

Silence of Thai Students as a Face-Saving Politeness Strategy in a Multicultural University Context

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Abstract

Silence as a communicative act in face-to-face spontaneous interaction has been under-investigated in linguistic politeness research in Thailand. With the recent increase in the influx of foreign students gaining admission into Thai universities yearly, the result is that such universities will be a coexistence of cultures. This study therefore aims to investigate the situational face-threat contexts where Thai students use silence as a politeness strategy. This aim is guided by the main research question of what different situational face-threat contexts could lead to the use of silence by Thai students in their foreign-peer interactions in a Thai multicultural university context. Twenty students' interactions were sampled using micro-socio-ethnographic technique, with data from observation, interview, and questionnaire. The main findings revealed that: uncertainty of language proficiency, expected hurting words from interlocutor, and unexpected negative change in hearer's mood, amongst others, were the main circumstances where Thai students use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy. The findings imply better intercultural awareness in multicultural university contexts.

Keywords: Foreign-peer interaction, multicultural context, silence, Thai university students

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Introduction

Silence has been the focal point of pragmatic research interest in the Western Societies within the last two decades (Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985; Jaworski, 1997). As one of the most essential communication signal, silence represents a non-verbal human behaviour. For Hall (1959), silence represents the cultural beliefs and activities of a given group. To this notion, Hall (1959) and Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) demonstrate that culture and communication are inextricably the same; culture determines behaviour. If someone wishes to interact with a person from a foreign culture, he/she should recognise the significance of linguistic and non-linguistic patterns. Silence can therefore be interpreted as culture-specific (Kurzon, 1998), a multifaceted, complex and complicated linguistic issue (Basso, 1988; Braithwaite, 1990; Saville-Troike, 1985) because its interpretation is ambiguous and relies to a greater extent on the socio-cultural norms of the society in which it is used, and the situational context (Brown & Levinson, 1987; Sifianou, 1997). Regarding the research context, Thailand, few studies have been found to investigate the use of silence. To the best of our knowledge, more specifically, research studies investigating the use of silence as a face-saving politeness strategy among Thai students interacting with their international friends in a southern Thai university have been scarce.

Lehtonen & Sajavaara (1985) explain that silence as a communication tool can be used to change the verbal intention to non-verbal channel of communication. To support this, Poyatos (2002) asserted that “Linguistics has wasted many research opportunities offered by silence . . . rarely have linguists referred to silence as a component of interaction” (p. 99). It is from this background that in characterizing the notion of silence, researchers perceive it as part of communication, as the speaker chooses to express him or herself by silence when it is his or her turn to talk (Goffman, 1981; Crown & Feldstein, 1985).

Within this study, silence as a face-saving politeness strategy is operationalised within the situational context of the students, deliberately avoiding or terminating conversation (the absence of talk or where talk might relevantly occur) with their international peers on campus, in situations that might threaten the face of the interlocutor if the conversation continues. This study, therefore, seeks to explore how Thai students (in a multicultural Thai university setting) use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy during peer social interactions on campus.

The relationship between silence and politeness strategy employed by these students, as well as the different situational contexts (situations which can lead to face threats) wherein these students use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy in interactions, is also part of the aim of this study. In other words, considering the fact that silence is a complex and complicated phenomenon, this paper attempts to discuss in a preliminary way when and why Thai students (engaging in English communicative interactions) use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy in order to draw some implications for Thai students’ social interactions in a multicultural university setting. This research aims will be achieved using the following research questions:

1. How do Thai students use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy in their foreign-peer interactions?
2. How do different situational contexts influence Thai students’ use of silence when interacting with their foreign peers?

Silence and Politeness

It is crucial to investigate the pragmatic function of silence to study the use of silence as a face-saving politeness strategy (Ariel, 2010 and Ambele, 2014). As a politeness strategy, silence can be used in social interaction to avoid confrontation and disagreement (Jaworski, 1993, 1997; Sifianou, 1997; Jaworski & Stephens, 1998; Nankane, 2006), whereas the idea of politeness is based on the concept of face which is a technical concept related to an individual's public/private self-image (Yule, 1996). Therefore, politeness can be defined as linguistic expressions that show awareness of a person's reputation and create a friendly atmosphere for better communication (Lynch, 1985; Tannen, 1990; Jaworski, 1993). From this stand point, it is not exaggerated to conclude that there is a significant relationship between keeping silence and showing politeness when interaction happens. For clarification, studies have shown how different forms of avoidance can be adopted as an advantage in problematic discourse. For example, Nankane (2006) argues that 'opting out' from conversation is used strategically by interactants in face-threatening situations, for example, in using complaints. Likewise, Tannen (1990), Jaworski (1993) and Buddharat et al. (2017) demonstrate how silence is employed to keep the channel of communication open, manage conflict and emotional tension, and to lead to or signal an end in communication between groups of people. For example, intense (verbal) arguments between friends may jeopardize their relationship, and the avoidance of confrontation through silence may minimise the potentially damaging effects of an ensue fight. Similarly, being silent for a while is common in situations preceding the exchange of leave-taking formulae, which are the verbal markers signalling the end of an interaction. In Thailand, specifically, a study conducted by Hongladarom & Hongladarom (2005) illustrate that Thais are more likely to utilize silence to withdraw from disagreement and to prevent their further argument. The finding also showed that silence among Thais is perceived as a polite nonverbal behaviour which they can minimize face threat with the hearer.

Sifianou (1997) further explains how silence is used as a face-saving politeness strategy in multicultural interactions in Greek and English societies based on Brown & Levinson's (1987) politeness theory. Brown & Levinson (1987) do not focus on silence in their theory. They only referred to it as "Don't do the FTAs" without including it in their theory. Brown and Levinson (1978, 1987) model of politeness theory is principally based on the notion of face as adapted from Goffman, 1967, as cited in Ambele, 2014. Goffman (1967) defines face 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 regarding approved social attributes" (p. 5). In other words, it refers to a speaker's reputation, good name, and sense of social identity (Ambele, 2014, p. 17). It is the emotional and social feelings of self that can be lost, damage, maintained, or enhanced which an individual has and expects others to recognize (Yule, 1996; Brown & Levinson, 1978, 1987; Odebunmi, 2003). Regarding the definitions of face stated, it can be concluded that the face is socially or interactively based which exists in response to the presence of or interactions with others. It is a specific image we present to others; they prefer to be seen in a certain way by certain groups of people. Therefore, one should be aware of any possible actions that can pose a threat to a person's face. In Thailand where this study was conducted, the concept of "face" also plays a significant role on showing politeness and giving respect in social interaction (Ukosakul, 2005). Simply put, there is a relationship between face and politeness in Thai culture. Thais always perceive that maintaining other people's face is one of the main politeness strategies

because they often associate the face's concept to their dignity, self-esteem, prestige, reputation and pride. Consequently, face is measured as a root value underlying Thai social interactions. Examples of some politeness strategies that are used to maintain one's face include indirectness, avoidance of confrontation or strong criticism, and suppression of negative emotions (Ukosakul, 2005).

According to Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987), face has two specific types of desires: negative face (the need and the desire not to be imposed upon) and positive face (the need and desire to be liked, appreciated, affirmed or approved of). They suggest that all verbal activities or speech in general imply a positive or a negative face threat to either the speaker or the hearer. They call this strategy "Face Threatening Acts" or (FTAs). To illustrate, FTAs mean that a person may say something against the expectation of another speaker who is concern with saving his/her public face. This can be considered as a threat to his/her face (Yule, 1996). In order to redress the potential threat, the speaker can say something which is called "face saving act" (Yule, 1996). According to Brown & Levinson (1987, p. 14), FTAs are controlled by three social variables or factors: 'social distance' between the interlocutors, the 'relative power' and the status of imposition that are involved in FTAs. They propose five strategies in dealing with FTAs which can be illustrated in Figure 1.

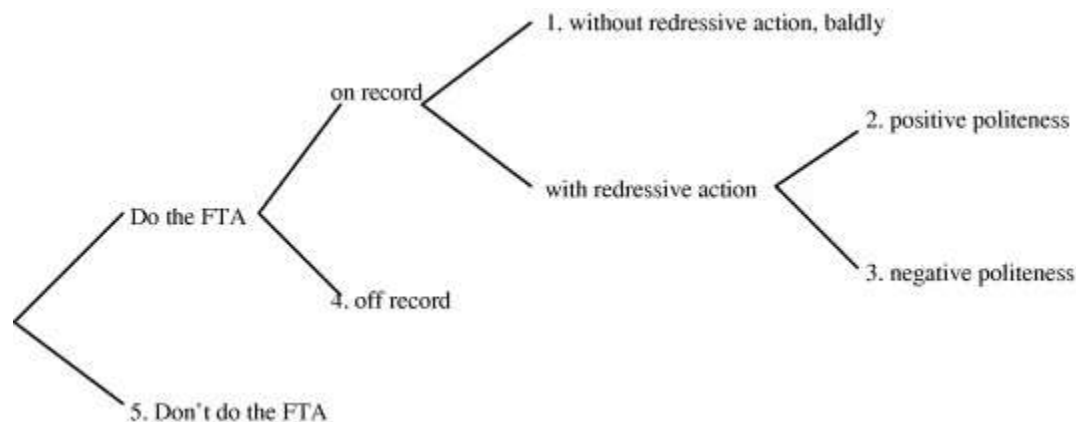


Figure 1. Possible strategies for doing FTAs (adapted from Brown & Levinson, 1987)

To explain the above strategies for the purpose of clarity, bald on record strategy is a direct way, unambiguous, and concise way of an utterance. The speakers say whatever they prefer to say. Face is ignored or irrelevant here. Bald on record strategy could be expressed by both positive and negative politeness. The former means the speaker thinks that the listener wishes to be respected: "Could you please close the window?" The latter, on the other hand, means that the listener wishes to be respected and the speaker may impose on him/her by asking him/her to do something: "Close the window". Off-record strategy, on the other hand, is an indirect way of an utterance. The communicative intention of the act is ambiguous or vague. The speakers say something which is more general or different from what they mean, for example, "It's hot in here" to mean: 'open the window' or 'turn on the fan/AC'.

Brown & Levinson (1987) ignored the fifth strategy "Don't do the FTAs", since it provides "no interesting reflexes". Sifianou (1997) criticises Brown & Levinson for neglecting "Don't do the FTAs" strategy. According to Sifianou (1997), Brown & Levinson (1987) discovered the relationship between silence and politeness, but they considered silence as lacking in politeness. Tannen (1985, p. 97) indicates that 'silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness', because the speaker says nothing but means something. Thus, silence is correlated with off-record politeness, "because both positive politeness and negative politeness are usually enacted through the elaboration of redress action" (Sifianou, 1997, p. 73). Sifianou (1997) claims that it is wrong to ascribe silence to the highest degree of "Don't do the FTAs", as silence has many functions in interaction. Silence also manifests positive, negative or off-record politeness (Sifianou, 1997). Yule (1996, p. 62) refers indirectly to the relationship between silence and politeness through "self and other: say nothing" strategy. That is, when a person asks for something without uttering a word he/she depends on others to recognize his/her want (for instance, when someone searches his or her pockets or bag for a pen and the other person who sits next to him/her offers him/her a pen. In this event, this person employs silence to avoid a face threatening act).

Methodology

This study adopted a qualitative approach in investigating the research phenomenon.

Participants

The participants in this study were Thai university students studying in an international programme in a Thai multicultural university in Southern Thailand. The programme is a true representation of a cross-cultural setting with students from different countries around the world. The Thai students' social (*out-of-class*) interaction with their foreign peers is the focus of this investigation. English is the medium of instruction in this programme and all students admitted, including Thais are supposed to be fluent in English. The students are between their second and fourth year of study, thus, assumed to have had enough social interaction in English with each other on campus. The twenty Thai students whose interactions were considered for analysis in this study were of different age and gender.

Instruments and procedure

This study adopted a qualitative design. An ethnographic approach was used to answer the research questions. The study adopted the micro-socio-ethnographic technique which involved an analysis of small-scale events and processes, such as dyadic communication in social settings (Al-Harashseh, 2012, p. 254). Data for this study was collected through observing Thai students' social interactions with their foreign peers in a multicultural university setting, interviews with the students, and questionnaire to elicit the circumstances in which they use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy. Before we started collecting the data, the students were given a lecture of about 15 minutes on the topic of investigation to ensure that they understood the research purpose.

The Thai students were informally observed (for one semester) as they interacted with their foreign peers out of class - during school activities and at lunch times in order to reduce their uneasiness during interactions. Meanwhile, ethical procedures in data collection were strictly observed. Within this time, the researchers made field notes of the different observed face threat

situations where the Thai students chose to be silent (as a face-saving politeness strategy) during interactions with their foreign peers, and why.

The information from the field notes were used to design the interview questions. The interview questions focussed only on those observed situations where the Thai students used silence as a face-saving politeness strategy. The interviews were done within the same day or week of the observed interaction so that the students can still remember the situation and respond to the questions appropriately. The students were asked about why they chose silence in these situations, whether it was just because they didn't know what to say or because they were trying to save face or avoid face threat. This was done to validate the field note data. Only responses where the students said they used silence as a face-saving strategy were considered, and the rest discarded, in the final analysis.

The responses from the interviews were later grouped into different face threat situations and used to design the open-ended questionnaire. The questionnaire required the Thai students to list other circumstances (*when*) in which they use silence as a strategy to avoid face threat, and why. This instrument was used here in order to elicit more data from the participants to enrich the findings. Regarding the questionnaire administration procedure, the researchers met with the 20 Thai students in a study room where the questionnaire was administered, after which they were submitted to the researchers and their responses used as data for analysis in this study.

Theoretical framework

Politeness as a strategic conflict avoidance (in this case, through silence) has a strong bearing within Brown & Levinson (1987) face-saving politeness approach. The basic role of politeness is in "its ability to function as a way of controlling potential aggression between interacting parties, or in the view of Ide (1989), that connect politeness with smooth communication or that of Leech (1983, p. 82) which entails avoiding disruption and maintaining social equilibrium and friendly relations" (Al-Harahsheh, 2012, p. 251). As reported by Al-khatib (2001), Al-Harahsheh (2012) and Ambele (2014), Brown & Levinson (1978, 1987) politeness approach gets its strength over other approaches in that its explanation is based on the basic notion of face; which is all about the self-image that everyone wants to protect and preserve in public. This framework is adopted as the main theoretical foundation against which the findings from this study will be interpreted. It shows when and how Thai university students use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy when interacting with their foreign peers.

Findings and Discussion

The relevance of politeness in conversation cannot be overemphasised because it represents the strength, or the depth of social interaction between speakers. In generally, conversation should be based on respect between/amongst participants. Ideally, the degree of politeness between people who are strangers is higher than that of friends. Strangers tend to produce more assessment or acknowledgment backchannels than friends do, to show more respect and interest in and for each other. However, in conversations between friends, the participants have more intimacy or familiarity and stronger relationships, so they do not feel the need to produce additional assessment backchannels. Silence is therefore tolerated and acceptable between friends. It is more awkward between strangers because they are distant and they do not have a strong social interaction.

Apparently, in conversations between friends, there are longer periods of silence than in conversations between strangers (the focus of this study).

This section sheds light on the different circumstances in which Thai university students in southern Thailand use silence as a face-saving politeness strategy when interacting with their foreign peers (be it departmental mates or friends) with the aim to maintain the relationship they share and keep the conversation flowing. The study found out that the circumstances under which these students' recurrently use silence as face-saving politeness strategy are grouped according to their frequency, into different categories, as will be discussed in the following sub-sections.

Uncertainty of language proficiency

This happens to be the most commonly realised silence strategies among Thai students in general, especially when they are in situations where they have to communicate with foreigners. To be able to communicate effectively with other English speakers in the sense that they understand you when you speak and you understand them implies using the language in accordance with the norms of grammar and pronunciation, and other conventions of English language usage (Ambele, 2014). As a result, for fear of making mistakes in English or be judged wrongly as a 'bad English speaker' when a discussion is going on, the Thai student preferred to stay quiet. It should be noted here that the silence is not as a result of no knowledge on the topic under discussion but simply for fear of poor proficiency, as well as lack of confidence.

Expected hurting words from interlocutor

Silence (the deliberate avoidance of talk) is also considered a speech act because it entails not saying something with words but doing something at the same time with action. The Thai students in this study indicated this as one of the most common circumstances in which they employ silence in their interactions with their foreign peers. To them, if a conversation has been going on smoothly, and suddenly the speaker switched into something personal, such as, physical appearance (e.g. 'how do I look?') that will demand their personal opinion, then, they will be silent since he/she knows that what he/she will say (like 'you have a weird hair style') will hurt (threaten) the face of the foreign peer.

Unexpected change in the hearer's mood/tone/gestures with negative implication

Depending on the discourse topic (example in 4.1), the discourse participants most at times change their mood especially when the discussion that used to please them, no longer interest them. For instance, during one of the interviews with the Thai students, most of them said once they were happily engaged in a seemingly interesting discussion with their foreign peers, say, about their brilliant performances in one of their courses, then, a foreign friend asked them about their grade in another course, they suddenly change their smile into a gloomy face; however pretending not to have understood the question. This calls for a further repeat of the question as a reluctant-to-respond technique. With this unexpected change in their (Thai students) mood/tone /gestures, they stay quiet and never respond to the question for fear of saying something else which might cause the friends (foreign students) to lose face in public.

Expected quarrel/fight during interaction

From the data, the students here say that some of their conversations with their foreign peers (especially among competitors) sometimes end in a quarrel/fight. In order to avoid this impending situation of a quarrel that may even end up leading to a fight, the Thai students stay silent, giving a deaf ear to whatever the other person is saying. This, they adopt from a popular saying “that the best answer to a fool is silence.” In another light, this can also be interpreted as a situation where different cultural practices come into play.

Defenceless situations

This refers to a situation in which the Thai student is vulnerable to utter words that is face-threatening to their foreign peers in a discussion where the speaker enjoys and wishes it continues. In such situations, the Thai students vehemently stay silent and just smile. Example of such defenseless situation is when a European foreign peers wants to talk about sex (openly) with a Muslim Thai student.

Unintelligent discussion where speaker's presence is imperative

During a conversation of general interest, for instance, tourist sites in Thailand or food that is loved to be talked about by all, some Thai students take the issue too personal (especially when their foreign peer misrepresent Thailand or her culture in the discussion) that they no longer make sense in whatever is said. In this case, the Thai students stay quiet. Their silence here is not because they could not engage in the conversation, but is strategically use to avoid a situation where they could, in the process of correcting and clarifying the misrepresented information publicly to their foreign peers, get them angry. In this face threat situation, they simply stay silent to give the foreign peers the impression that his/her opinion is okay.

Fear of correcting a senior student in public

This strategy was observed in a small discussion group where a senior international student was explaining a concept to junior Thai students without knowing that one of these junior Thai students has a good mastery of the said concept. After his explanation, he asked if he did a good job as a way of assessing himself. All the junior students hailed his good oratory skill with words of praises (like, ‘it was a forensic explanation’), excluding one who just stayed quiet, as we observed and recorded in the field note. When we met him during the interview session and requested to know why he stayed quiet and did not hailed the senior student like the others, he said ‘because the senior student completely went off topic in his explanation and since I could not publicly correct him for fear of being rude, I stayed quiet’.

Speaker's desire not to be interrupted

This strategy was commonly realised among these Thai students especially when engaged in a group discussion or public discussion with their foreign peers. Contributions to the discussion is done through conversation, turn after turn by each discourse participants. When it is an individual's turn to speak, no matter what the speaker is saying, according to the principle of conversation, until he/she ends (conversation closing), then, can no one interrupt, except otherwise permitted by the speaker. Any attempt at interrupting when someone is speaking is considered impolite and rude, which is usually face-threatening as it is not only imposing on the speaker to stop but showing

dislike for what the speaker is saying. As a way of avoiding this situation, the Thai students say they use silence.

Conclusion

Silence is practiced in conjunction with embarrassment to indicate hesitation and interruption. Interruption, as a cultural practice, is unwelcomed by Thais, more so students, in conversations, whether the interlocutors are friends or strangers as the general Thai society is one that views politeness positively. The interrupted speaker may ask the interrupter to give him/her a chance to complete his or her turn. For example, he/she may say, *'I am still speaking'*, *'please listen,'* *'do not interrupt me'*. Silence is therefore an indication of politeness to the current speaker while he/she is talking. Also, silence as a face-saving politeness strategy was principally realised by these students in order to show respect and strengthen social rapport, as well to guarantee the continuation of the conversation. Moreover, the speaker may not have the desire to repeat him or herself for fear of expected and unexpected face threats. This enables the speaker to think of what to say next. Interestingly, the interlocutor tolerates this silence and hesitation, which are better than dealing with infelicities. Again, in another light, silence can be used in conjunction with hesitation in order to avoid infelicities that may disrupt the conversation or threatened the interlocutor's self-image. The speaker therefore keeps silent for a while for fear of not expressing ideas about which he/she may not be sure of, because he/she aims to produce a planned and processed discourse, which is faultless. Therefore, silence can also be used as a strategy in social interaction to avoid confrontation and disagreement. The findings in this study corroborated with previous investigations on the different circumstances in which people exhibit positive politeness during interactions. Overall, besides being shy, exhibited by most Thais usually through overt silence, as a part of the Thai culture, in this study, however, Thai university students use silence as a positive politeness face-saving strategy when they interact in English with their foreign peers in a multicultural university setting. The findings from this study have potential implication for socio-cultural awareness, thus, avoidance of such face-threat circumstances for better social interactions.

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