

Silence as Negation: The Strategy and Beyond

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Abstract

Silence is neither separate from nor the opposite of communication. The inclusion of silence on a par with speech and non-verbal means is a vital element of any communication strategy. The more indirect communication is, the more silent it becomes at any additional “joint” and “fold”. Strategic communication is essentially indirect. It instrumentalizes obvious (visual and vocal) semiotic means to convey not (always) obvious meanings (goals, feelings, values, attitudes, actions). Negation, or apophasis, is a form of strategic silence, used across the cultures – be it as religious doctrine, literary method or communication strategy. It is semiotic – especially linguistic – self-negation that carries extra-semiotic projections. Language, for example, admits that it is not an almighty medium, but also reminds us that nothing else can replace it. Negation is a risky strategy, because it leaves the meaning of a signification by a sender almost wholly to the imagination of the receiver. It takes some willingness to make sense, interpretative effort and resources by the addressee to achieve the intended effect. But if it succeeds, negation engages the public emotionally and spiritually more than any other strategy. Nowadays, the promotional cultures are increasingly exploiting the power of silence as negation. An “apophatic turn” in the humanities stresses on the exploration rather than the taken for granted and on the open-ended rather than “business as usual”. Apophatic silence as a method is not autopoietic – not closed in self-referential systems of thinking. It rather offers sensibility to cultural flows, participative creativity and self-questioning in reflective loops.

Apophatic silence

Alexander Solzhenitsyn's novel *One day of the life of Ivan Denisovich*, a Ulysses in a Siberian Gulag camp, ends with the main hero's take on the passed day.

Shukhov went to sleep fully content. He'd had many strokes of luck that day: they hadn't put him in the cells; they hadn't sent the team to the settlement; he'd pinched a bawl of kasha at dinner; the team-leader had fixed the rates well; he'd built a wall and enjoyed doing it; he'd smuggled that bit of hacksaw-blade through; he'd earned something from Tsezar in the evening; he'd bought that tobacco. And he had not fallen ill. He got over it. A day without a dark cloud. Almost a happy day.

There were three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days like that in his stretch. From the first clang of the rail to the last clang of the rail.

Three thousand six hundred and fifty-three days.

The three extra days were for leap years. (Solzhenitsyn, 1970)

Solzhenitsyn's volley of negations serves an almost impossible task. It makes the unimaginable real by saying it has not happened and the menacing inevitable by describing its chance avoidance. Apophasis is a deliberate embrace of the lack of words. It takes strength from the weakness of language. It is a form of explicit rather than implicit silence. We are not silent about the meaning of what we are saying. It is more straightforward than that. We are saying that there is a meaning that cannot be expressed.

In linguistics, apophasis is a broader concept of self-negation that points at and carries extra-linguistic connotations. It could be a religious doctrine, literary method or communication strategy. Language admits that it is not an almighty medium, but also reminds us that nothing else can replace it. Language sets the direction but not the destination. It leaves the meaning of an utterance outside the words of the speaker and wholly to the imagination of the listener. Silence is the power that keeps the meaning hovering – like the magnetosphere holds the plasma. Negation is not empty. It is full on the outside. It is a powerful tool of influence and persuasion. Willing engagement of a public in a conversation – active and responsible co-creation of meaning – is a prerequisite for relationship building.

The strategy of negation is not necessarily negative. It is not a strategy of utter denial, for example. It is not even mainly negative. Rejecting someone's claim of truth is not its chief thrust. It indirectly carries a positive meta-message – watchfully silent and ever-present. It also raises a claim of truth, but of a subtler and higher order. An attempt to express that truth with the conventional means of language – with any means – would only misread, trivialize or violate that truth. If there is a universal message in apophasis, it is: "Don't try to define what is worth in life; definitions kill." Like in the Bible: "You shall not make for yourself a carved image, or any likeness of anything that is in heaven above, or that is in the earth beneath, or that is in the water under the earth" (Exodus 20:4)

ESV). And like in Sinead O'Connor's love song: "Nothing compares 2 you" (O'Connor, 2014).

"No comment" is neither apophatic nor strategic. It is tactical silence, a tool of time management. It is concerned not with information, but with the instance of its (non-) communication. "No comment" leaves the door open for a fact and interpretation to be validated or not. It only means "no communication here and now". It neither confirms nor denies. The speaker is saying that he cannot speak. There is something clumsy, awkward in "No comment". Any other communication would be better, except not saying even that. This answer is rarely satisfying for those who ask. And then, the mere fact that the speaker is left with no other alternative, is also telling. Seasoned listeners know what to read into that imposition.

Silence discourses

In his *Rhetoric*, Aristotle defines "kataphasis" and "apophasis" as "categorical proportions as either affirmation or denial, saying and unsaying (Henderson, 2003)(10). As rhetorical devices, however, both categories represent logical qualities that include both statement of truth (whether something is or is not) and directive for its communication (whether to bring it up or not). Apophasis (Greek from ἀπόφημι, "to say no"), for example, may also extend to the denial that one has not or will not say what one is just saying. (Donald Trump, for example, as presidential candidate repeatedly reassuring that he would not talk about the extramarital affairs of Bill Clinton.) Thus it may liaise with other devices such as sarcasm, irony or insinuation.

The kataphatic approach dominates in the Western Christian churches. But this is uneven and not across the board – as the differences between the (apophatic) silent Quaker and (kataphatic) noisy Pentecostal worships show (Maltz, 1985). Kataphasis is also at the root of the European Enlightenment, rationalism and positivism. The apophatic theology, on the other side, is typical for the Orthodox Christianity and other Eastern religions. Yet the history of the European and North American cultures is rich in apophatic projects. They spread from religion and philosophy to poetry and arts (Franke, 2012; Gibbons, 2007; Martin, 1985).

Master Eckhart cautions, "If you visualise anything or if anything enters your mind, that is not God [...] To speak about God in any simile is to speak of him in an impure mode. But whoever speaks of God through nothingness speaks of him to the point" (cited in Schürmann, 1978, p. 125).

John Milton presents the truth of God as silent truth in his poem *Paradise lost*: "His words here ended, but his meek aspect / Silent yet spoke, and breathed immortal love" (Milton, Kastan, & Hughes, 2005, p. 266-267). Religion and literature meet here in the use of negation as a poetic tool. It is the opposite of Michel Foucault's "exhaustive representation", the transformation of silence into discourse, where silence is achieved through verbose reasoning about what is not said (Foucault, 1990).

If discourse is an exhaustive representation that silences by leaving no gaps or silence, it says everything and so leaves nothing more to be said. Silence is, then, in possession of meaning. Thus it can be said that we are now dealing with two forms of exhaustive representation: discourse that silences and silence that discourses. (Sendbuehler, 1994)

The truth of God is a silent truth. It is not just object of discourse. It *is* the discourse. Christ must not simply speak about truth, but he must also “speak true” – be the truth he speaks. In apophysis, silence discourses. Apophatic silence is *profound* silence. Meaning emerges from its own depth.

Poetics is in a way apophatic. It is creative negation, reflective of the limits of language¹. It ventures outside language with a view to helping it by destroying it (Franke, 2012). A device of indirect communication, apophysis is not a forthright negation. It alludes to something by denying that it is mentioned². It points at the inadequacy of naming. But it names – quietly, by the fact of no naming. Something is present *by* its absence (Gibbons, 2007).

Small voice and small target

In politics, we use negation to promote ourselves by differentiation. In identity politics, for example, we place emphasis on who we are *not* instead of who we are. It is especially persuasive when we are less popular and recognised than our opponents. Apophatic strategies include pitting the unknown (hope, freshness) against the known (disappointing, boring), aspiration (ideals, values) against experience (disappointments, cynicism), and (unspecified) policies against (specified) spin. “All talk and no action.” Obama’s “new car smell” (Miller, 2014).

Shakespeare’s *Julius Cesar* belittles himself as meek orator to distinguish himself from Brutus, the orator in vogue.

I come not, friends, to steal away your hearts.
I am no orator, as Brutus is;
But, as you know me all, a plain blunt man...
For I have neither wit, nor words, nor worth.
Action, nor utterance, nor the power of speech
To stir men’s blood; I only speak right on. (Shakespeare, 1988)

Small voice makes us a small target. We should not rush to abandon a discourse, which is not ours but where our target publics are. It is the premise we have to accept and understand. We have to work first there – could be for very long – before we try to move them to our conclusion (Perelman, 1982). Calculated self-negation comes to help. We openly submit to that discourse and tacitly undermine it by *inner* withdrawal. We gradually disown it by diminishing, mocking or falling our role in it. We shift gear and forcefully pull the public out of the premise to our conclusion *only* when our discourse gathers enough torque and has chance for success.

From Julius Cesar back to Theresa May. In the contest to replace the Leader of the Conservative Party and Prime Minister, David Cameron, after the UK Brexit vote in 2016, she gave a speech. In it she used apophasis to turn the disadvantage of not being one of the winner MPs who had campaigned for UK to leave the EU (especially Michal Gov) into an advantage:

I know I'm not a showy politician. I don't tour the television studios. I don't gossip about people over lunch. I don't go drinking in Parliament's bars. I don't often wear my heart on my sleeve. I just get on with the job in front of me" (Rentoul, 2016).

In the same speech May promised that in case she was elected Leader (and thus Prime Minister), she would lead a "boring and competent" government. "Boring" is a code for "small target". At the same time it reinforces the notion of good government as silent government as the opposite of noisy government. A government that evades the radar of the media not because it is undemocratic, but – if good news is bad news – because there is nothing to report. A government that is not at issue.

"Small voice" is a strategy of silence as old as the world. In ancient Greek, the rhetoric Isocrates claimed that he was not a good orator. He only had a "small voice". Some contemporaries and also scholars from later epochs took him at his words. But there is another hypothesis. He used his supposed *mikrophōnia* to distance himself from the figure of the "great orator" and "new politician". Cleon's rantings, for example, notoriously represented the decay of the mores, courts and civil institutions during his time. Witness of noisy and poisonous "democratic virtues", Isocrates retreated to his silent, unassuming and self-effacing art of writing and teaching. "A 'small voice' is associated with a life of quietude, responsibility, that is political non-involvement, and with the abandoned democratic virtues, above all 'moderation'" (Too, 1995, p. 8)³. Moderation, impish stillness may have – who knows – spared him Socrates' fait.

The public communication lesson here is not that if you are, for example, a small business you have to lower your voice and sink as a target. On the contrary, small businesses usually occupy niches, which allow them to have a choice. They are usually boring and trivial subjects of conversation. The media are rarely after them. They can be easily silent and invisible – if they choose to. Their problem is not looking smaller; their problem is looking bigger. It is the optics of blowout.

The lesson is rather for the big corporations and political institutions, which are under constant, systemic media scrutiny. For them, silence and invisibility as being outside the media sphere is not an option. They do not have that luxury. Their problem is that they have to incessantly feed the media cycle. There is no outside. They can only be silent in what they say and invisible in what they show. And here strategy, including of small voice and small target, comes into play for the big ones.

CEOs and politicians often confuse strategy and tactic (Tiffen, 2012). The need to be constantly winning fixates them on the short-term communication objectives,

including involuntary reactions. They overrate the role of positive spin. They overreact to tangential issues. Strategic silence gives way to tactical noise. Yet obsession with not losing any battle rarely leads to winning the war. Small voice, moderation and keeping it cool may protect big organisations from the detrimental impact of tactical thinking on long-term decision-making.

The spell of uncompromised reality

Terence Martin explores the negative structures of American literature. For him, US identity is built on apophasis. "America is not Britain." America as a "blank sheet". The New World as the negation of the Old one – from Judd and Melville to Paine and Whitman (Martin, 1985). He sees the same in advertising. For example, Seven-Up was for a number of years known as "Uncola". It appeared on TV commercial in 1983 as a beverage with "No caffeine, no artificial flavours, no artificial colours." At roughly the same time, Perrier's advertising positioned the mineral water as "clear" and "pure":

Earth's first soft drink. Not manufactured, but created by the earth when it was new. [Perrier remains] clear, pure and sparkling, and minus all those additives that civilisation has invented. There's no sugar. No artificial sweetener. No calories. There's no caffeine, no colouring. And Perrier is recommended for salt-free diets, as well. (Martin, 1985, p. 8)

"When [the earth] was new." *Brand-new*, I would add. Apophasis is a strategy of *brand differentiation*. In markets with material saturation, it differentiates ideally. It is anchored in reality, in which we already live. But it is a perfected, retouched reality – with all wrinkles boldly denied or subtly photoshopped.

Shellharbour is two hours drive from Sydney on the Illawarra South Coast. The visitor's guide touts the paradise to tourists and "sea changers":

We admit it, there's a lot that you're used to that won't find in Shellharbour. At first, you won't notice what you are missing, but slowly it'll become very obvious.

For a start, we don't have crowds. Even if we're busy we don't feel jammed up or hassled, because we've got of space everywhere [...]

We don't have parking meters. They're for places with too many people, driving too many cars and not enough spaces to part them. They make you feel like you should not be there, and they make you pay for the privilege of being unwanted.

We don't have traffic jams. They're for people who don't value their own time but like wasting petrol and feeding parking meters.

We don't have air you can see or water you can't see through [...]

We don't have noise. Well, not the annoying, headache-inducing kind you get from the city traffic, flight paths and heavy industry [...] You'll also miss out on feeling stressed and hassled, tired and worn down, put out and put upon.

You see, it's the things we don't have that make us who we are and how well we feel – relaxed, informal, friendly and good humoured. (South Coast NSW, 2014)

Negated are the symptoms of urban malaise, the fallouts from the marketplace, and the sacrifices one makes to take advantage of the big city. Apophasis humanises the loss. It wakes up forgotten dreams of childhood. It distils memories; it frees from conventions. It appeals with native, stylised and idyllic (if not utopian) values. The new brand positions itself “in a void beyond definition”. It addresses the “grievous need to negate”. It offers an original, uncompromised reality (Martin, 1985, p. 8).

There is a strong link between strategies of negation and relationships building. In the Bakhtin/Vološhinov paradigm, emotion and evaluation are essential elements of genuine conversation, which in turn is a prerequisite for actual relations between active publics (Vološhinov, 1976). Apophasis steps up when high emotion needs representation but finds no words (or other signs). Silence in worship, love, intimacy, mourning, victory and loss symbolises – not only initiates but also celebrates – close bonds. High-value matters, high valence – that is states of extreme feelings (positive or negative) – and situations that prompt extraordinary measures *test* not only the power of signs but also that of relations. Strategies of negation move outside the language to stay inside the relations. If successful, they save the language from itself and the relations for themselves. The language, let alone, does not weaken. But the relations, endowed with silence, appear stronger.

The apophatic turn

Chris Galloway, who has introduced the topic in public relations, argues for a wider adoption of the “apophatic turn”. Globalisation, de-traditionalisation, increase of mediated experience, pluralisation (and fragmentation) of social positions, and emergence of contingent knowledge assist that turn *inwards*, to a *new reflexivity*. Negation may remove misconcepts that arise from imperfect language. In may claim higher, spiritual (not necessarily metaphysic) grounds by refusing profanation by the uniformed. It conveys a sense of the whole against the “literal” (positivist) definitions of its parts. He claims, it is more telling and less risky to define public relations though what is not, instead of what it is (Galloway, 2013).

The apophatic turn marks the transition to modernity and post-modernity. Strategies of negation have always enabled tacit resistance to verbal dominance. In the Soviet Union, aphorisms were an indelible part of such opposition – as the memes today. A pessimist says, “Life cannot get worse”. An optimist says, “Yes, it can”. When people had to choose between two things, a typical reply was “оба

хуже” – “both are worse” (Golinkin, 2016). We see in such impersonal, automated strategies of negation silence working in cultural-critical and post-modern fashion. Again, no professional strategist or communication scholar can make up such pop-art practices of resistance. Yet they already contain everything the apophatic turn can offer.

In “both are worse” we see the Bakhtian rejection of the exclusive and authoritarian binary of “either/or” in favour of the inclusive and carnivalesque “and/and” (Bakhtin, 1984). “Both is worse” flouts the formal logic of someone’s “natural” choices. We also see the Derrida’s rejection and binaries, in which relations of dominant and dominated are camouflaged as equal alternatives (Derrida, 1996). Proverbial and aphoristic negation subverts logic (of dominance). It is absurd that makes sense. And there is even something from Lyotard’s “différend” – a dispute between parties that cannot be equitably resolved because there is no overarching rule of judgement (Lyotard, 1988). (Victims of holocaust cannot disprove holocaust deniers because they are dead. Australian Aborigines cannot claim native title in a legislative tradition of “terra nullius”.) “Both are worse” does not only discard the alternatives as inequitable but also the mere notion of having a choice within a discourse, from which straightjacket we dream to break free.

The apophatic method stresses on the exploration rather than taken for granted and open-ended rather than “business as usual”. Evaluation then would not be self-referential, autopoietic “measuring of the outcomes against the objectives” (Wilcox, Cameron, Ault, & Agee, 2005) but a constant, spontaneous and spiralling quest of reflective “learning loops” (Kanter, 2010).

[...] turning inwards aims not at doing but at undoing, not at constructing but deconstructing. It aims at weakening rather than enhancing the rationalising, calculating, planning dimensions of the self-self relationship [...] It focuses less on purposive decision-making process and more on getting rid of the “tyranny of purposiveness”. Eventually, it aims at the achievement of a void within goals and means, rather than being actively chosen, emerge spontaneously. Goals in the apophatic case are neither pre-given/pre-constituted (as in rational choice theory), nor extremely imposed. (Mouzelis, 2010, p. 273)

Interestingly, the concept of silence as negation makes a case for reconciling communicative action (communication before goals) with strategic action (goals before communication) in Jürgen Habermas’ binary (Habermas, 1985). More precisely, it solves its koan – of the type of “What comes first: the chicken or the egg?” – by merging goals and communication in incessant loops of practice (Tugendhat, 1985). Yet it does it on terms, which are dissimilar, even opposite to the kataphatic, rationalist argumentation of Habermas. The apophatic approach may help overcome the putative – and false, in my understanding – distinction between communicative and strategic action (Dimitrov, 2017). As we have seen, silence as negation may retain its experiential, exploratory and creative thrust and, at the same time, serve well as a strategy of communication.

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¹ See about the use of the apophatic device in literature (Gibbons, 2007; Lorenz, 1989; Martin, 1985) and also in architecture and music (Franke, 2012; Jankelevich, 2003).

² Insinuation also works that way: “I am not saying that he is...” If accused of what he means, one can point at what he has said.

³ I would like to thank Chuck Marsh who gave me the idea of silence as “small voice” and who made me read the seminal book about rhetoric and Isocrates by Yun Lee Too.