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When a Chief Speaks through His Silence

During the past decade, the role of language in political behavior has received increasingly systematic attention (Brenneis 1984, Brenneis and Myers 1988; Brison 1992; Shapiro 1984). However, as Brenneis has noted in a review of the literature, "language-focused considerations of . . . the meanings and implications of silence are remarkably rare" (1988:226). Discourse-centered approaches to social interaction have generally treated silence as a pragmatic feature of linguistic utterances—specifically, a pause between segments of speech (Sherzer and Urban 1986; Urban 1991). Despite the well-recognized importance of non-verbal and paralinguistic aspects of communication in oral cultures, the political importance of silence as a communicative act in itself, independent of any verbal utterance, has received little systematic attention (notable exceptions are Nwoye 1985; Tannen and Saville-Troike 1985). This essay will examine the role of silence as a politically significant communicative act in a small-scale society.

In the spring of 1981, a highly unusual incident occurred among the Wauja, a small single-village tribe of Arawak speakers residing in the Upper Xingu region of the Amazon rain forest.¹ One morning at dawn, when most of the Wauja villagers were bathing at the river, a man strangled his stepson, a boy of about four years. The child had been born out of wedlock while his mother was a widow; his father was not publicly known.

Though initially the stepfather had seemed to accept the child, the boy's illegitimacy was a continuing source of shame. Some of the other men taunted the stepfather that he was raising a bastard child. Finally, one morning when the house was empty and there were no witnesses about, the man quickly strangled the boy, leaving his body at a short distance from the house, where it would soon be discovered.

Like the stepfather that morning, I too, had stayed behind, and was writing up notes in my own house, completely unaware of what was silently taking place only a hundred feet away. Suddenly, however, Wauja began pouring in through the door, visibly agitated, repeating in horrified whispers the story of what had just happened. This incident, I should emphasize, was

unlike anything I had witnessed during two years among the Wauja, who generally are kind and tolerant toward their children.²

"That man has done a very bad thing,"³ they told me again and again. "What will happen to him?" I asked. "How should I know?"⁴ was the repeated answer, delivered in a stock Wauja phrase implying the matter was beyond the speaker's control. This seemed strange to me, but when I pressed further, I was told only, "The chief will know. In a little while we will hear what he has to say."⁵ The chief, as it happened, was away from the village attending a ceremony in a neighboring tribe, but was expected back in several hours.

The mother and older sister of the dead boy asked me to help them wash his body and prepare it for the grave, which we did together. For the rest of the day I paid visits to friends in various houses, trying to understand the meaning of what had happened. Everyone I spoke to was willing to express a personal reaction to the killing; some expressed outrage, others more subdued disapproval. Not a single person, however, was willing to express an opinion of what would happen to the killer. The answer to that question was virtually the same everywhere I turned: "We are waiting to hear the words of the chief." "It is he who knows about these matters, not us." "The chief will know."⁶

The old chief finally returned that evening at dusk, tired from the long and unaccustomed journey. I was watching him most intently, not wanting to miss a word of the legal judgment I expected would take place. To my growing puzzlement, however, as time dragged on, the matter was not even mentioned. The chief surely knew something was amiss, since his house was filled with a large number of unaccustomed visitors, whose very presence belied the studied casualness of their behavior.

But as I sat at his feet, hanging on every word of the conversation that followed, I heard only the chief's long and formal account of the details of his visit, punctuated by the usual polite questions from his listeners about food consumed and tidbits of gossip gleaned in the other village. Finally the long account came to an end, and the chief began to quietly smoke tobacco as he sat by the hearth fire. An awkward silence fell over the room, and the visitors from other households began to slip away, one by one. I couldn't believe it. Wasn't anyone going to mention what had happened?

In fact, at that point one of my housemates turned to me, and casually suggested I tell the chief the news. Although I had helped bury the child, I was only a guest in the community, and did not understand why the killing had occurred or what its consequences might be. I wanted no part in accusing the man who killed him. Moreover, I had no idea of how to broach such a ghastly topic to the chief himself, with members of every household witnessing my awkward narration. However, my protests were met with such irritated insistence that, in the end, I did as I was told.

When I had finished, the chief said nothing, and merely gazed silently into the fire as he smoked his tobacco. As if nothing unusual had happened, people dispersed to their hammocks and went to bed.

During the next few days, I tagged along after the chief, puzzled at his silence on the killing, but certain the moment would come when he would speak. After all, hadn't the Wauja repeatedly told me that the stepfather's fate depended on "the words of the chief" ⁷? Thinking perhaps I had somehow missed the fateful pronouncement, I periodically asked knowledgeable persons whether they had heard anything. "No, he hasn't spoken out," ⁸ they replied. "No, he hasn't spilled any words," ⁹ they also said, using a common Wauja turn of phrase.

More time passed, but the aftermath of the incident still seemed contradictory and unresolved. On the one hand, the Wauja all agreed that only the words of the chief would decide the matter, but on the other hand, when the chief completely ignored the issue, nobody seemed even to care. Puzzled and frustrated, I let the matter drop. Only much later did I understand what had happened.

Part of my problem in understanding what happened resulted from ambiguities (for a speaker of English) in Wauja linguistic conventions for quoting discourse. I gradually came to realize that when the Wauja use the phrase, "so-and-so *said* something," this did not necessarily mean that a verbal utterance had occurred. For instance, people sometimes confided to me their fear of local witches in statements such as:

That man is a very bad witch. He said to me, "I'm going to shoot death darts into your children. I'm going to kill all your kinsmen." ¹⁰

Of course, no Wauja would ever admit to practicing lethal witchcraft against innocent persons, and most especially he would not admit it to his enemies.¹¹ What the Wauja speaker meant is that the *non-verbal behavior* of the alleged witch clearly revealed an intent to cause harm.

To cite another illustration, the Wauja consider certain birds to be death omens, and when such a bird flies suddenly right over a man's canoe, he may comment, "That bird is saying to me, "Your kinsman will die soon," ¹² even though the bird in question made no sound whatever, let alone a verbal utterance.

There are several ways the previous statement about the bird can be made in Wauja, but they all have similar literal translations:

- 'He is saying to me'
- 'His words are saying to me'
- 'His language is saying to me'

A more sensitive translation, however, might be on the order of:

'He is expressing to me'

'He is communicating to me'

From this perspective, we can offer a different interpretation of the statement the Wauja repeated again and again just after the killing. Although I took their words in their literal sense, "the chief will reveal his decision *by what he says*," what the Wauja actually meant was simply, "the chief will reveal his decision," —period.

And indeed, after I had become more sensitive to the Wauja way of doing things, the behavioral appropriateness of the chief's response became obvious to me as well. For while in our culture, formal occasions are frequently marked by extended verbal utterances, among the Wauja, it is precisely those matters of greatest seriousness that are handled with greatest delicacy. And in the Wauja view, such delicacy frequently precludes any direct verbal reference.

Direct factual descriptions, open conversation, and overt references are associated with light conversation on non-controversial topics. In contrast, indirect allusions, carefully circumscribed conversations, unspoken references, and even silence itself are associated with matters that are important or controversial. Informal behavior tends to be overt or explicit, formal behavior indirect, allusive, and symbolic.

The importance of verbal restraint to mark formal situations is pervasive in Wauja society. For instance, a fundamental marker of Wauja social identity is behaving with appropriate respect toward senior affines. One shows this respect, however, not by what one does, but rather by what one refrains from doing: one does not speak the names of these affines, nor joke freely in their presence, nor casually touch their persons. The most appropriate behavior in the presence of these senior affines is modesty and silence. Those who fail to observe such restraint risk being compared to the incestuous, quasi-human creatures who lived in the mythological past.

Similarly, the importance of the dead and the respect accorded them is seen in the Wauja custom of never speaking their names.¹³ To speak the name of the deceased is to risk calling the person's soul down to earth from the celestial village, dooming it to an unhappy exile, wandering the netherworld of the deep forest. Note here the association of socially meaningful silence with not only respect but also potential danger, an association that obtains in other contexts as well.

But perhaps the most striking practice in regard to verbal restraint is the silence enjoined on adolescents undergoing puberty seclusion. Ideally, every Wauja boy and girl must spend a period ranging from several months to several years in a dark chamber within the family's house, secluded from fellow villagers and even from the light of day.

In their isolation, the young people learn to manufacture objects appropriate to their sex, and to drink various medicinal infusions believed to impart strength and beauty to their developing

bodies. Above all, however, they are enjoined to be silent. If an adolescent in seclusion must speak, he beckons the listener to approach and then speaks only in soft whispers.

Significantly, the seclusion of young men preparing to be chiefs is distinguished from that of ordinary adolescents in that it is more protracted and is repeated at intervals of several years. In addition, in order to become a shaman, yet another period of seclusion and socially enjoined self-restraint is necessary. Thus, learning to be a Wauja is, in large measure, learning to control the impulse to speak inappropriately. And learning to become a chief requires one to learn this lesson especially well.

With these things in mind, it no longer seems strange that the chief expressed a legal decision by maintaining silence. In his behavior, the chief acknowledged the gravity of the situation while communicating his decision that no action against the man was to be taken.

The chief did not need to publicly explain his reasoning since, to the Wauja, the justification for his decision was obvious. The murdered child had been an anomaly. There were no other illegitimate children in the village, due to the inflexible Wauja custom of burying immediately after birth any children born to single mothers. The little boy's mother had wrongfully sought to evade the consequences of this rule by taking an extended visit to a distant village, among people who were traditional enemies of the Wauja. When the child was born, he was therefore spared, in accordance with the customs of the enemy tribe, although, had he been born among his own people, he would unquestionably have been killed.

Since the only reason the child had been allowed to live was because his mother had acted in defiance of this rule, the stepfather could not properly be faulted for doing what should have been done years before. Although the Wauja were deeply disturbed at the unprovoked killing of a half-grown child, the presence of an illegitimate child living openly among them was in the end even more socially disruptive.

Some readers may wonder what is the evidence that a legal decision, or for that matter, any decision at all, took place? Simply because a decision can be culturally expressed by silence doesn't mean that any instance of silence can be taken as a sign of decision. Perhaps the whole thing just blew over in the months after the killing, without anything ever having been resolved one way or another.

My answer to this question is that the Wauja not only knew that a decision had been made, but in fact were unanimous as to what decision had been reached. The reader will recall that immediately after the killing, not a single individual was willing to express an opinion as to what would happen to the killer. Yet only a few weeks later, everyone I asked firmly assured me that no action would be taken against the stepfather. One man explained:

I was very sad when he killed that child. That is not our way. We do not kill children who are already big, who are old enough to walk about and know our language. But what can we do? That child had no father. It should have been buried at birth. Had it been buried at birth, according to custom, none of this would have happened."

The chief, of course, never expressed this reasoning in so many words. But the Wauja knew that the incident brought into conflict two rules: (1) that illegitimate children may not be allowed to live, and (2) that no one may take the life of another person. (That is, as the Wauja define a person. A witch is no longer a person, a newborn is not yet a person, but a four-year-old boy is indeed a person.) By not denouncing the killer as a murderer, the chief had clearly decided that the rule requiring that illegitimate children be destroyed took precedence and that the incident was to be viewed as delayed infanticide.

But we would be missing the point entirely to call such a decision "informal" merely because it was not expressed in a public speech. For the Wauja, legal decisions must be expressed with exemplary restraint precisely because of their public importance, as well as their dangerous association with potential conflict.

The lack of overt and explicit behavior in this unusual case reflects not a casual, flexible, spontaneous and informal law, in which decisions are arrived at through a loose, unfocused process of group consensus, but rather a strict cultural protocol of greatest public restraint—even silence—in situations of greatest public importance.

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Notes

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1. Research among the Wauja was conducted during a total of twenty months residence in their village. The first period of research, during eighteen and a half months between January 1981 and June 1983, I lived first in the house of Chief Walakuyawa, then in that of his stepson, who later became Chief Talatalakuma. During a return visit of six weeks in the summer of 1989, I resided in the household of Chief Atamai. Since most Wauja in 1983 spoke little or no Portuguese, from the outset of this study all data was collected in Wauja, a dialect of the Arawakan language family. In addition to 20 months of research in the Wauja community itself, I did nine months of linguistic work with native Wauja speakers who resided with me while away from their own community. On the first such visit five Wauja stayed with me for three months in Brasilia and Sao Paulo in 1983, and on the second, a Wauja speaker lived in my home in Virginia for six months during 1989-90.

2. In fact, though Wauja can remember certain events as far back as, in some cases, seven generations, no one had ever heard of another case of an illegitimate child being raised in the tribe, much less being killed when it was half-grown. According to the Wauja elders, the circumstances of this case were without known precedent.

3. *Aitsa awujipai Eyu.*

4. *Kuuh hai yiu . . .*

5. *Amunaun uutapai meenegi. Meenegi ewetemepei igatakija.*

6. *Meenegi ewetemeppei amunaun igatakija. Amunaun utapai; aitsa autapai. Amunaun utapai meenegi.*

7. *Amunaun igatakija.*

8. *Aitsa inyankawi.*

9. *Aitsa ahuuka pagitakija.*

10. *Ityana wekeki kyanka. Nukutehene pitsainyaun yeetsipwiya, uma nipitsi. Numanita yitsu yeekitsa.*

11. There are individuals who admit to knowledge of witchcraft, but not to using it against innocent victims. Among the Wauja and neighboring tribes, there is a category of ritual specialists that cast counter-spells on witches, in return for extremely high fees. These witch-killers are called "masters of tying-up" (*tsitye wekeho*), because they work their magic using witchcraft fetishes tied in tight little bundles. They are distinguished from the witches themselves, who are called "masters of witchcraft" (*ityana wekeho*). The witch-killers admit to having knowledge of witchcraft technique, though they deny using it for antisocial purposes. While there are currently no such specialists among the Wauja, there are several among neighboring tribes, and these are occasionally sought out by the Wauja in times of crisis.

12. *Kuhupwijati iyaanka nu: pakama yeetsipwiya. Kala nutain akamapai, kala niseji.*

13. However, when the grandchild of a deceased person becomes old enough to inherit his or her grandparent's name, the name may once again be freely pronounced, since it is no longer "owned" by the deceased.