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# Communicating the cultural richness of Finnish *hiljaisuus* (silence)

**Abstract:** Our cultural lenses can blind us not only to other cultures but also to what we take for granted in our own culture. Thus, we are often unaware of *how* and *why* our cultural background can easily lead to a biased interpretation of others, and we are also often unaware of how even a high level of competence in a foreign language might fail to communicate our cultural meanings to others.

This article offers a Finnish pedagogical case study in which there are pragmatic examples of the movement from becoming aware of Finnish cultural richness, often invisible to self and others, towards development of competence to communicate what had been hidden from self and others. Two pragmatic examples demonstrate how students became aware of Finnish communication norms related to positive Finnish silence and also developed some competence to communicate their cultural richness via semantic alternatives rather than direct dictionary translation. One example highlights the value of turning local and exchange students into important academic resources in an intercultural communication course, and the other draws attention to the importance of creating new exercises when there were no “why silence” questions from exchange students during a course. Both these examples demonstrate the importance of students learning via experience and teachers learning from students.

**Keywords:** Finnish silence, cultural richness, language, awareness, response able, ethnographic learning

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## 1 Introduction

Reference to culture carries multiple meanings. Here I will briefly introduce the concepts of “culture” and “cultural richness” in my courses. Culture is understood to be a combination of visible social diversity within the society (personalities, social contexts, regional subcultures, etc.) and often invisible,

taken-for-granted, shared frames of reference related to social norms, practices and values in the society. Therefore, culture is embedded in something shared for cohering diversity, e.g., the taken-for-granted relationship between language, values and social practices. *Cultural richness*, which is discussed in Section 3.2, is understood in this article to mean *cultural presence that works in a positive social way* (Berry 2011). Awareness of cultural richness comes via discovery of “rich points”: integrated webs of associations and connotations that are familiar, if subconsciously, to local residents but often hidden from others. Hence, the roots of the meanings in words like *silent* and *shy*, which are used by Finns to describe Finnish *hiljaisuus* (‘silence’), often remain invisible both to Finns and to others.

Dictionaries play a very important, even essential, role in language learning. Nevertheless, deep cultural meanings embedded in the native language, which have been translated into another language, can be overshadowed by the social frames of reference in other cultures. If we look at the example of unique Finnish *hiljaisuus* (‘silence’), the positive sides of silence in the Finnish mind are rarely, if ever, made explicit in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish dictionaries. Why?

Dictionaries are created and often read via the prism of the readers’ taken-for-granted cultural depth which does not overlap very much with Finnish *comfort with silence*. Thus, communication of the cultural richness of Finnish silence requires creation of semantic clusters of words/phrases that can be integrated into sentences to communicate the positive sides of *Finnish silence*, e.g., respecting others, listening, interested, etc. Teachers and students alike can benefit from double checking to see if their reliance on “proper” grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation is communicating their cultural meanings to others. This article focuses on a Finnish intercultural communication challenge while never denying the importance of grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation in foreign language learning.

Plurilingualism is very important (Schlabach and Boström 2011), just as bilingual/bicultural competence. Nevertheless, when any foreign language is being used as a shared international language, we face the challenges often associated with English as a lingua franca. Regardless of whether the shared language in multicultural contexts is English, French, German, Russian, Spanish, etc., there are often *invisible misunderstandings* hiding the *multiculturalism* in the shared international language. A *false friend*, e.g. reference to Finnish silence in English, is interpreted here to be a *risk word*, the exact same word in a foreign language that can rarely communicate one’s deep cultural meanings to others. We are often unaware of how we and others implicitly translate back into our respective cultures via our mother tongue.

Developing some competence to communicate one's taken-for-granted cultural richness to others is a universal challenge when every culture has its own deep taken-for-granted ways of living and communicating. Hence, a combination of language and intercultural communication learning is essential for coping with sensitive cultural misunderstandings: movement from *"that's not me"* to *"now we can communicate and understand each other better"* in all multicultural contexts.

## 2 Finnish silence: myth or reality?

I will start with a statement from a Finnish student's reflective essay: "Silence is not silence, even if the dictionary convinces us so!" This discovery represents a step forward after Kari Sajavaara and Jaakko Lehtonen raised the following question: Finnish silence: myth or reality?

The terminology [in English] may be highly misleading depending on the type of culture that it is applied to. [If misinterpretation is from the outside], it is understandable that the result is misguided. Yet, one of the dilemmas in all this is that at the same time the insider is also incapable of seeing his or her true nature as a communicator. (Sajavaara and Lehtonen 1997: 278–79)

The insights of Sajavaara and Lehtonen raise questions related to what is missing in language learning. Is it the language itself (grammar, vocabulary and pronunciation) or communication competence related to using a shared international language?

The integration of all these goals into language learning has been made explicit during talkback comments in *IATEFL Voices* (Tarnopolsky 2011). After I realized that Kari Sajavaara and Jaakko Lehtonen had planted the seeds, I asked Sajavaara: "How can we get rid of the word silence?" His response: "Your job." My silent response over time: "I'll learn from Finnish students." I would never learn how to get rid of the word silence, as Sajavaara suggested. Nevertheless, ways to move beyond reference to silence came to the surface step by step (Sections 4 and 5; Appendix 1).

In Section 4, discovery with exchange students, and Section 5, discovery without exchange students, there are three important questions for both the students and teachers to reflect on: (1) Are we aware of our deep cultural richness? Possible response: not often because it is often taken for granted. (2) Does our deep cultural richness lead to communication challenges? Possible response: yes, more often than we realize. (3) Can we rely on a "proper" foreign language to

communicate our cultural richness to others? Possible response: sometimes but not often.

## 3 The role of theory and language

### 3.1 Role of theory during the development process

Here I will briefly introduce theoretical frames of reference that brought awareness of what was happening even before being exposed to theories. I began as a teacher who simply enjoyed learning from students. Over time I discovered that I had been following Max Van Manen's interplay between integrated teaching-research activities, e.g., the teacher being highly motivated to learn from students; learning via experience; reflecting on patterns; (re)framing patterns; discussing experience with others outside the classroom; and discovering the relationship between parts and the whole (Van Manen 1990). That awareness created an interest in analyzing my experience.

As I moved towards a focus on intercultural communication, I benefited from the ethnographic insights of Michael Agar (1991, 1994, 1996), Pierre Bourdieu (1991), Donal Carbaugh (1990, 1996, 2005, Michael Byram (1997), Clifford Geertz (1973), John Gumperz (1982, 2001), Dell Hymes (1972a, 1972b, 1974, 1996), Claire Kramsch (1998), Gerry Philipsen (1987, 1992, 1997), Muriel Saville-Troike (1989), Ron Scollon (1985), and Anna Wierzbicka (1997, 2004). Over time awareness of a whole-part relationship between particular word-images and the larger systems of practice of which they are a part (Carbaugh et al. 1997) played an important role. Local ways of living and communicating (Hymes 1972a, 1972b, 1996) can carry risk with them embedded in the words they use in intercultural contexts (Carbaugh: 2005: Ch. 8). Cooperation with Donal Carbaugh (Carbaugh and Berry 2001; Carbaugh et al. 2006) opened the door to understanding the relationship between theories and what was happening in my courses after I had created simple hands-on metaphors in my courses that overlapped, to some extent, with the academic literature above (Berry 2009: Ch. 3). Berry (2012b) offers more ethnographic frames of reference.

### 3.2 The relation between language and cultural richness

In every moment of silence and talk there are visible and invisible moments related to personality, roles in different contexts, and social norms within a culture.

The relationship between language, communication, and social relations is interpreted in different ways within but especially across cultures. Therefore, an invisible *relationship between local language and cultural richness* can influence the challenge of communicating cultural meanings across cultures in a foreign language. Regardless of one's linguistic competence in foreign languages, the meanings in the words/phrases being used are rooted in one's native language which is embedded in one's culture.

Awareness of “cultural richness” comes to the surface via discovery of “rich points”. Perplexity can lead to the discovery of rich points via an ethnographic framing process. Michael Agar's concept of rich points is closely linked to the examples in this article. Rich points “can be rich [ . . . ] because of the intricate web of associations and connotations that they carry with them, webs that have no corresponding echoes in [one's] own language” (Agar 1994: 232).

Rich points can be terms of expression (and other means of communication) ranging from lexical items to basic premises, which invoke deep and complex feelings and values that people implicitly claim as their own, and are difficult, at least initially, to translate for and communicate to people from other cultural spheres of coherence. They are readily familiar, if subconsciously, in the speech communities of the cultural actors but the absence of overlap in dense cultural meanings can remain invisible in the intercultural groups. The meanings are attached deeply to the interactants' spheres of coherence. If understood at all in other speech communities, rich points typically have a different range of meanings and can be understood in other speech communities as sending significantly different messages. (Berry et al. 2009: 64–65).

## 4 Discovery with exchange students

### 4.1 Pragmatic learning space

Adrian Holliday's (1994, 1996) encouragement for teachers to become ethnographers and B. Kumaravadivelu's (1994: 33) vision of teachers as “creators of learning opportunities and utilisers of learning opportunities created by learners” were supportive of the learning environment. The goal of the intercultural communication courses has been to help students better understand how and why they (mis)interpret themselves and others. During more than a decade approximately 50 Finnish and 60 exchange students participated each year in introductory intercultural communication courses for business students at the Turku School of Economics. Students from across the Atlantic were also involved in e-mail exchange with these students (Berry et al. 2006). The courses began with creation of multicultural groups of 5–7 students who were initially confused when

they were given autonomous responsibility to become teacher-learners of each other.

As the students responded to the teacher's springboards, they sent reflective essays to group members after each group discussion, created their own springboards, and led the teacher forward as he coached from the sidelines – sometimes getting students back on track by sharing examples of his experience when learning from students during previous courses. As the non-native speakers moved back and forth between English and their native languages to discover cultural meanings “back home”, they began to realize that the teacher was “right” when he had told them that they could become privileged intercultural communicators in English, compared with the native speakers of English. It was not uncommon for the native speakers of English in a course to realize that they were “underprivileged” when English was the shared international language.

During a *reflection-on-reflection* learning experience the students become aware of a new way to interpret the lexical term “responsibility”: *it creates opportunity to become response able* – ability to respond in an appropriate/reasonable way for self and others (Berry 2011). Springboards are exercises, discussions and questions related to values, identity, and ways of living and communicating. For example, to what extent will the agreement we made at a personal level in English be interpreted in the same way via the languages of our group's three cultures? Students are encouraged to openly and politely make reference to any aspects of their cultures and other cultures that they find positive or might find confusing for self or others. Positive interpretations of Finnish cleanliness and Finland's nature are often initially emphasized by both Finnish and exchange students. On the other hand, perplexity comes to the surface when exchange students are confused about Finnish silence and Finnish agreement that “we are silent/shy” people.

This learning approach contributes to becoming “response able” with sensitive cultural issues, e.g. Finnish silence, as students are coached to create a *shared third space*: a semi-coherent “social space, inhabited by people in motion, in interaction and in transformation” (Kelly 2001: 56). During this process students create shared frames of reference in order to explore the diversity and commonality of their taken-for-granted cultural assumptions about self and others. As they create “local internationalization”, a shared learning environment, group members work together using a shared international language to discover *where*, *how* and *why* cultural overlap ends and difference begins when dealing with social relationships in their respective cultures (Berry 2011).

Michael Byram (1997: 12) sums up the pedagogical goal related to students learning through experience: “The [. . .] desirable outcome is a learner with the

ability to see and manage the relationships between themselves and their own cultural beliefs, behaviors and meanings, as expressed in a foreign language, and those of their interlocutors, expressed in the same language.” Theoretical insights brought awareness of what I had learned and should share with others, but the key support has come from students who have been my teachers. Many of the examples in this article are taken from “*That’s not me*”: *Learning to cope with sensitive cultural issues* (Berry 2009).

## 4.2 Is silence only negative?

There is a clear consensus among Finnish students that everyone can benefit from developing some more small-talk competence, and some students with different personal and/or regional backgrounds can feel uncomfortable with the silence of other Finns in some social contexts. They might prefer more verbal interaction than others in those situations while being unaware of their own taken-for-granted comfort with silence/quietness in other contexts. Hence, they rarely, if ever, know how to explain the positive sides of Finnish silence to others. Students in the courses had linguistic competence in English but were often unaware of their missing competence for discovering, interpreting and communicating cultural meanings. Thus, the courses focused on helping students use their language skills to better interpret and communicate often invisible cultural meanings in their languages and the languages of others.

Over time the courses achieved partial success at the stages related to discovering and interpreting multiple cultural meanings. During this process the intercultural courses have often been full of comfort as students enjoyed learning from each other. Nevertheless, any reference to Finnish silence often brought confusion and discomfort to the surface. Finding ways to cope with discomfort related to Finnish silence often continued to be an intercultural challenge. For example, one talkative Finn in a Finnish-German group talked to the teacher after class – “they just don’t understand and keep talking about Finnish silence” (Berry et al. 2009: 47). She hoped that the teacher would find a way to avoid reference to silence in group discussions. The next session included an exercise in which the students created and discussed examples from everyday life related to feeling comfortable and uncomfortable when talking or being silent in different contexts.

After the exercise the students better understood the how and why related to cultural divergence and overlap. The clearest absence of cultural overlap came from examples of *comfort with silence*. Most of the exchange students were comfortable when they knew they should not talk, e.g., in a church, a library, during

a concert, when listening to something very interesting, etc. Of course, Finns also feel comfortable with silence in those contexts. Nevertheless, Finnish students mainly referred to comfort with silence when having nothing meaningful to say, when alone or with others in nature, when in one's own thoughts even if surrounded by others, when communicating non-verbally with others, etc. After doing the exercise, the Finnish discomfort and the German confusion faded away in that group.

Several years later the teacher discovered a new approach for helping students explain the positive sides of Finnish silence when a Finnish student told the European and American exchange students in his multicultural group that being silent was negative in Finland. Even if the other Finns in his intercultural group did not initially agree with him, everyone in the group agreed that silence is negative after a couple of weeks. The teacher then asked the student to describe a *harkitsevainen* Finn to the exchange students. His response: a *harkitsevainen* person listens and thinks while others are talking but also talks when it is one's turn to talk and feels s/he has something meaningful to share with others. The teacher then asked if an *ujo* ('shy') person could be *harkitsevainen*. His response: yes but not always. (See Appendix 1 and 2.)

The student then explained that he had ignored his respect for being *harkitsevainen*. He wanted Finns to be more talkative and had been trapped by a "too silent/too shy" negative semantic frame of reference which is rather common when Finns talk among themselves about silence. The exchange students then realized that he was *harkitsevainen* and also the group member who was often talkative when they asked questions about Finns (Berry et al. 2009: 87–88). This example of initial failure to communicate the cultural richness of Finnish silence is rather common when Finns are explaining Finnish silence to others.

### 4.3 Through cultural "bottlenecks" to bi-directional dialogue

Our taken-for-granted cultural roots are somewhat similar to roots in nature. For example, trees grow with roots that continue to influence the role of the branches and leaves. To grow means to adjust to the natural environment, which is a relationship between the environment inside and outside the soil. Trees can be replanted in different places. After the transplant they sometimes take advantage of new natural environments and sometimes the adjustment is difficult or unsuccessful.

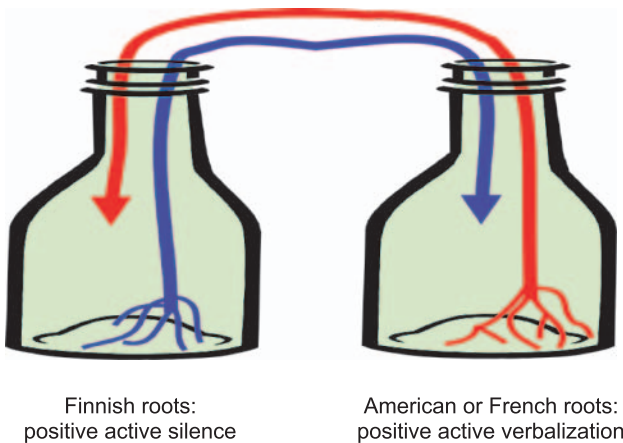
Human beings grow up in an environment in which one learns to become a socially acceptable person by communicating and acting in ways that others ex-



pect. Thus, people have their own cultural roots and personal experiences, which are often taken for granted. Unlike trees, human beings who are also cultural beings can benefit from watering and fertilizing their roots in different cultural environments. In some cases, a person is also influenced by in-depth experience in more than one culture.

The more a person has experienced different cultural environments, the more different kinds of roots are influencing him/her in intercultural contexts. For example, a French student who grew up in France with her Chinese family discovered during a course that her interpretation of language usage related to cultural meanings was influenced in different ways when at home with the family or out on the street with native French colleagues. Here I will only offer less complicated examples of more than a decade of learning from Finnish and French exchange students, as well as American students communicating via e-mail during English language courses.

There are always communication challenges even when relying on the native language within one's own culture ("bottle" here). Communicating with a foreign language through one's own bottleneck and also through the bottleneck of others is even more complex (Du-Babcock et al. 2008), especially when coping with misunderstood cultural richness across cultures. Movement through the bottleneck



*Movement from taken-for-granted roots deep in one's cultural experience through the bottlenecks of one's own culture and the culture of others*

**Fig. 1:** Communication through cultural "bottlenecks"

of one's own culture via awareness of the roots deep in one's culture as well as communication through the cultural bottleneck of others became an important goal that the teacher was initially unaware of.

As one Finnish student made explicit, communicating the cultural richness of our silence is not easy because others do not hear or see positive active Finnish silence. Nevertheless, questions and answers with examples can take us forward. When Finnish and exchange students became teacher-learners of each other, semantic alternatives for reference to silence came to the surface via questions about the how and why in their ways of acting and communicating. For example, silence can mean actively listening and respecting others while others are talking. More in-depth examples are available in Section 6 and Appendix 1. Getting through Finnish cultural bottlenecks can lead to discovery of ways to help others interpret one's message better via their own bottlenecks. This is an important point to emphasize. Regardless of the culture, there is little hope that *outsiders* will understand local cultural richness until the *insiders* get through their cultural bottlenecks and use language in such a way that it communicates through the *outsiders'* bottlenecks.

Here is a sum-up of American, French and Finnish movement through their cultural bottlenecks into the cultural bottlenecks of others. (1) *American students*: Now we begin to realize how uncomfortable we are with silence and how we misinterpreted Finnish comfort with silence. We thought that Finns are silent to hide feelings but, thanks to their questions, we now realize that sometimes we talk to hide our feelings. Our feelings are often openly on our sleeves and we think maybe Finnish feelings are hidden, at least from us, deep in their faces. Our remedy to connect people via small talk might interfere with a Finnish respect for shared privacy and having meaningful conversation. Our sense of openness is free expression of feelings but a Finnish sense of openness seems to be more connected to not hiding important information from others who need it. We engage in small talk to get the talking going and hopefully end up with meaningful talk. In contrast Finns tend to talk when they really have something to say.

(2) *French students*: Now we begin to understand that Finns are comfortable with silence before talking and that they show interest by listening. Once we began to understand the positive sides of their *active listening* silence, we became aware of and explained how our active interruption was a way to show interest in our culture. We cannot learn to be like the Finns but we feel better now that we have learned about Finnish comfort with silence. We feel very good about how we can rely on what Finns say, because Finns make a promise when they say they will do something without using the word promise. In France we highly respect a person who listens before talking. Now we know that a Finn who is not talking

very much by our standards might also be the person we should respect the most. Can we act on that interpretation?

(3) *Finnish students*: One of the most interesting things during the course was to realize that our silence is actually quite a complex concept, which is considerably hard to explain when using the English term silence. “*Silence is not silence, even if the dictionary convinces us so!*” There are many things that we understand and can act on now: Now, we understand both how American and French openness to verbalize togetherness had closed the door to understanding our comfort with silence and how our comfort with silence had closed the door to understanding the positive sides of their “openness”. Now, we can acknowledge that we have negative sides of silence and that we could benefit from a little more small talk, but *we should no longer just say we are silent, shy people who do not talk enough*. Now, we are aware of the cultural richness of positive Finnish silence and ways to get through our cultural bottleneck. If others raise questions because they do not hear or notice the positive sides of our Finnish silence, e.g., showing respect, listening, being interested, etc., we can give examples from everyday life as we try to communicate our cultural richness via their cultural bottlenecks. In short, we have to be aware of the importance of positive silence in Finland, and also must use language in such a way that we can communicate via the cultural bottleneck of others. “I’m off to France in the spring and hope I can learn to interrupt others.”

This process of getting through one’s cultural bottleneck and communicating through the bottleneck of others can come when looking in the mirror together and responding to key questions: (1) What message did I/you (would I/you) want to communicate in this or that social context? (2) How did I/you (would I/you) act/talk/communicate non-verbally to send this/that message in this or that context? (3) Why did I/you (would I/you) communicate this/that message and why in this way? (4) What is there in me that makes it difficult to understand the other’s ways of communicating and acting? (5) What is there in the logic of the other’s ways of communicating and acting that are hidden from me? (6) *How can we help each other ask and answer these kinds of questions?* The sixth question makes explicit that intercultural competence requires bi-directional competence: not only better understand others but also have competence to lead others through the same process. Insiders and outsiders need to help each other ask and answer these questions. Therefore, cooperative teaching across cultures and learning by local “insiders” and stranger “outsiders” provides an opportunity to turn students into rich academic resources who can teach each other much more than the teacher can ever teach them.

Looking in the mirror together led to awareness of multiple social and personal dimensions of Finnish silence, e.g., positive active, positive relaxing, and negative active/passive silence in different contexts (more information in

Section 5). All of these examples of Finnish silence came to the surface when Finnish and exchange students learned from each other about their cultural richness that they had initially taken for granted. The students also learned about the cultural richness of others that they had misinterpreted. Controllable confrontation full of so-called stupid questions can bring both responsibility and opportunity for intercultural communication learning to the surface. As mentioned earlier, responsibility and opportunity are integrated when responsibility is interpreted to mean *response able*: ability to respond in an appropriate/reasonable way for self and others.

## 5 Student discovery without exchange students

A new semantic approach for communicating *hiljaisuus* ('silence') came to the surface during an American Culture course with only Finnish students. Students were placed in autonomous groups of 5–7 to discuss how they understood the similarities and differences between Americans and Finns. There were two goals in the course: how to better explain Finnish ways of living and communicating to Americans and to better understand the “logic” of American ways as the teacher shared information about American social, economic and political realities. This approach could contribute to preparing them for team building in an American-Finnish context.

After the students read about the learning experiences of Finnish students in intercultural groups similar to those in Section 4, they all agreed with the examples given by Finnish students. Regardless of the agreement with the text in the book that the Finnish students had read (“*That’s not me*”: *Learning to cope with sensitive cultural issues* [Berry 2008: Ch. 2]), they were trapped during the course by the absence of *why silent* questions from exchange students. They had become aware of their cultural richness during the course, but were not yet aware of how to move out through their cultural bottlenecks and through the bottlenecks of Americans. They continued to refer to silent Finns during their group discussions without making explicit the positive sides of Finnish silence. Agreeing that comfort with silence is a *natural way to be* can fall short of communicating the positive side of silence to others *uncomfortable with Finnish silence*.

The teacher had been a *privileged learner* during courses with Finnish and exchange students as well as Finnish-American team building across the Atlantic. Why? During those courses examples of semantic alternatives for explaining positive silence had emerged over time. He had also become a *spoiled ethnographic* coach who gradually realized that students could also be his teachers when they created awareness that his traditional discovery approach did not work in a dif-

ferent learning context. While discussing the challenge of helping students communicate to others that something positive is often happening in their minds when they are silent, Marjatta Nurmikari-Berry, the creator of the concept “grammar of quietude” (Berry et al. 2008: 48), suggested reference to *active silence*. Over time reference was also made to *relaxing silence*. After two decades of out-of-class discussions, we realized: “better late than never”.

The out-of-class learning led to creation of a semantic exercise during which the Finnish students were asked to move back and forth between Finnish and English rather than mainly think and talk in English during their group discussions. Here are the guidelines for the exercise: “*Think in Finnish* and list words/phrases in Finnish that you relate to positive active silence, positive relaxing silence, negative active silence and negative passive silence.” Once the Finnish list was ready, it was relatively easy for the students to create a similar list in English. The results led to the creation of four categories of Finnish *hiljaisuus* (‘silence’) in Appendix 5 of the second edition of *That’s not me* (Berry 2009). We must keep in mind, however, that drawing a line between so-called categories is similar to drawing a line in water. Nevertheless, the image in Figure 2 was created in the leading Finnish newspaper *Helsingin Sanomat* (HS May 17, 2009: D7).

Here I will introduce a short list of English words and phrases semantically associated with *hiljainen* (‘silent’)/*hiljaisuus* (‘silence’) in the four categories. The examples overlap with the semantic meanings in the four categories and are listed separately rather than as translated options. (1) *Myönteinen aktiivinen hiljaisuus* (‘positive active silence’): willing to wait, listening carefully, focused on something, showing interest, communicating without words, being polite, being in one’s own thoughts, respecting and giving private space to others, thinking (hard), calm; (2) *Myönteinen passiivinen hiljaisuus* (‘positive relaxing silence’). The examples overlap with the semantic meanings of “in harmony with oneself”, e.g., in nature, in sauna, when observing or feeling something wonderful, when communicating non-verbally with others, calm, peaceful, enjoyable, relaxed, take it easy, interested. (3) *Kielteinen passiivinen hiljaisuus* (‘negative passive silence’): no respect, dull, bored, indifferent, depressed, apathetic, too reserved, difficult to handle, not letting anyone close, exhausted. (4) *Kielteinen aktiivinen hiljaisuus* (‘negative active silence’): cannot tell anyone, sulking, selfish, not talk enough, rude, impolite, no respect.

To sum up these semantic clusters, being too silent/shy can definitely carry negative meanings in Finnish culture. In contrast, *relaxing silence* is one important natural way to be and Finnish socially *positive active silence* integrates Finnish comfort with both being silent and talking.

This semantic approach is important regardless of the foreign language used by Finns. The Unit for Languages and Business Communication in the School



Fig. 2: Multiple meanings of Finnish silence

of Economics at the University of Turku is moving towards integrating modified versions of this approach into Finnish, French, German, Russian and Spanish courses. The HS picture can now play an important role in waking up students. After teachers introduce students to the HS picture, they can give them semantic examples and then share sentences in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish. All the examples can be used in modified ways depending on the linguistic competence of the students and the time frame in a course (Appendix 1).

## 6 Conclusion

I will end this article with an example of a student's reflection after the American Cultural Course.

Before starting the American culture-course, I was aware that Americans tend to feel a little uncomfortable and confused when being around silent people. However, I had never really thought about why that was the case. I had only interpreted the matter from my personal Finnish point of view. I used to think that Americans were really weird to be bothered by silence and I couldn't understand why they didn't appreciate all the great aspects of silence. I had taken the positive sides of quietude for granted and I thought anyone who didn't notice them must be out of his mind! I made the common mistake of assuming that the things that are appreciated in my culture should be common ideals in other places, too. During the course I realized that the characteristics that Finns consider positive can be completely misinterpreted in different cultures. When I show my interest by listening carefully, staying silent for a while in order to give the other person some space, it might actually be considered as being rude or uninterested! That was definitely a new discovery for me, and it explained many of the confusions I had faced during my exchange year in the United States.

I have a good example on the confusing situation where an American only saw the negative aspects of being silent. During my exchange year I took French classes in high school. I really enjoyed those classes and thought that the teacher was great. During the last day of the school year the teacher asked me to stay in the class for a few minutes longer as there was something he wanted to talk about. He looked kind of disappointed and asked me: "Did you enjoy the classes at all? Was there something wrong in my teaching? You seemed very passive all these months, were the things that I taught too easy for you? Was there not enough challenge? Why didn't you like the classes?"

I was shocked by these questions as they definitely got me off guard. The truth was completely the opposite; I had really enjoyed the classes and always tried to pay attention to the lessons. I tried to explain that to the teacher, but he didn't seem to believe me. He most likely still thinks that his classes were a major disappointment for me. That's partly my fault. *Back then I didn't really have the tools or understanding to express the positive aspects of silence that were hidden from the teacher. I was just confused and didn't really know what to say. Hopefully next time in a similar situation I'll be able to explain myself better so there won't be any hard feelings.*" (Berry et al. 2009: 90)

When students reflect in this way at the end of a course, they will share their learning experience with others and become active teachers outside the class room.

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## Appendix 1

### An alternative way to communicate Finnish *hiljaisuus* ('silence')

This appendix offers examples of ways to introduce Finnish silence in English, French, German, Russian and Spanish (Berry 2012a: 20–23). On the Finnish side, students can become more aware of the cultural meanings embedded in the Finnish language, more aware of how those cultural meanings might be overshadowed by different cultural meanings when translated into other languages, and more aware of the importance of actively using semantic alternatives in intercultural contexts when communicating cultural meanings. Depending on the level of linguistic competence, the sentences can be given to students as written below or in modified ways.

Whenever native-speaking exchange students can be integrated into intercultural communication courses or advanced English, French, German, Russian and Spanish courses, new questions and responses will create better alternatives for the future. As courses move forward in the Unit for Languages and Business Communication, modified alternatives will always come to the surface and offer students alternative *tools* to use when interacting with exchange students and business people in other cultures. Michael Berry, Eeva Boström, Valentina Lehtonen, Kristina Lindgren, Maryna Sasunkevich, Joachim Schlabach and Paula Sjöblom contributed to the creation of the ten sentences.

#### 1

- a) English: You have probably noticed that we Finns do not talk as much as people in your culture.
- b) French: Vous avez probablement remarqué que les Finlandais ne parlent pas autant que les gens dans votre culture.
- c) German: Bestimmt haben Sie bemerkt, dass Finnen nicht so viel reden wie Leute in Ihrer Kultur.

d) Russian: Возможно, вы заметили, что финны говорят меньше, чем представители вашей культуры.

e) Spanish: Se habrán dado cuenta de que los finlandeses no hablan tanto como la gente de su cultura.

## 2

a) English: Our silence does have negative sides when we are too silent for negative reasons.

b) French: Notre silence a des côtés négatifs quand nous sommes trop silencieux pour des raisons négatives.

c) German: Unser Schweigen hat freilich auch negative Seiten, wenn wir etwa aus negativen Gründen zu schweigsam sind.

d) Russian: В нашей культуре в неразговорчивости (тишине, молчании) есть отрицательные стороны, они проявляются, когда мы молчаливы по негативным причинам (молчание – негативно).

e) Spanish: Evidentemente nuestro silencio tiene también aspectos negativos si estamos demasiado silenciosos por razones negativas.

## 3

a) English: Our active Finnish silence is full of non-verbal communication (communicating without words).

b) French: Notre silence actif finlandais est plein de communication non-verbale.

c) German: Das finnische aktive Schweigen ist voll von non-verbaler Kommunikation.

d) Russian: Наша активная тишина наполнена невербальным общением (общением без слов).

e) Spanish: Nuestro silencio activo finlandés está lleno de comunicación no-verbal (comunicar sin palabras).

## 4

a) English: When our minds are active other Finns can see how we are communicating without words. This activity is probably hidden from you.

b) French: Lorsque nos esprits sont actifs, les autres Finlandais peuvent voir comment nous communiquons sans mots. Cette activité est probablement cachée pour vous.

c) German: Wenn wir gedanklich aktiv (bei der Sache) sind, können andere Finnen sehen, wie wir wortlos kommunizieren. Diese Aktivität ist für Sie möglicherweise verborgen.

d) Russian: Когда наше сознание активно работает, финны видят, как мы общаемся без слов. Этот процесс, возможно, скрыт от вас.

e) Spanish: Cuando nuestra mente está activa, otros finlandeses pueden ver cómo estamos comunicando sin palabras. Esta actividad le quedará oculta.

## 5

a) English: Finns prefer to have active silence before talking to the point. We believe it is sensible (asiallinen) to be sticking to the point (asiassa pysyvää) and to talk about the fact of the matter (asiasta puhuminen). This is common when discussing something important. It is not very common when friends want to be joking with each other.

b) French: Les Finlandais préfèrent avoir un silence actif avant de parler. Ils pensent qu'il est approprié de parler des faits et de ne pas s'éloigner du sujet. Cela est fréquent lorsqu'on parle de quelque chose d'important. Ce n'est pas très fréquent quand on veut plaisanter avec ses amis.

c) German: Finnen benötigen eine gewisse Zeit mit aktivem Schweigen, bevor sie sich zu einer Sache äußern. Sie glauben, es ist vernünftig auf diese Weise zum Thema zu kommen und über die Sache zu sprechen. Bei Diskussionen zu wichtigen Themen ist das üblich. Allerdings nicht, wenn Freunde untereinander Witze machen.

d) Russian: Финны предпочитают делать паузы (период активной тишины), активно молчать, прежде чем обсуждать проблему. Они считают, что разумно говорить по существу, о самой сути дела. Это обычно касается обсуждения важных вопросов, но не шутивной дружеской беседы.

e) Spanish: Los finlandeses prefieren mantener un silencio activo antes de hablar de un tema preciso. Piensan que es razonable ir al grano y hablar de un tema concreto. Esto es común cuando se habla de algo importante. No es muy común cuando los amigos quieren bromear entre sí.

## 6

- a) English: In many cultures people talk quickly to show they are actively listening. In Finland we often have a lot of active silence and communicate without words when we are actively listening.
- b) French: Dans plusieurs cultures, les gens parlent rapidement pour montrer qu'ils écoutent activement. En Finlande, nous avons souvent beaucoup de silence actif et nous communiquons sans mots que nous écoutons.
- c) German: In vielen Kulturen sagen die Leute schnell etwas, um zu zeigen, dass sie aktiv zuhören. In Finnland dagegen haben wir ziemlich viel aktives Schweigen und sagen ohne Worte, dass wir aktiv zuhören.
- d) Russian: Во многих культурах люди быстро говорят, чтобы показать, что они активно слушают. Для финнов же характерно активное молчание, невербальное общение в процессе активного слушания.
- e) Spanish: En muchas culturas las personas hablan rápidamente para enseñar que están escuchando activamente. En Finlandia a menudo tenemos mucho silencio activo y comunicamos sin palabras que estamos escuchando de una manera activa.

## 7

- a) English: Sometimes Finns are silent to hide something. I wonder if people in your culture sometimes keep talking to hide something.
- b) French: Quelquefois les Finlandais sont silencieux pour cacher quelque chose. Je me demande si, dans votre culture, les gens continuent quelquefois à parler pour cacher quelque chose.
- c) German: Manchmal schweigen die Finnen, um etwas zu verbergen. Könnte es sein, dass in Ihrer Kultur die Leute manchmal reden, um etwas zu verbergen?
- d) Russian: Иногда финны молчат с целью утаить что-либо. Интересно, в вашей культуре люди иногда много говорят, чтобы скрыть что-либо?
- e) Spanish: A veces los finlandeses se callan para ocultar algo. ¿Es posible que en su cultura las personas a veces sigan hablando cuando quieren ocultar algo?

## 8

- a) English: When someone else is talking, active silence is our way to show respect (for others).

- b) French: Quand quelqu'un autre parle, le silence actif est notre manière de montrer du respect.
- c) German: Wenn jemand anderer am Sprechen ist, ist aktives Schweigen unsere Art, Respekt zu zeigen.
- d) Russian: Когда кто-то говорит, активное молчание – это способ финнов продемонстрировать уважение к говорящему.
- e) Spanish: Cuando otra persona está hablando, el silencio activo es una señal de respeto (hacia los demás) de nuestra parte.

## 9

- a) English: We are willing to wait for our turn to talk, especially if the other person is also willing to wait while we talk.
- b) French: Nous sommes prêts à attendre notre tour de parole, spécialement si notre interlocuteur est aussi prêt à attendre quand nous parlons.
- c) German: Wir warten, bis wir an der Reihe sind, etwas zu sagen, besonders wenn auch die andere Person wartet, während wir sprechen.
- d) Russian: Мы всегда готовы подождать своей очереди, особенно, если собеседник тоже ждёт своей очереди, когда говорим мы.
- e) Spanish: Estamos dispuestos a esperar nuestro turno para hablar, sobre todo si la otra persona está dispuesta a esperar mientras nosotros hablamos.

## 10

- a) English: Sometimes our silence sends the strongest message of respect, interest, social togetherness, etc.
- b) French: Quelquefois notre silence envoie le message le plus fort de respect, d'intérêt, d'affinités, etc.
- c) German: Manchmal ist unser Schweigen die stärkste Botschaft für Respekt, Interesse, Zusammengehörigkeit etc.
- d) Russian: Иногда наше молчание – сильнейшее проявление уважения, заинтересованности, социальной сплочённости и т.д.
- e) Spanish: A veces nuestro silencio manda el mensaje más fuerte de respeto, interés, unidad social, etc.

## Appendix 2

### Are Finns shy?

Are Finns shy (*ujo*)? Yes, as understood in the Finnish language but not often when Americans, French, Germans and Spaniards rely on their dictionary definitions of shy. During group discussions Finnish and exchange students were encouraged to move back and forth between English and their native languages to discover what additional words they could have used to send the cultural meanings that they believed they were sending when using the word ‘shy’ (*ujo*) to describe Finns. The following is presented as the kind of Finnish and English forms of statements that were often made during these group discussions: *Suomalaiset ovat* (‘Finns are’), *Suomalainen on* (‘a Finn is’): *ujo* (‘socially timid, careful’), *hiljainen* (‘quiet in style and amount of talk’, ‘silent’), *arka* (‘timid’, ‘cautious’, ‘sensitive’), *pidättyväinen* (‘tactful’, ‘reserved’, ‘reticent’), *varautunut* (‘cautious in order to be prepared before acting’/‘talking inappropriately in a new situation’, ‘reserved’, ‘observant’), *hienotunteinen* (‘discreet’, ‘considerate’, ‘tactful’) and *herkkä* (positive: ‘sensitive to others’ feelings, and negative: ‘easily upset’). Most Finnish users interpreted these words as neutral or positive unless preceded implicitly or explicitly by ‘too’/*liian*. A common question by Finnish students during their discussions was: why are we using shy when we have all these other options? The answer was often: because everyone else says we are shy (Berry et al. 2004).

When references to ‘silent’, ‘quiet’ and ‘shy’ are combined in different ways in French one can detect some difference between translating *hiljainen* into ‘silent’ or ‘quiet’. Finnish students often choose ‘silent’ instead of ‘quiet’. Both alternatives are correct dictionary translations, which can create culturally misleading interpretations. Finns also often refer to themselves as ‘shy’ people. When responding in this way, they are often unaware that (1) ‘silent’ in French (*silencieux*) is generally socially negative; that ‘silent’ + ‘shy’ in French (*silencieux + timide*) is more negative; and that (2) ‘quiet’ (*tranquille*) is positive while ‘quiet’ + ‘shy’ in French (*tranquille + timide*) can also be at least neutral. French students are also unaware that the words ‘silent’ and ‘quiet’ come from the same Finnish word *hiljainen*. Thus, cultural meanings easily remain hidden on both sides, especially when there is a mutual agreement that Finns are ‘shy’. Each word and combination can move in a more positive or negative direction within different social situational contexts in each culture. This Finnish-French challenge is discussed in more detail in Berry (2006).

## Bionote

*Michael Berry*, PhD, University of Wisconsin (Madison), moved to Finland as a Fulbright professor and remained at the Turku School of Economics where he was given opportunity to turn Finnish and exchange students into learner-teachers of each other during intercultural communication and management courses.