silence in communication is polite or not. Brown and Levinson (1987) have argued that silence is the most polite strategy to do an FTA. However, Sifianou (1995) has refuted this claim by pointing out that silence is not always regarded as polite. For instance, when it replaces an expected verbal response to a question or invitation, it can leave the addressee confused and feeling affronted, and is usually evaluated negatively (Jaworski 1993 & Sifianou 1995). In such a case, silence is definitely not considered polite. This has been also confirmed by the results of the survey that has been conducted for this research project.

Moreover, it has been emphasised that whether silence is considered polite or impolite depends very much on the context in which it occurs. In relation to this, the specific situation in which it is used and the relationship of the interlocutors play a crucial role. Apart from this, the culture in which silence is used is a crucial factor. It has been observed that different cultures have different concepts of silence. Some cultures show a higher tolerance towards

silence than others. It has also been pointed out that the evaluation of silence depends substantially on a culture's politeness system (Scollon & Scollon 1995) and its orientation towards either negative or positive politeness (Sifianou 1997). Moreover, it has been revealed that there is a Western bias towards speech rather than silence. Thus, in 'Western cultures' silence in communication is frequently evaluated negatively and interpreted as a lack of harmony, solidarity or interest in the relationship of the interlocutors. In some cases, it might even be regarded as a breakdown of communication (Scollon 1985). In contrast to this, in many 'non-Western cultures' silence is tolerated and accepted. Sometimes, it even takes over communicative functions which are otherwise realised by speech. Finally, whether silence is regarded as polite or impolite is also substantially influenced by individual attitudes of people. This factor has become particularly obvious in the analysis of the results of the empirical study. Informants from the same cultural environment sometimes had completely different views on this issue. Hence, it is impossible to maintain that silence is either polite or impolite. No general claims can be made.

In the course of Chapter 5, examples of how silence is used and assessed in different cultures were presented. On the one hand, silence in selected 'Western cultures' has been discussed. These examples included, amongst others, the stereotypically silent Finnish culture, but also the case of the Italian Alpine village Valbella, which refuted the common stereotype of the spirited and voluble Italian to a certain extent. On the other hand, the use and evaluation of silence in selected 'non-Western cultures' have been presented, and thus, it has been demonstrated that there are differences to how silence is applied and assessed in mainstream 'Western cultures'.

The last section has focused on the empirical data that have been collected for this project. Attitudes towards silence and politeness among English- and German native speakers have been investigated and compared. In summary, no striking differences in the attitudes towards silence in these two language groups could be detected. Although, owing to their distinct politeness patterns, differing tendencies of a higher or lower tolerance for silence in specific situations were expected in these two groups, significant differences could be found only in a very small number of the situations presented in the questionnaire. Similarly, the views of male and female informants did not differ significantly from each other.

Surprisingly, a considerable number of general assumptions about silence and politeness, as well as researchers' claims about this issue could not be confirmed and proved valid. These findings stress that the topic of silence and politeness is very complex and that it is extremely difficult to make any claims about it without producing sweeping generalisations. Moreover, it

indicates the necessity of further and more extensive and detailed research in this area. A more in-depth investigation of the attitudes towards silence in various contexts in single cultures and speech communities could produce more insight and would provide useful material for cross-cultural comparison. This would also facilitate the process of distinguishing the use and evaluation of silence in 'Western cultures' in contrast to 'non-Western cultures'. So far, it seems that not enough systematic empirical research in this area has been conducted and therefore, a distinction of how silence is used in 'Western cultures' in contrast to 'non-Western cultures' appears somehow vague and not completely justified. Unfortunately, it would be beyond the scope of this project to undertake such an extensive and systematic cross-cultural investigation of silence, but there is definitely enough space and demand for new research projects in this area.

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9. Appendices

Appendix 1: Questionnaire English

Questionnaire for diploma thesis in linguistics

Dear respondents,

I am a student of English language and literature at the University of Vienna and I am currently collecting data for my diploma thesis. The thesis deals with the role of silence as a means of expressing (im)politeness and this study investigates attitudes towards silence in communication. I would very much appreciate if you could help me by answering the following questions.

It should not take you longer than 15 minutes to complete the questionnaire. Please answer spontaneously and honestly. There are no right or wrong answers, as this study serves to investigate attitudes. Your answers will of course be treated anonymously and will not be used for any other purposes.

Most of the questions are multiple-choice questions where you have to choose one response of a number of options. Apart from this, the questionnaire also includes some open questions which follow the multiple-choice questions. Those serve to gain more information about the reasons and explanations for your choice, and give you the opportunity to add personal comments.

Questions

- (1) Sarah (33) meets her friend Anne (32) for a coffee right after having been at the hairdresser. Sarah likes her new haircut and is waiting for Anne to comment positively on it. Anne immediately notices the new haircut but she doesn't like it at all. When Sarah finally asks "How do you like my new haircut?", Anne remains silent and then changes the topic.

How would you evaluate Anne's behaviour in the conversation? Choose one of the following options:

☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

- (2) John (20), 2nd year student of Medicine, tells his brother Mark (28) that he has decided to give up his studies and look for a job because he has realised that he is not willing to spend the next 6 or more years studying. Mark thinks this is a foolish und immature decision and tells John so. John is disappointed and offended and they separate. A week later both meet at a family celebration. John is still offended and expects an apology from his brother because he insulted him and did not even try to understand the reasons for his decision. Mark still thinks John is making a mistake and even though he knows John is waiting for an apology, he is not at all willing to apologise.

However, he does not want to start another fight in front of all relatives. Therefore, he remains silent in John's presence.

How would you evaluate Mark's decision to keep silent instead of telling John that he is not going to apologise? Please choose one of the following options:

- ☐ polite ☐ impolite ☐ neutral

- (3) Tom (35) works as an engineer in a big company in the city of Vienna. It is Saturday and Tom is on his way to the tennis club to enjoy his leisure time. In the underground he suddenly meets a colleague (Joseph, 38) from work. Both see and greet each other. Tom and Joseph do not know each other very well and they do not have much in common on social grounds. After having said "hello" both men stand in silence next to each other until one of them gets off the underground.

How would you assess the silence between the two men? Choose one of the options below.

- ☐ polite ☐ impolite ☐ neutral

- (4) July (23) and Mary (22) are both students of English literature and they are waiting in front of the classroom for a course they both attend. They know each other from this course, and while they are both waiting, they start a conversation. They talk about their professor, what they expect from the course, and how they like it. Then, they cannot think of another topic and fall silent.

How would you describe the silence in this situation? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ perfectly normal and comfortable ☐ uncomfortable
☐ awkward/embarrassing

What would you do if you were in this situation? Please choose one of these options:

- ☐ Sit silently next to each other until the course begins because you cannot think of another topic you really want to talk about with the other person.
☐ Try to find another topic and then talk about something like, for instance, the weather, university in general, or other courses.

- (5) You are on the way to a friend. While you are sitting on the bus, a woman takes a seat next to you. Although she takes notice of you, she does not say anything and after a few stops she leaves the bus wordlessly.

How do you consider the woman's behaviour? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

Why? Please give reasons for your choice.

- (6) Michael (28) has recently finished his PhD thesis and his last exam, and he is very proud of his achievements. A week after his exam he meets with his friend Peter (31) in a bar to have a beer. Peter knows that Michael has reason to celebrate because he has finally finished his studies. Nevertheless, although Michael would expect Peter to say something about his PhD and at least congratulate him, Peter does not say anything about this because he personally thinks that this is not a great achievement. After the greeting and a few moments of silence he starts talking about another topic.

How would you assess Peter's behaviour in this situation? Choose one of the options below.

- ☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

Why did you choose this option? Give reasons.

- (7) Kathy (26) and Marcus (27) have been a couple since more than a year. As they think it is time that the parents of both get to know each other finally, they arrange a three-course-dinner for them. The evening begins quite well: Kathy's and Marcus' parents greet each other, exchange a few words and sit down at the table. Kathy and Marcus are nervous but also happy that the meeting seems to be nice. After the first course is finished, suddenly it seems as if the topics of conversation are exhausted, and silence spreads across the room.

How would you feel in this situation if you were Kathy or Marcus? Please choose one of the following options.

- ☐ perfectly normal and comfortable ☐ uncomfortable
☐ awkward/embarrassed

Can you comment on your choice?

- (8) Imagine you do not own a car but desperately need one to pick up the new dresser you have ordered. In the evening you are invited at a friend's place for dinner. You know that s/he has a car and while eating dinner you ask him/her if you could borrow it for a few hours. Although you know that your question has been heard and understood, your friend does not answer, but just goes on eating the meal in silence and after a few minutes starts talking about something else.

How do you interpret your friend's absence of response? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ as a rejection ☐ as consent to lend you the car
☐ as indecision/hesitation

How do you consider his/her behaviour in the situation? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

- (9) After work you are planning to stay home and spend the evening with your boyfriend/girlfriend. You decide to cook something and then watch a movie. After you two finished preparing the meal, your boyfriend/girlfriend falls silent and so you eat your dinner in silence.

How do you feel in this situation? Choose one of the options below.

- ☐ perfectly normal and comfortable ☐ uncomfortable
☐ awkward/embarrassed

Please give reasons for your choice.

How do you regard your boyfriend's/girlfriend's silence during dinner? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ impolite ☐ polite ☐ neutral

Please give reasons for your choice.

- (10) On a weekend evening you meet a friend whom you haven't seen for a couple of months. You have decided to watch a movie at the cinema. After having bought your tickets, you drink a coffee and chat about different things. Suddenly you hear a strange sound. After a few seconds you realise that s/he has just belched, because you see a bit of embarrassment in his/her face.

What would you do? Choose one of the following options:

- ☐ don't say anything about it and do as if you haven't noticed it
☐ make a joke about it

Why do you do that?

Personal background information about the respondent

Nationality:

Occupation:

Mother tongue: ☐ English ☐ German

Gender: ☐ male ☐ female

Age (years): ☐ 18 – 35 ☐ 36 – 60 ☐ 61-

Thank you very much for your contribution!

If you have any questions, please do not hesitate to contact me: veronika.karl@gmx.at.

Fragebogen für Diplomarbeit in Linguistik

Liebe Informanten,

Ich studiere Anglistik an der Universität Wien und bin gerade dabei, Daten für meine Diplomarbeit zu sammeln. In meiner Arbeit geht es um Stille in Kommunikation als Ausdrucksmittel von (Un)Höflichkeit, und im Rahmen dessen untersuche ich Einstellungen gegenüber Stille in Kommunikation. Ich wäre euch daher sehr dankbar, wenn ihr mir dabei mit der Beantwortung der folgenden Fragen helfen würdet.

Es sollte nicht länger als 10 bis 15 Minuten dauern, den Fragebogen auszufüllen. Bitte antwortet spontan und ehrlich. Richtige oder falsche Antworten gibt es nicht, da die Studie dazu dient, persönliche Einstellungen und kein Faktenwissen zu untersuchen. Eure Antworten sind anonym und werden für keinen anderen Zweck als für den empirischen Teil meiner Diplomarbeit verwendet.

Die meisten Fragen sind Multiple-Choice-Fragen bei denen ihr eine von mehreren Antwortmöglichkeiten auswählen und markieren sollt. Außerdem beinhaltet der Fragebogen auch einige offenen Fragen, die den MC-Fragen folgen und dem Zweck dienen, nähere Informationen über die Gründe eurer Wahl zu sammeln und euch die Möglichkeit geben, persönliche Kommentare hinzuzufügen.

Fragen

- (1) Nach ihrem Friseurtermin trifft Sarah (33) ihre Freundin Anna (32) in einem Kaffeehaus um ein wenig zu plaudern. Sarah gefällt ihr neuer Haarschnitt und sie erwartet sich einen positiven Kommentar von Anna dazu. Anna bemerkt den neuen Schnitt zwar sofort, aber ihr gefällt er ganz und gar nicht. Wenn Sarah schlussendlich fragt „Wie gefällt dir mein Haarschnitt?“, bleibt Anna zuerst still und ändert dann das Gesprächsthema.

Wie würdest du Annas Verhalten in diesem Gespräch beurteilen? Wähle bitte eine der folgenden Optionen:

☐ unhöflich ☐ höflich ☐ neutral

- (2) Johannes (20), Medizinstudent im 2. Jahr, erzählt seinem Bruder Markus (28), dass er sich dazu entschieden hat, das Studium abzubrechen und sich einen Job zu suchen, da er herausgefunden hat, dass er nicht bereit ist, die nächsten 6 Jahre oder mehr mit Studieren zu verbringen. Markus findet, dass Johannes' Entscheidung dumm und unreif ist und sagt ihm das auch. Johannes ist enttäuscht und gekränkt, und die beiden trennen sich.

Eine Woche später begegnen sie sich bei einer Familienfeier. Johannes ist noch immer gekränkt und erwartet eine Entschuldigung von seinem Bruder, weil dieser ihn ja beschimpft hat und nicht einmal versucht hat, seine Beweggründe zu verstehen. Markus glaubt immer noch, dass Johannes einen Fehler macht, und obwohl er weiß, dass Johannes eine Entschuldigung erwartet, ist er nicht gewillt, ihm diese zu geben. Er will aber während der Familienfeier keinen Streit verursachen und bleibt deswegen still in Johannes' Gegenwart.

Wie würdest du Markus' Entscheidung, still zu bleiben anstatt Johannes zu sagen, dass er sich definitiv nicht entschuldigen wird, bewerten? Bitte wähle eine der folgenden Antwortmöglichkeiten:

- ☐ höflich ☐ unhöflich ☐ neutral

- (3) Tom (35) arbeitet als Ingenieur in einem großen Unternehmen in der Wiener Innenstadt. Es ist Samstag und Tom ist am Weg zum Tennisclub, um dort seine Freizeit zu genießen. In der U-Bahn trifft er plötzlich Joseph (38), einen Arbeitskollegen. Beide sehen und grüßen einander. Tom und Joseph kennen sich nicht besonders gut und haben auch nicht viel miteinander zu tun. Nachdem sie „Hallo“ gesagt haben, stehen sie still nebeneinander bis einer von ihnen aussteigt.

Wie würdest du die Stille zwischen den beiden bewerten? Wähle bitte eine der folgenden Optionen:

- ☐ höflich ☐ unhöflich ☐ neutral

- (4) Julia (23) und Maria (22) studieren beide Englische Literatur. Sie besuchen den gleichen Kurs und kennen sich daher. Als sie beide vor dem Seminarraum darauf warten, dass die Lehrveranstaltung anfängt, beginnen sie ein Gespräch. Sie sprechen über ihren Professor, darüber was sie vom Kurs erwarten, und wie sie ihn soweit finden. Danach fällt ihnen allerdings kein Gesprächsthema mehr ein und sie werden still.

Wie würdest du die Stille in dieser Situation beschreiben? Wähle eine der folgenden Möglichkeiten:

- ☐ ganz normal und angenehm ☐ unangenehm
☐ komisch/peinlich

Wie würdest du in dieser Situation handeln? Bitte wähle eine dieser Optionen:

- ☐ Still nebeneinander sitzen bis der Kurs beginnt weil dir kein anderes Thema einfällt, worüber du wirklich Lust hast zu reden.
☐ Versuchen, ein anderes Gesprächsthema zu finden, und dann darüber zu reden, sei es zum Beispiel das Wetter, die Uni im Allgemeinen, oder andere Kurse.

- (5) Du bist gerade am Weg zu einem Freund. Während du im Bus sitzt, nimmt eine Frau neben dir Platz. Obwohl sie dich bemerkt, sagt sie nichts, und nach einiger Zeit steigt sie wortlos aus.

Wie würdest du das Verhalten der Frau bewerten? Wähle einer der folgenden Optionen:

- ☐ unhöflich ☐ höflich ☐ neutral

Wieso? Bitte nenne Gründe für deine Wahl.

- (6) Michael (28) hat erst kürzlich seine Doktorarbeit abgeschlossen und seine letzte Prüfung im Doktorstudium absolviert. Er ist sehr stolz auf seine Leistung. Eine Woche nach seiner Prüfung trifft er sich mit seinem Freund Peter (31) in einer Bar, um ein Bier zu trinken und zu plaudern. Peter weiß, dass Michael Grund zum Feiern hätte weil er sein Studium beendet hat. Nichtsdestotrotz und obwohl Michael sich erwarten würde, dass Peter ihm zumindest zu seinem Titel gratuliert, verliert dieser kein Wort darüber, weil er das persönlich als keine große Leistung erachtet. Nach der Begrüßung und einem Moment der Stille beginnt er über ein anderes Thema zu sprechen.

Wie würdest du Peters Verhalten in dieser Situation bewerten? Wähle eine der folgenden Möglichkeiten:

- ☐ unhöflich ☐ höflich ☐ neutral

Wieso hast du diese Option gewählt? Nenne bitte Gründe dafür.

- (7) Kathrin (26) und Marcel (27) sind seit über einem Jahr ein Paar. Da sie denken, es sei nun an der Zeit, dass sich die Eltern der beiden endlich kennen lernen, arrangieren sie ein 3-Gänge-Abendessen für sie. Der Abend beginnt ganz gut: Kathrins und Marcells Eltern begrüßen einander, tauschen ein paar Worte aus, und setzen sich an den Tisch. Kathrin und Marcel sind zwar nervös, aber auch froh, dass das Essen soweit so gut läuft. Nachdem der erste Gang vorüber ist, scheint es aber plötzlich als wären die Gesprächsthemen erschöpft, und es breitet sich Stille im Raum aus.

Wie würdest du diese Situation empfinden, wenn du an Kathrins und Marcells Stelle wärest? Bitte wähle eine der folgenden Optionen:

- ☐ ganz normal und angenehm ☐ unangenehm
☐ komisch/peinlich

Kannst du deine Wahl begründen/näher erläutern?

- (8) Stelle dir vor, du besitzt kein Auto, aber du brauchst dringend eines um die neue Kommode abzuholen, die du bestellt hast. Am Abend bist du bei einem Freund zum Essen eingeladen. Du weißt, dass er ein Auto hat, und während dem Essen fragst du

ihn, ob er es dir für ein paar Stunden leihen würde. Obwohl du dir sicher bist, dass er deine Frage gehört und verstanden hat, antwortet er nicht, sondern isst sein Abendessen in Stille weiter und beginnt dann nach einigen Minuten wieder über etwas anderes zu sprechen.

Wie würdest du die ausbleibende verbale Antwort auf deine Frage interpretieren? Bitte wähle eine der folgenden Möglichkeiten:

- ☐ Ablehnung/Verweigerung
- ☐ Zusage/Einwilligung
- ☐ Unentschiedenheit

Wie würdest du sein Verhalten in dieser Situation bewerten? Wähle eine der folgenden Optionen:

- ☐ unhöflich
- ☐ höflich
- ☐ neutral

- (9) Nach der Arbeit hast du vor, gemütlich zu Hause zu bleiben und den Abend mit deinem Freund/deiner Freundin zu verbringen. Ihr beide entscheidet, zuerst etwas gemeinsam zu kochen und danach einen Film zu sehen. Nachdem ihr das Essen fertig zubereitet habt, wird dein Freund/deine Freundin still und so verspeist ihr wortlos euer Abendessen.

Wie würdest du diese Situation empfinden? Wähle bitte eine der folgenden Antwortmöglichkeiten:

- ☐ ganz normal und angenehm
- ☐ unangenehm
- ☐ komisch/peinlich

Begründe/erläutere bitte deine Wahl.

Wie würdest du die Stille deines Freundes/deiner Freundin während dem Essen bewerten? Wähle eine der folgenden Optionen:

- ☐ unhöflich
- ☐ höflich
- ☐ neutral

Begründe/erläutere bitte deine Antwort.

- (10) An einem Abend am Wochenende triffst du dich mit einer Freundin, die du seit Monaten nicht gesehen hast. Ihr habt entschieden, einen Film im Kino zu sehen. Nachdem ihr die Karten gekauft habt, trinkt ihr einen Kaffee und plaudert über verschiedenste Dinge. Plötzlich nimmst du ein eigenartiges Geräusch wahr. Ein paar Sekunden später wird dir klar, dass deine Freundin gerülpst hat, da ihr Gesichtsausdruck einen Hauch von Peinlichkeit verrät.

Was würdest du in dieser Situation tun? Bitte wähle eine der folgenden Möglichkeiten:

- ☐ nichts sagen und so tun als ob du es nicht bemerkt hättest
- ☐ einen Scherz darüber machen

Wieso würdest du dich für diese Möglichkeit entscheiden?

Persönliche Hintergrundinformation über Informanten/innen

Nationalität:

Beruf:

Muttersprache: ☐ Englisch ☐ Deutsch

Geschlecht: ☐ männlich ☐ weiblich

Alter (Jahre): ☐ 18 – 35 ☐ 36 – 60

☐ 61 –

Vielen Dank für die Mitarbeit!

Für etwaige Fragen stehe ich gerne zur Verfügung: veronika.karl@gmx.at.

Appendix 3: English abstract

In their well-known work on politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987) have alleged that silence is the most polite strategy to do a face-threatening-act. But is this claim really valid? Can silence be generally viewed as polite? There seems to be considerable uncertainty and disagreement on this issue. This research project deals precisely with this topic, and it attempts at answering the previous question. The thesis focuses on the relationship between politeness and silence in communication. It investigates how silence is used and whether it is considered polite or impolite. Thereby, it takes on a cross-cultural view and compares examples of different cultures with respect to their use and evaluation of silence in communication.

The theoretical part of this thesis presents and discusses the most influential theories on politeness in language and the main ideas about silence in communication. Moreover, one section is dedicated to the observation of how silence is used and evaluated in different cultures. Selected studies investigating silence and other aspects of communication are analysed. The empirical part of this thesis consists of a survey targeting English- and German native speakers. It provides information about attitudes towards silence in particular situations, and compares the results of these two language groups.

The findings of both the theoretical and the empirical part of this project indicate that there is no straightforward answer to the initial question. Whether silence is regarded as polite or impolite in communication depends on a range of factors, such as context, culture, relationship between the interlocutors, and individual attitude. This research highlights the relativity of such concepts like *politeness*, and demonstrates the diversity of the different functions silence can fulfil. Furthermore, it emphasises the complexity of the relationship between silence and politeness in communication, and shows that no general claims can be made about whether silence is assessed as polite or impolite.

Appendix 4: German summary/ Deutsche Zusammenfassung

Titel: Schweigen in unterschiedlichen Kulturen als Ausdrucksmittel von (Un)Höflichkeit

Brown und Levinson (*Politeness* 1987) haben in ihrem bekannten Werk über Höflichkeit die Behauptung aufgestellt, dass Schweigen die höflichste Art und Weise sei, einen ‚gesichtsbedrohenden Akt‘ (face-threatening-act) zu vollziehen. Da laut ihnen jeder kommunikative Akt potentiell gesichtsbedrohend ist, erweckt die Aussage den Eindruck, dass Schweigen in Kommunikation generell als höflich erachtet werden kann. Nun liegt die Frage sehr nahe ob dieses Argument wirklich stichhaltig ist. Kann man sagen, dass Schweigen im Allgemeinen als höflich bewertet wird? Eine Reihe von Wissenschaftlern hat sich mit dem Thema *Höflichkeit und Sprache* beschäftigt, und genauso wie es in diesem Bereich verschiedene Theorien und Modelle gibt, herrschen auch kontroverse Ansichten über die Beziehung zwischen Schweigen und Höflichkeit vor. Die vorliegende Diplomarbeit beschäftigt sich daher genau mit diesem Thema und versucht, eine Antwort auf die oben gestellte Frage zu finden. Die Aspekte *Höflichkeit* und *Schweigen in Kommunikation* werden näher untersucht und danach in Relation zueinander gesetzt. Zudem wird dabei eine kulturübergreifende und kulturvergleichende Sichtweise angewendet.

Der theoretische Teil dieser Arbeit stellt die einflussreichsten Theorien über sprachliche Höflichkeit und die wichtigsten Ideen rund um das Thema *Schweigen in Kommunikation* vor, und betrachtet diese kritisch. Ein eigenes Kapitel widmet sich dem Gebrauch und der Bewertung von Schweigen in verschiedenen Kulturkreisen. Dabei werden ausgewählte Studien über Kommunikation in einzelnen Kulturen analysiert. Der empirische Teil besteht aus einer Befragung, welche Informationen über persönlichen Einstellungen gegenüber Schweigen und Höflichkeit liefert. Dabei werden zwei spezielle Sprachgruppen untersucht und verglichen: Deutsche und Englische Muttersprachler.

Die Erkenntnisse aus beiden Teilen der Diplomarbeit weisen darauf hin, dass es keine eindeutige Antwort auf obige Frage gibt. Ob Schweigen nun als höflich oder unhöflich erachtet wird, hängt von einer Reihe von Faktoren ab, wie Kontext, Kultur, Beziehung der Gesprächspartner, und individuelle Einstellung. Diese Arbeit unterstreicht die Relativität von Konzepten wie *Höflichkeit* in Sprache, und zeigt die Vielfältigkeit an Funktionen auf, die Schweigen in Kommunikation erfüllen kann. Außerdem betont sie die Komplexität der Beziehung zwischen Schweigen und Höflichkeit, und stellt fest, dass es nicht möglich ist, generelle Aussagen darüber zu tätigen, ob Schweigen als höflich oder unhöflich bewertet wird.

Appendix 5: Curriculum vitae

Angaben zur Person

Name: Veronika KARL
Geburtsdatum: 09.12.1985
Geburtsort: Trinec (CZ)
Geschlecht: weiblich
Staatsangehörigkeit: Österreich

Ausbildung

Datum	Name und Ort der Ausbildungseinrichtung	Hauptfächer/berufliche Fähigkeiten	Bezeichnung der erworbenen Qualifikationen
seit Oktober 2005	Universität Wien	Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik	bei Abschluss Magistra der Philosophie
September 2008- Jänner 2009	University of Aberdeen (UK)	English language studies, Spanish	Auslandssemester
Oktober 2004 – Juni 2005	Medizinische Universität Wien	Studium der Humanmedizin	
September 1996 – Juni 2004	Bundesgymnasium Wieselburg/Erlauf		Matura
September 1992 – Juni 1996	Volksschule Wieselburg/Erlauf		

Berufserfahrung

Datum	Art der Beschäftigung	Arbeitsbezeichnung	Unternehmen & Ort
seit Dezember 2010	Verkauf & Administration Personalwerbung	Assistentin des Verkaufsleiters	<i>Catro Media</i> 1030 Wien
Februar 2010 – Juni 2010	Administration, Öffentlichkeitsarbeit	Assistentin	<i>Media Pros GmbH & Waris Dirie Foundation</i> 1030 Wien
seit November 2009	Übersetzung (Deutsch-Englisch)	Übersetzerin	<i>Sensix AG</i> 1150 Wien
März 2009 – April 2010	Nachhilfe	Englisch-Nachhilfelehrerin	<i>Mobile Nachhilfe</i> Wien
2004 - 2009	Service	Kellnerin, Eisverkäuferin	<i>Konditorei Reschinsky</i> 3250 Wieselburg
Sommer 2003	Kinderbetreuung	Kindergarten-Assistentin	<i>Kinderfreunde</i> 1020 Wien