Managing talk and non-talk in intercultural interactions: Insights from two Chinese–British business meetings

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Abstract

This paper explores how people's expectations regarding talk and non-talk can affect intercultural interactions. Using discourse data from two Chinese–British business meetings together with follow-up interview comments, it describes instances when the participants reacted differently to talk/non-talk, and considers why the differing reactions occurred. It maintains that 'silence' can be manifested in ways other than physical non-talk, and argues that people's perceptions of silence depend on their expectations. Mismatches in expectations, which can occur frequently in intercultural interactions, can result not only in subjective feelings of 'uncomfortable silence', but may also lead people to feel they have been 'forced' into silence or have not been 'allowed' to be silent.

Introduction

'Could I ask you each to introduce yourselves?' This seemingly straightforward request, which was made by the British chairman of a Chinese–British business meeting, caused consternation and confusion among his Chinese visitors. It is just one of the examples reported in this paper that illustrates how different participants may react significantly differently to issues such as when they should talk, whether they should talk, or when or whether they should keep quiet.

Our analyses led us to reconsider the question as to what silence is, and how it affects intercultural communication. We argue that silence (in the context of communication research) should not be equated simply with the absence of sound, but rather that several types of silence can occur. We maintain that in studying silence, both talk and non-talk should be examined, because this fuller context can reveal more clearly

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any differing expectations and perceptions that the interlocutors may hold. The paper draws on data from two Chinese–British business meetings in order to explore and support these claims.

2. Multiple perspectives for analysing silence

As Jaworski (1993: 24) rightly argues, 'silence has many faces'. Analytically it is vital to study it from multiple perspectives, including manifestations of silence, contextual influences on silence, pragmatic interpretations of silence, and evaluative reactions to silence.

Silence is often manifested physically, and analyses of non-talk (i. e., the absence of sound) examine issues such as *when* the absence occurs, *how frequently* it occurs, and *how long* it lasts. As Walker (1985) points out, most psychologists researching dyadic interaction categorize physical non-talk into two main types: *in-turn* pauses and *switching* pauses. In-turn pauses occur during the utterance of a single speaker, such as hesitation pauses or pauses for rhetorical effect. Switching pauses occur at the margins of speakers' turns, and can be either a response time pause (the gap between the end of the first part of an adjacency pair and the onset of the second part) or an interface pause (the gap between the completion of one adjacency pair or exchange and the onset of the next) (Brotherton 1979, cited by Walker 1985: 62). Within pragmatics, a key issue is whether the physical non-talk is meant to convey any message.

Silence can also be manifested 'informationally', as illustrated by the following authentic example. Helen met her head of department, Martin, who told her that one of the professors in the department was leaving. A few days later, Helen was chatting with a colleague, Eric, and commented to him about this news. Eric was immediately taken aback, and said, 'Oh but I saw Martin yesterday and he didn't say anything to me about it at all'. He then spent a long time trying to understand why Martin had been informationally silent towards him on this issue. On many occasions, physical silence and information silence overlap; for example, if we ask someone for a piece of information and they literally do not reply, their silence is both physical and informational. However, it is quite possible for the person to reply, but not to respond on the issue raised. In this case, there is information silence but not physical silence. In these circumstances, the hearer typically tries to work out whether the information silence is deliberate or inadvertent.

'Participatory' silence is another type of manifestation that particularly applies to group situations. When there are several people participating in a communicative event, there may be no absence of sound (because one or more people are talking throughout), yet certain individ-

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uals may make no verbal contribution at all. This may be noticed or commented on afterwards, and thus can be labelled as 'participatory' silence.

There are no absolute criteria for identifying these various manifestations of silence; rather, people perceive silence subjectively, and this perception depends on their expectations. As Vlad Žegarac (personal communication) suggests, 'non-talk is silence, when talk is expected' (cf. also Johannessen 1974). This definition usefully applies to all three potential manifestations of silence.

Since perceptions of silence depend on people's expectations, analyses need to explore the contextual factors that are likely to influence people's expectations. Of crucial importance here are the conventions/norms associated with the communicative event as to who is permitted to speak, and when. For example, in a British law court, members of the jury are not allowed to ask questions when a witness is being questioned, and in many church services, the congregation is expected to remain attentively silent during the sermon. So any lack of speech by the jury or the congregation at these times would not be interpreted as silence, even though there is both physical and participatory non-talk. Yet if the witness or the priest did not speak at these times, this absence of speech would certainly be perceived as silence because people are expecting them to talk. Clearly, participant roles are crucially important, and as Pan (2000) points out, participant relations, such as hierarchical relations, can also be important. She explains how hierarchical rank influences who speaks how much in Chinese business meetings:

> Most business meetings in my data follow a similar pattern in opening a meeting or a topic. That is, the person highest in ranking position (#1 person) opens the meeting/topic with an introductory remark. Then #1 passes the topic to #2 (the one that comes second in rank). #2 gives details about the topic and opens the discussion. Discussion then follows among other participants, mostly without #1, who remains silent during most of the discussion. #1 does not take up many speaking turns and is not the most voluble speaker in a meeting, but he/she speaks at critical moments to make a decision or to end an argument. (Pan 2000: 80)

When people perceive silence (i. e., when an interlocutor is unexpectedly physically, informationally and/or participatorily silent), people typically try to interpret the silence. This is because the silence is perceived to be relevant, with a communicative import that needs to be figured out. So people try to work out if there was an informative intent (i. e., does the silence have a pragmatic meaning, such as 'I disagree with you' or 'I'm

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angry with you') and if so, what it was, and whether or not the 'silent' person was deliberately trying to communicate this. In addition, people may experience evaluative reactions to the silence. They may feel a range of emotions, such as discomfort, bewilderment or irritation, and at the same time, they may form evaluative judgements of the 'silent' persons, such as that they are unfriendly or lacking in ideas. It is important to remember, however, that silence is not always negatively evaluated; for example, if we are expecting a colleague to dominate decision-making at the next team meeting (on the basis of our previous experience of his/her behaviour at these meetings), and s/he keeps quiet throughout, we may feel pleased that s/he was silent. Nevertheless, we may still try to work out why s/he was silent and whether s/he was trying to convey any message through the silence.

Cross-cultural differences add an extra layer of complication to the analyses, in that differing conventions and expectations at the group level may impact upon people's perceptions of silence, pragmatic interpretations and evaluative reactions at the individual level, and the upshot may be intercultural 'misunderstandings'.

Various authors have pointed out differences across cultures in the normative lengths of between-turn timings; for example, Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1990) in relation to Athabaskan and English; Enninger (1987) re Old Order Amish; Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) re Finnish; and Wieland (1981) re French and American English. Some of them have also discussed the impact of such timing differences on intercultural interactions. Wieland (1981), for example, studied the turn-taking behaviour of French and American guests at dinner parties, and found that the American guests tended to display brief between-turn pauses, whereas the French tended to overlap. These different norms seemed to lead to different expectations, because in follow-up interviews, the Americans claimed that the French interrupted them rudely, whereas the French described the Americans as slow and boring conversationalists. Scollon and Wong-Scollon (1990) similarly argue that communication difficulties can result from even relatively small timing differences in speakers' pausing behaviour at transition relevant places (i.e., points where speakers may change in conversation), and that these can lead to negative stereotyping:

> Generally speaking, Athabaskans allow a slightly longer pause between sentences than do English speakers. The difference is probably not more than half a second in length, but it has an important effect on interethnic communication. … The length of pause that the Athabaskan takes while expecting to continue is just about the length of pause the English speaker takes in exchanging turns. If an Athabaskan

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> has in mind a series of sentences to say, it is most likely that at the end of the first one the English speaker will think that he has finished because of the length of the pause and will begin speaking. The Athabaskan feels he has been interrupted and the English speaker feels the Athabaskan never makes sense, never says a whole coherent idea. Much of this misunderstanding is the result of something like a one-half second difference in the timing of conversational pauses, but it can result in strong stereotypical responses to the opposite ethnic group. (Scollon and Wong-Scollon 1990: 273)

Other studies have found that beliefs about the necessity for talk can be different. For example, Giles *et al.* (1992), in a questionnaire study, compared Chinese and American beliefs about talk with strangers (the Chinese were Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese studying in the United States of America), and found that the Chinese had a significantly higher 'tolerance for silence' than their American respondents did. Similarly, Saville-Troike (1997) argues that Anglo-Americans and Navajo Indians have different norms and beliefs about when people should or should not talk, and gives the following exchange in a kindergarten classroom on a Navajo Reservation as an example:

> A Navajo man opened the door to the classroom and stood silently, looking at the floor. The Anglo-American teacher said 'Good morning' and waited expectantly, but the man did not respond. The teacher then said 'My name is Mrs Jones' and again waited for a response. There was none.
>
> In the meantime, a child in the room put away his crayons and got his coat from the rack. The teacher, noting this, said to the man, 'Oh are you taking Billy now?' He said, 'Yes'.
>
> The teacher continued to talk to the man while Billy got ready to leave, saying, 'Billy is such a good boy', 'I'm so happy to have him in class', etc.
>
> Billy walked towards the man (his father), stopping to turn around and wave at the teacher on his way out and saying 'Bye-bye.' The teacher responded, 'Bye-bye'. The man remained silent as he left. (Saville-Troike 1997: 138−139)

In this exchange, the teacher anticipated a response both to her greeting and to her indirect request for the man to introduce/identify himself, and so when he gave no reply, she perceived this as silence: physical silence (the man made no sound), participatory silence (he did not respond to the words spoken directly to him), and informational silence (he did not identify himself when indirectly requested to do so). The teacher, it

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seems, felt uncomfortable with the silence, and thus continued to talk to the man, presumably trying to work out the pragmatic meaning of his silence. She guessed he must be Billy's father, but seems to have been unable to understand why he was silent. However, the labelling of the man's lack of response as silence could be treated as ethnocentrism, because in Navajo culture (according to Saville-Troike) it is appropriate and polite to refrain from speaking when people first meet, and there is a religious taboo that prohibits individuals from saying their own name. So from the man's point of view he was not 'silent'; he simply did not speak because it was not culturally appropriate for him to do so. From his point of view, the 'problem' was not that he was 'silent' but that the teacher was inappropriately talkative.

3. Background information on the Chinese–British business meetings

3.1 The business background

The meetings analysed in this paper both took place in England at the headquarters of a British engineering company. This British company designs, manufactures and sells an engineering product that is used in industrial plants throughout the world. In every contract signed in China, they agree to host a delegation of up to six people who are involved in some way in the deal. The official purpose of the visit is to inspect the products purchased, to receive technical training, and to have an enjoyable time sightseeing. In reality, though, the products have typically already been shipped and installed, so the visitors are unable to inspect the goods. The British company handles all the administration associated with the visit, and prepares a programme of events which includes a welcome meeting, training sessions, local business visits, sightseeing, shopping and social activities, and ends with a close-out meeting.

The meetings considered in this paper are the welcome meetings of two successive delegation visits. Prior to this (in other words, before our data collection began), the company had received about twelve Chinese delegations, so were relatively experienced in handling them.

3.2 Research procedure

Three types of data were collected for analysis: (1) video recordings of the meetings; (2) field notes about the delegation visit; and (3) comments made by the participants during follow-up interviews and (where possible) playback sessions. The British and Chinese participants were interviewed separately.

In all aspects of the data collection, we endeavoured to maximize the validity and reliability of the data. Over the previous few years, we had

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developed very good relations with staff at the host company. And during the visit, one of us (Xing Jianyu) spent as much time as possible socially with the Chinese visitors in order to build up a good rapport with them (e. g., accompanying them on sightseeing trips). We did this deliberately, so that both British and Chinese participants would have confidence in us, so that they would not feel too uneasy about the recording, and so that they would be honest and open with us in the interviews and playback sessions. We were very satisfied with the ways in which they seemed to 'conduct their business as normal' and with their cooperation during the follow-up sessions.

4. Differing perceptions and reactions to talk and non-talk

This section reports some instances in the meetings when the British and Chinese participants differed significantly in their awareness of and preferences for talk/non-talk, and in their reactions to the talk/non-talk that actually occurred.

4.1 Welcome meeting one

The delegation for this particular visit comprised six Chinese engineers. They arrived at London Heathrow Airport very early one morning, were driven to their hotel in the town where the British company was located, and were then taken to the British company headquarters for an introductory welcome meeting later that morning.

The welcome meeting took place in a rather small room with a rectangular table in it. The British chairman sat at one end (i. e., the 'head') of the table, and another British staff member sat at the other end of the table. The Chinese visitors sat around the rest of the table, and other British staff sat or stood behind the seated people. When the delegation arrived, it emerged that it did not include an interpreter, so Jianyu Xing was asked to be an on-the-spot interpreter; Xing sat/stood at the oppo-

Table 1. *The structure of the welcome meeting during delegation visit one.*

Stage		Duration	Time of Start and End
Meeting Start			11.19.21
	Pre-meeting	14'42	11.19.21 – 11.34.03
Meeting		13'58	11.34.03 – 11.48.01
	Post-meeting	6'39	11.48.01 – 11.54.40
Total Meeting Time		35'19	

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site end of the table to the chairman to do this. The other one of us operated the video camera in the background.

The outline structure of the welcome meeting is shown in Table 1.

4.1.1 Between-turn pauses. As can be seen from Table 1, the pre-meeting phase was slightly longer than the core meeting phase – the visitors waited for almost 15 minutes before the welcome meeting officially started. This was because the chairman (who was the Sales Manager for China) was first of all waiting for some of his British colleagues to arrive, and then he was called away to take an important international telephone call. During this pre-meeting phase, a lot of between-turn pauses occurred. The following extract illustrates two such moments of non-talk in an interchange between the British chairman and a Chinese senior engineer:

Extract (1) At the beginning of the meeting, just after the exchange of business cards, the British chairman initiates a conversation with one member of the Chinese delegation.
BC = British Chairman; CSE = Chinese Senior Engineer
Start time: 11.21.51

BC: Mr (surname) (.) d'you do you speak English?
CSE: a little
BC: a little.
CSE: yes.
BC: I (1) I have not seen you before (.) in Shanghai.
CSE: yes.
BC: yeah?
CSE: yes. I'm in pressure (?) parts. maybe (product name) in another group.
BC: right. so you're connected with the um (3) evaporator (?).
CSE: design the pressure parts.
BC: fine.
CSE: but including that (product name) and duct some piping.
BC: uhhuh.
CSE: piping. some piping.
BC: right.
→ (5)
BC: we're we're just waiting (.) for some colleagues to come, (1) and then (1) we will start.
→ (13)
BC: how is (1) how is Dr Liu? I heard he was in hospital.
[Conversation continues]

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Table 2 shows the frequency and duration of between-turn pauses during the preliminary stage of the meeting that were 2 seconds or longer.

Table 2. *Between-turn pauses in the pre-meeting phase.*

Start Time	Initiator	Description of Events and Discourse Topics
11.19.21		Preliminaries: exchange of business cards, serving of drinks etc.
11.21.51	British	British chairman talks with a Chinese senior engineer about where he works.
11.22.30		*5 secs. of non-talk*
11.22.35	British	British chairman explains that they are waiting for some British colleagues to arrive.
11.22.42		*13 secs. of non-talk*
11.22.55	British	British chairman talks with Chinese senior engineer about his factory and his superior.
11.24.26		*2 secs. of non-talk*
11.24.28	British	British chairman talks about his visit to the factory where the other Chinese visitors work.
11.26.36		British chairman called out of the room to take an international phone call.
11.26.38	British	British staff introduce themselves, and the administrator briefly describes arrangements for the two-week visit.
11.29.09		*3 secs. of non-talk*
11.29.12		States that they'll wait until the British chairman returns.
11.29.14		*12 secs. of non-talk*
11.29.26	British	British manager asks about their flight over, mistakenly addressing the researcher.
11.29.51		*4 secs. of non-talk*
11.29.55	British	The same question is addressed to the delegation, and the Chinese senior engineer comments on their flight.
11.30.42		*7 secs. of non-talk*
11.30.49	British	British manager asks how they like British weather.
11.31.16		*4 secs. of non-talk*
11.31.20	British	Several British comment on recent weather and joke about it.
11.31.39		*8 secs. of non-talk*
11.31.47	British	British manager asks who can speak English and Chinese senior engineer explains.
11.32.05		*6 secs. of non-talk*
11.32.11	Chinese	*Further comments about people's language skills.*
11.32.26		*17 secs. of non-talk*
11.32.43	British	British talk to each other about where the British chairman has gone. They decide to start the meeting.
11.32.50		*15 secs. of non-talk*
11.33.05	British	Administrator starts the meeting.
11.33.15		*British chairman returns*
11.33.24		*22 secs. of non-talk*
11.33.46	British	British chairman apologises.
11.34.00		*3 secs. of non-talk*
11.34.03	British	British chairman starts meeting.

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As can be seen, there were frequent pauses or moments of non-talk during this pre-meeting phase. Occasionally there was some activity at the time, such as pouring drinks, but in nearly all cases there was nothing noticeable taking place either verbally or non-verbally. Various conversational topics were introduced, and these were always initiated by the British. The only exception to this was at 11.32.11 when the Chinese senior engineer added a further comment about the delegation members' proficiency in English, and this led on to a brief further discussion of the topic. The frequency and duration of the pauses increased noticeably after the British chairman left the room – partly because he was quite gifted at engaging in relational talk, and maybe partly because easy conversational topics had been exhausted.

Both of us were present at this welcome meeting, and both of us were very conscious of the British efforts to keep the conversation going, and the discomfort that the British were feeling over the non-talk. Signs such as tense body posture, uncomfortable glances at each other, and nervous laughter displayed their awkwardness, and they suggest that the British felt these pauses/moments of non-talk should not be occurring. In other words, for the British, the non-talk was perceived as silence. When we have played the video of the meeting at conferences or in lectures, most Westerners have again displayed discomfort (e. g., by shifting in their seats), and have commented afterwards how awkward and embarrassing they found the pausing to be. Again, it suggests that they perceived the non-talk as silence.

In contrast, the Chinese visitors appeared very relaxed. Their body posture was not tense, there were no awkward glances from one to another, and they did not seem to be concerned about the moments of non-talk. Similarly, most Chinese students (and some other nationalities) who have watched the video have felt quite comfortable with the pausing, and have commented on this afterwards. Two different interpretations of this are possible. It could be that the Chinese visitors had different expectations regarding the acceptability of non-talk at the beginning of a welcome meeting and/or of the acceptable length of between turn pauses; in other words, the Chinese may not have perceived the pauses/non-talk as silence. Alternatively, they may have perceived it as silence, but not felt uncomfortable with it because they believed it was the British participants' responsibility to initiate conversation, not theirs.

4.1.2 In-turn pauses. Throughout the welcome meeting, the British chairman spoke at a noticeably slow speed; in fact, the tempo of his speech was not only slower than that of the other British participants, but also slower than that of the Chinese senior engineer (the only Chinese delegation member who spoke in English at the meeting). This was

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partly (but by no means completely) due to the very high frequency of in-turn pausing, especially during his longer turns. The following extract illustrates such pausing.

Extract (2) During the pre-meeting phase, the British Chairman recounts his experiences when visiting the delegation members' hometown.
BC = British Chairman; CSE = Chinese senior engineer
Start time: 11.24.28

BC: but the thing I remember about Qingdao is the beer.
CSE: Qingdao beer is famous beer.
BC: yes.
CSE: in China. and also in the world.
BC →: yeah. But there their colleagues (1) they they took me to dinner (1) uh (2) two times (2) and they they tell me (1) that it is a a custom in Qingdao (1) that (1) each time (1) a local person (1) toasts (.) one glass (1) the foreigner has to drink two glasses.

Many native speakers of English who have watched the video recording of the meeting have evaluated the British chairman negatively, regarding his slow speed, frequent pausing, simplified sentence structure and simplified choice of vocabulary as patronising. However, non-native speakers have usually taken a very different stance; they have regarded his conversational style as helpful accommodation towards the fluency level of his Chinese interlocutors.

In a follow-up interview, the British Chairman explained that he deliberately spoke slowly and simply with pauses, because he felt it would give the visitors a better opportunity to understand what he was saying. Although the Chinese did not comment on it specifically in their follow-up interview, they were very positive in their evaluation of him, and by no means felt he was arrogant or patronising.

So in the case of in-turn pauses, none of the participants of the meeting (neither the British nor the Chinese) perceived them as silence. They also did not evaluate them negatively; on the contrary, the Chinese may well have regarded them positively. It is important to remember, therefore, that evaluations of in-turn pausing and of the people 'producing' it can differ significantly, depending on people's assumptions and expectations as to what an appropriate speed and manner of delivery is.

4.1.3 Giving a return speech. During the main phase of the welcome meeting, the British chairman gave a welcome speech, introduced each

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of the British staff, talked about the arrangements for the visit, and then brought the formal part of the meeting to a close. During the whole of this phase, none of the Chinese visitors said anything at all. However, during the post-meeting stage, both the Chinese senior engineer and the official leader of the Chinese delegation tried to signal their desire to say something. In both cases they were either misinterpreted or unnoticed by the British, but undaunted, they simply proceeded to give brief return speeches, as shown by the following extracts:

Extract (3) Two members of the Chinese delegation take the initiative to give a return speech during the post-meeting phase.
CSE = Chinese senior engineer; COL = Chinese Official Leader
BC = British Chairman; Lynn = British Administrator; Sajid = British Project Engineer[1]; INT = 'On-the-spot' Interpreter
Start time: 11.48.27

CSE: we're (1) we're =
BC: = sorry I didn't introduce Lynn, this is Lynn. Lynn's our project administrator (1) and she organised your flights (.) your hotels (1) and um you'll see a lot of her during your trip. and if she can help in any way (.) please (1) don't hesitate to ask her.
CSE: we're very thank you for you tell us something and um (1) um (1) mister [gesturing towards Sajid and Lynn] and another people here arranged us the hotel is very good. uh very good.
Lynn: oh good.
…

[Some small talk is taking place between the British chairman and the Chinese senior engineer. Meanwhile, the official Chinese delegation leader leans forward and leans back again, but at first is unable to take his turn.]

BC: what was your first impression when you came from the airport?
INT: [interprets into Chinese]
[COL: leans forward and leans back again]
CSE: maybe London is bigger. London. London City is bigger. drive a long time. and also in (???)
INT: bigger than Shanghai?
CSE: um maybe.
COL: [leans forward] *I* =
BC: = I think there was a prob+

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COL: *I I think that we six have come to London, entrusted by our authorities, to see how things are here, it is our first time over here, and we are very pleased. The first impression is that the people in this country are very warm and friendly, especially those two* [pointing at Lynn and Sajid] *are very warm and friendly. And the cities are very beautiful, very clean.*
INT: [interprets into English]
BC: thank you.

Note: words in italics were originally spoken in Chinese and only the interpreted version has been included here.

The Chinese were clearly expecting to be given the opportunity to give a return speech, and when this did not occur during the main stage of the meeting, they were conscious of the participatory (and maybe informational) silence that had (inadvertently) been forced upon them. When they realised that the meeting was drawing to a close, they both took steps to rectify the situation, and simply gave their return speeches. Meanwhile, the British remained oblivious to the participatory silence that the Chinese had perceived during the main stage of the meeting. (See also section 4.2.2.)

4.2 Welcome meeting two

The second delegation visit also comprised six Chinese engineers. They had arrived the day before, and since that was a Sunday, they spent the remainder of that day resting. The following morning they were brought to the company headquarters for the introductory welcome meeting.

The welcome meeting took place in the same room as for Visit One and with the same seating arrangements. A Chinese engineer, who was studying at a local British university, was recruited by the British company to be the interpreter during the visit.

For this meeting, the timings were very smooth − no one was kept waiting and the pre-meeting phase was brief. Unlike in Welcome Meeting One, there were very few between-turn pauses, and the British chairman (who was different from the person chairing Welcome Meeting One) did not obviously slow down his speech or display many in-turn pauses. However, the giving of the return speech was once again problematic, and the introducing of the visitors also emerged as an issue.

4.2.1 Team introductions. Shortly after the British chairman had welcomed the visitors, he asked the British staff to introduce themselves. When they had done this, he invited each of the Chinese visitors to

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introduce themselves. This immediately caused confusion among the visitors. The delegation leader turned to consult the others, and one of them requested in Chinese that he do it on their behalf. The leader then started to speak on behalf of everyone, but the interpreter interrupted him saying, in Chinese, that they should first introduce themselves. This resulted in further worried faces and discussion in Chinese, and it was nearly a minute before the visitors started introducing themselves individually. However, the delegation leader was still not sure what to say for his own personal introduction, and several of his colleagues prompted him. This can be seen from the following extract.

Extract (4) The British participants have just finished introducing themselves, and the British Chairman asks the Chinese visitors to do that.
BC = British Chairman; COL = Chinese Official Leader; INT = Interpreter; CH1, CH2, CH3 & CH4 = Other Chinese members of the delegation

BC: could could I now ask if if the members (.) could each introduce themselves so that we can learn (.) um (.) who they are and what their interests are.
INT: [interprets into Chinese]
[Time = 10.13.32 hours]
COL: [turns to colleagues and discusses with them and the interpreter in Chinese]
COL: *we each introduce ourselves*
CH1: *it's best if you do it on our behalf*
[Time = 10.14.06 hours]
COL: [reading from a script] *first of all, to [X] Company=*
INT: *=no no. he said first introduce yourselves (.) I am [surname] from [name] Company*
[Time = 10.14.21 hours]
COL: *I am [surname] from Company [name]*
INT: [interprets into English]
CH2: *say what you do*
COL: *I'm involved in design*
CH3: *give your full name (.) full name (.) full name (.) say you're a design engineer*
COL: *design engineer*
INT: [interprets into English]
CH4: *I am the director of the [product] Department of Company [name]*
INT: [interprets into English]
[Chinese delegation members continue to introduce themselves.]

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In the follow-up interview and playback of the video recording, the British Chairman commented how confused he was at this. He could not understand why they did not just proceed, and assumed there must be some kind of interpreting problem. The Chinese, however, in their follow-up interview argued that the delegation leader should have spoken on their behalf, and that 'this is the normal way'. In other words, the Chinese wanted everyone except the leader to be participatorily silent at this point, whilst the British assumed that everyone would be participatorily active in the team introductions.

4.2.2 Giving a return speech. Since the interpreter interrupted the Chinese delegation leader as he started to give his return speech, he was prevented from giving it at this point. He had clearly prepared it, because he started to read from a written text, yet no other suitable opportunity arose (or was given) during the remainder of the meeting. The Chinese were deeply offended by this, and commented as follows in the follow-up interview:

> Comment (1): (Chinese Delegation Leader)
>
> *According to our home customs and protocol, speech is delivered on the basis of reciprocity. He has made his speech and I am expected to say something. … Condescension was implied. In fact I was reluctant to speak, and I had nothing to say. But I had to, to say a few words. Right for the occasion, right? But he had finished his speech, and he didn't give me the opportunity, and they each introduced themselves, wasn't this clearly implied that they do look down upon us Chinese.* [Translated from Chinese]

In other words, the Chinese leader was 'forced' to be informationally silent in terms of the return speech (although not physically or particpatorily silent since he spoke). The British, however, were completely unaware that the Chinese felt 'silenced' over giving a return speech and that they were thereby offended. In fact, the British Chairman claimed in the follow-up interview that the Chinese delegation members were much more casual than they had been a few years previously, and that they were no longer concerned about protocol in meetings, such as the giving of (return) speeches.

5. Factors influencing the differing perceptions and reactions

The differing perceptions and reactions described in the last section probably result from a complex interplay of factors.

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As explained in section 2, a number of researchers have reported that different cultural groups may have different generalised norms regarding the temporal management of turn-taking. In some cultural groups, it is usual for there to be virtually no physical gap between the end of one speaker's talk and the beginning of the next, whilst within other groups, that normative gap may be one second or longer. To the best of our knowledge, no studies have investigated whether such generalised differences exist between Chinese and British English speakers. Nevertheless, if Chinese were found to have greater tolerance for pausing at transition relevant places, this could explain why they were less uncomfortable with the pausing than the British were.

However, pausing and patterns of talk/non-talk are also intimately connected with people's conceptions of the role-related obligations of the participants, and this is likely to be a major explanatory factor. The meetings took place at the headquarters of the British company, so the British were hosts and the Chinese were guests. In Welcome Meeting One, when there was a delay to the start of the meeting, the British, as hosts, probably felt more of an obligation to 'keep the conversation going' than the Chinese did. When they had difficulties doing this, it is only natural that they would feel more awkward or anxious than the Chinese.

Furthermore, in high power distance societies (such as the People's Republic of China) (Hofstede 2001), it is normal and common practice for team members not to talk during formal meetings while the delegation leader speaks on behalf of the whole group (cf. Pan 2000). So in both welcome meetings, all the Chinese visitors except the delegation leaders were probably simply assuming that none of them had any responsibility to say anything, and that it was perfectly acceptable for them to sit without talking. They therefore probably felt no obligation to speak, and were relaxed in that assumption. In contrast, the delegation leaders assumed it was their duty to speak on behalf of the group, and were disconcerted when they were not given that opportunity. The British, on the other hand, were more egalitarian in approach. They assumed that omission of formal protocol would be preferred, and thus did not invite the Chinese to give a return speech, and treated all delegation members equally in terms of who was expected to contribute turns.

Yet another factor could be people's perceptions of the relative importance of task versus relationship. The British probably felt awkward in Welcome Meeting One, not simply because of the pausing, but also because there was a delay to the start of the meeting and thus to getting on with the task. They were trying their best to 'fill in the time' before the key part, which was the meeting itself. The Chinese, on the other hand, seemed to appreciate the relaxed start because of the opportunity it gave for relationship building. It is frequently argued that Chinese

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(and many other Asians, too) attach great importance to relationship building, and that this is a pre-condition for successful business (see, for example, Harris and Moran 1987). The period of waiting allowed the British Chairman to talk with them about their home towns, and for other British staff to engage in small talk with them about their trip, the weather, and so on. In fact, they seemed to appreciate that very much.[2] It was missing from Welcome Meeting Two, which launched almost immediately into the main part of the meeting, and yet that visit was much less successful. So rather ironically, what could be seen as bad organisation on the part of the British – not getting the staff to arrive on time for the meeting – in fact turned out to have positive consequences, in so far as it led the British to engage in social talk (albeit with pauses), in a way that they almost certainly would not have done if the delay had not occurred. This seemed to be more important to the Chinese than any awkwardness associated with the pauses that interspersed it.

6. Implications for intercultural communication

Cross-cultural and intercultural communication studies of silence have tended to focus on physical non-phonation and the problems that can arise when there are differing norms and expectations associated with it. Whilst we agree that this can be extremely important, we argue that analyses should go both deeper and further when considering silence in intercultural interactions.

Three types of talk/non-talk need to be studied: physical, informational and participatory. In line with the definition that 'non-talk is silence when talk is expected', we need to study people's perceptions of silence in relation to their expectations within these three aspects. Potential matches and mismatches in the expectations that the interlocutors presume they mutually share can then be mapped as shown in Table 3.[3]

The mismatches can be classified into two types, according to which interlocutor expects (or does not expect) talk to occur. These two types can then lead to different upshots for the different interlocutors, depending on whether the turn-holder actually talks or does not talk. These upshots are shown in Table 4.

As can be seen from Table 4, one interlocutor typically experiences some kind of emotional reaction and/or evaluative reaction, whilst the other may be completely unaware that anything unexpected or untoward has happened. Needless to say, the strength and nature of people's reactions will vary according to circumstances (e. g., personality, importance of the interaction to them), and this includes whether the interlocutor

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Table 3. *Potential matches and mismatches in expectations of talk, information exchange and participation.*

Physical Talk			
		Turn-holder	
		Expects Someone to Speak at Given Point	*Does not expect Anyone to Speak at Given Point*
Turn-giver	*Expects Someone to Speak at Given Point*	Matching Expectation	Mismatching Expectation: Type 2
	Does not Expect Anyone to Speak at Given Point	Mismatching Expectation: Type 1	Matching Expectation
Information Exchange			
		Turn-holder	
		Expects to Give Information Y	*Does not expect to Give Information Y*
Turn-giver	*Expects to Hear Information Y*	Matching Expectation	Mismatching Expectation: Type 2
	Does not expect to Hear Information Y	Mismatching Expectation: Type 1	Matching Expectation
Participation			
		Turn-holder	
		Expects to speak at a Given Point	*Does not Expect to speak at a Given Point*
Turn-giver	*Expects other to speak at Given Point*	Matching Expectation	Mismatching Expectation: Type 2
	Does not Expect other to speak at Given Point	Mismatching Expectation: Type 1	Matching Expectation

expects something *not* to happen, or simply does not expect it to happen. A negative reaction is much more likely to occur in the former case than the latter, because there is a value judgement associated with it. For example, when the British chairman invited the visitors to introduce themselves individually, their surprise could have been associated with disapproval (e. g., because of a strong belief that only leaders should speak in such circumstances) or it could have dissipated quickly because the visitors were happy to do it, even though they did not normally do so. The former situation is much more likely to lead to a negative evaluation than the latter, and draws attention to the importance of exploring how people's values and beliefs affect their expectations.

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Table 4. *Potential upshots from mismatches of expectations.*

	Turn-holder Talks	*Turn-holder does* not *Talk*
Type 1 Mismatch of Expectation (Turn-holder expects to talk, turn-giver does not expect turn-holder to talk)	Turn-giver experiences some kind of emotional reaction (e. g., surprise, sense of domination) Turn-holder may be unaware Turn-giver may evaluate A negatively	Turn-holder perceives 'enforced' silence and may experience some kind of emotional reaction (e. g., disrespected) Turn-giver may be unaware Turn-holder may evaluate other negatively
Type 2 Mismatch of Expectation (Turn-holder does not expect to talk, turn-giver expects turn-holder to talk)	Turn-holder experiences some kind of emotional reaction (e. g., annoyance, coercion) Turn-giver may be unaware Turn-holder may evaluate other negatively	Turn-giver perceives silence and may experience some kind of emotional reaction (e. g., discomfort) Turn-holder may be unaware Turn-giver may evaluate other negatively

The differing reactions of the Chinese and British delegation members reported in this article illustrate the genuine interactional consequences of mismatches in expectations. Issues of talk and non-talk prominently affected the meetings, but in different ways for different participants. Only by studying silence within this fuller context (i. e., by analysing both talk and non-talk, rather than just physical non-phonation of a certain minimum length of time) do the full complexities of effective management of talk and non-talk in intercultural interactions begin to emerge.

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Notes

1. All the names of participants have been changed.
2. Although Giles *et al.*'s (1992) study of beliefs about talk found Chinese to have a higher tolerance for non-talk than Americans, that study focused on talk with strangers, whereas the interactions reported here are between business associates. As Pan (2000) explains, type of relationship has a major impact on Chinese interactional behaviour.
3. In dyadic interactions, physical talk and participation expectations cannot always be differentiated, but in interactions involving multiple interlocutors they need to be differentiated.

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Transcription conventions

(.) pauses of less than one second
(3) pauses of the length indicated
= latching
+ unfinished word
(??) unintelligible speech
Overlapping is shown by the layout

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