A Sociological Study of Silence Functions in Iranian Culture: Literary and Religious Texts

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Extended abstract
1. Introduction
Cultural infrastructure in adopting appropriate teaching and learning methods in EFL classes is crucial. The meaning of silence is culture-bound and cultural guidelines govern when and why one employs silence.

Learning to speak and write in English in Iranian EFL classrooms seems to be a process of challenging one’s values. Iranian EFL learners, with a “silence is gold” mentality and accustomed to a dialectic approach in education tradition, experience a totally new atmosphere in English classes including discussions and interaction with their teachers and peers.

Thus, diversity of views in educational practices underscores the necessity of understanding the meanings of silence that are common in a given socio-cultural context such as Iran. Also, the relevance of silence meanings to educational practices in Iranian EFL classrooms can assist language learners to gain the most from their EFL classroom and can improve their speaking and writing skills.

In Iran, parts of these cultural guidelines come from educational literature, religious teaching and every day culture in a society.

2. Methodology
The present study aimed at uncovering the underlying assumptions about silence in Persian culture within the framework of Hofstede’s (1991) and Hall’s (1976) theories as well as relevance theory (Sperber & Wilson, 1986, 1995) through content analysis.

Multiple data collection sources (proverbs, literary and religious texts) were utilized both to provide in-depth information and to increase the validity of the findings. Consults with experts in the field of Persian literature and theology provided a basis for developing the scope and orientation of the research.

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Didactic literature including poetry and prose on silence was garnered in chronological order during the period of the 4th to the current century. The unabridged dictionary of Persian proverbs (Dahgan, 1383) and ten thousand Persian proverbs (Shakoori Rad, 1382) were selected to draw the proverbs on silence. Religious texts on silence, i.e., Quranic verses and Hadiths by the Prophet Muhammad, Imam Ali and other Imams were obtained respectively from Akhlagh dar Quran (Makarem shirazi, 1378), Nahjolbalaghe (Dashti, 1379), and Nahjolofesahe (Payandeh, 1383).

The data collection resulted in a corpus of 600 verses and prose, 250 proverbs as well as 180 verses and Hadiths. Themes that emerged from the coding were analyzed using the software program Nvivo8. The data collection continued until saturation was achieved. Thus, concepts which were closely linked in meaning were formed into categories and categories with similar meanings, in turn, were brought together into a theme. Overall, 13 categories emerged. Then the categories were revised, modified and later collapsed into seven themes.

3. Discussion
Highlights of the findings are as follows. The literary texts and proverbs take precedence firstly over intellectual and next over moral functions of silence while the priority in religious texts is first on the moral and next on the intellectual function of silence.

The intellectual function of silence drawn from literary texts highlights its role not only in saving one’s face and saving one’s life but also in saving others’ face and saving others’ lives. It seems that in a collectivist culture such as Iran, it is important to maintain unity and harmony. Intellectual function drawn from religious texts serves to protect Muslims “in situations where there is overwhelming danger of loss of life or property and where no danger to religion would occur thereby” (Mo’men, 1985, p. 102).

Promoting silence in literary texts related to moral function of silence is under the influence of religious teachings. This function places emphasis on promoting piety and salvation. According to the religious texts, the dangers and harms of tongue are many and there is no rescue from them except silence. Hence, moral function of silence (guarding one’s tongue), on one hand leads to personal self-improvement and salvation and on the other hand, leads to society prosperity by sustaining consensus and avoiding conflicts.

4. Conclusion
The results reveal that silence majorly has intellectual and moral functions in Iranian culture. Therefore, it can provide a clearer picture of Iranian culture. The
findings of this study provide a detailed and localized understanding of the assumptions of silence which seems necessary to the process of teaching and learning English.

**Key Words:** hofstede Theory, intellectual function, ethical function, silence, Relevance theory.

**References**


