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Mutism – one of the research areas of applied linguistics[1]

If you cannot be silent,
you will not be able to hear what is left unsaid.

Ewa Sonnenberg (2003)

Key words: mutism, lack of speech, pause, latency

Słowa kluczowe: niemówienie, milczenie, przemilczenie, pauza, latencja wypowiedzi

Introduction

The proper language development of the human being enables the man to carry out cognitive activities whose effect is 'conceptually organized knowledge' (Grabias 2012: 16), communication with the environment and socialization. Speech gives the human being a number of possibilities for individual and community development. Of course, there are numerous disorders that make it difficult or impossible for a person to use the potential of speech, causing that what is given to people as a species cannot serve him or her.

However, speaking is also a volitional act. Knowledge of the language itself, the ability to speak, properly functioning central and peripheral nervous system as well as functional speech organs may not be sufficient if the potential sender of the speech does not feel the need for its implementation (Skoczek 2015). It is always possible to speak or not to speak.

One aspect of the title phenomenon is significant. While speaking, and thus making the statement, we do not only use the sound components. In the speech, two phenomena are linked together: speaking and mutism. Exclusion of any of them results in the creation of sound forms that are difficult or impossible to be received, or conversion of such forms into silence. 'Linguistic behaviour is equally composed of two parts – sound and silence' (cf. Rokoszowa 1994: 27), thus it is important to review the non-verbal parts of the statement carefully as well.

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[1] Fragments of this article come from the author's doctoral dissertation *Tempo of children's utterances.*

Regarding mutism as the opposite of speaking, it is possible, while attempting to characterize it, to apply the formula[2] created on the basis of the well-known definition of 'talking' by Renata Grzegorczyk. The negative form of the indicated definition enables to indicate the phenomenon of mutism in the situation where 'the sender' (not) wishing to communicate particular information to the recipient, does not select the appropriate vocabulary and grammatical structures from the language code, does not activate the verbal organs to implement the form of selected language units, as a result which the sender does not send acoustic waves to the ear of the recipient in whose receiving organs the reception of sound and its mental interpretation does not take place (cf. Michalik, Cholewiak et al., 2016; Michalik 2013, cf. Grzegorczykowa 2007). Consequently, it can be said that it is 'the lack of a unitary speech-receiving act of speech' (Michalik, Cholewiak et al., 2016).

I will present my own definition of 'mutism' in the next part of the article.

'Mutism' – terminological approach[3]

I suggest to discuss the broadly understood mutism in the situations when the potential sender, depending on or notwithstanding the sender's own will, does not undertake verbal interaction (silence) or, taking part in such an interaction, excessively uses the means[4] that do not constitute purposeful articulation of the speech sounds (filled pauses), and also when the non-verbal signals[5] dominate in the sender's message (concealments and proper pauses). At the same time, mutism should be treated as the basis, background for making the statement. Within its scope, it is possible to specify significant or non-significant components.

The given definition allows to include the following phenomena within the scope of the notion of 'selective mutism', 'concealment' and 'pause' (Michalik, Cholewiak et al., 2016), which were already included in the discussion regarding the language (Rokoszowa 1983, 1994; Handke 2008), and recently also in the index of the issues of contemporary theory and practice of speech therapy (Michalik 2013; Michalik, Cholewiak et al., 2016).

The following figure shows the above-mentioned relationships:

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[2] The quoted definition is taken from the article: *Mutism, selective mutism, staying silent, pause – serious gaps in the theory and practice of speech therapy* (Michalik, Cholewiak et al., 2016).

[3] The quoted definition of "mutism" was created for the needs of an unpublished doctoral thesis entitled *Tempo of children's utterances* (Solak 2018).

[4] In each speech, you can indicate the places where you expect the pause, which can segment the utterance More frequent use of the indicated type of pauses, and thus their use within the sentence phrases, or their significant extension (over 2 seconds), can be considered as excessive use of this measure.

[5] The degree of saturation of the message with non-verbal signals must be very high repair, so that you can talk about mutism. If 80% of utterances were proper pauses and silence, then 20% of the message remains. The research conducted by me as part of my doctoral thesis showed that about 40% of children's utterances constitute various pauses, hence the censorship in the case of the discussed phenomenon is very difficult.
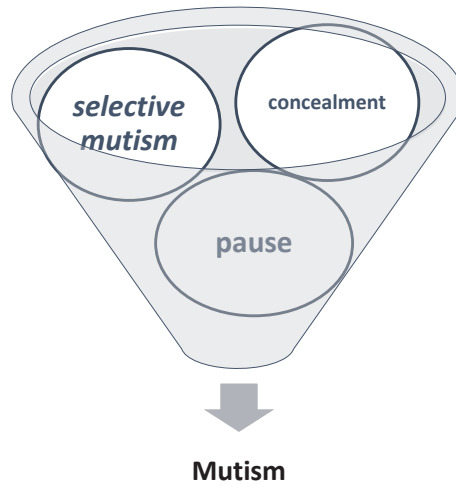
Fig. 1. The terminological scope of the notion of 'mutism' (the author's own elaboration)

The components of mutisms hould also be grouped in relation to their semantic value regarding the phenomena of linguistic communication.
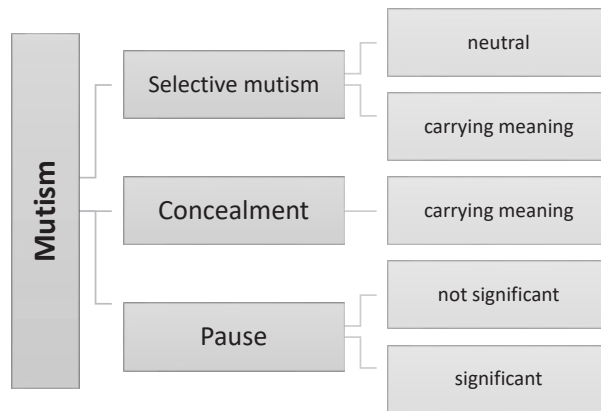

Fig. 2. Semantic values of the components of mutism (the author's own elaboration)

Acquisition of the awareness about the phenomena indicated within the scope of mutism as well as gaining the ability of their application is not a one-step process. 'First, we learn to speak and – simultaneously – use pauses and prolonged silence, naturally inscribed in the articulatory structure. Then, we begin to understand the sense and meaning of the intentional and situational silence. Finally, we learn to use silence as a non-verbal, yet, a significant component of social communication' (Handke 2008: 18). This process seems to be very complex, and, in turn, the skills gained thanks to it – important from the point of view of interpersonal communication.

Each of the above-mentioned phenomena requires a separate description.

Silence

Paradoxically, silence constitutes an important phenomenon for the human language sphere. Cyprian Kamil Norwid, trying to include it in 'grammar of all languages' wrote: 'I am announcing that the entire one PART OF THE SPEECH is released from the existing grammars. And it is the one on which the cliché is built and vaulted – and not even one cliché, but also the next logical short introductory statement and the theme of the third and fourth one…' (1922: 37–38). It is silence[6] that Norwid assigned a significant role in communication. On the one hand, it constitutes a neutral ground for the statement. On the other hand, without doubt, it is able to communicate since interpersonal communication does not proceed just through spoken words.

Izydora Dąmbska sets out the basic two areas of understanding of the notion of 'selective mutism': 'We can speak about selective mutism in at least two senses: the broader one and narrower one. In the broader sense, the entire act of being speechless is mutism […]. In the narrower sense selective mutism, is the result of the conscious abstention from saying words' (1963: 73). However, identification of selective mutism with mutism does not seem completely correct in this perspective. It is difficult to define the not significant silent pause[7] as a selective mutism, but it can by certainly characterized by the term 'mutism'. Therefore, with the description of selective mutism and other phenomena inscribed in the sphere of mutism, it is worth referring to their semantic value.

Assuming that selective mutism exists regardless of the language system, yet, it is somehow necessary to make the statements since only the statement made on it can reach the recipient and be properly understood, and also that in the communication process it is possible to choose 'between using the language and the selective mutism' (Rokoszowa 1994: 33), I consider the existence of semantically neutral selective mutism, which fulfills the function of the cognizable world in Rokoszowa and it is an unmarked background for language – transcendent silence (Śniatkowski 2002; Rokoszowa 1994) and selective mutism carrying the meaning that is purposefully used in communication and it is able to express specific content' (cf. Śniatkowski 2002: 10). This simplified division results from the adopted linguistic perspective.

In communication, selective mutism not being the background for speech, can be characterized in combination with speech in the form of five alternatives: (1) speak/not speak – concerns the form of communication and it is implemented by the marking (*signifiant*) side of the sign; (2) express/not express –a semantic character, corresponds to the marking (*signifié*) side of the sign; (3) to say/not to say – a pragmatic dimension of action and decision; (4) listen/not listen – perspective of the listener; (5) respond/not to respond – perspective to the respondent's perspective (Rokoszowa 1994: 33–35).

Selective mutism itself can also be a message. Its meaning is understandable due to its linguistic context. Śniatkowski writes: 'This type of selective mutism is

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[6] The author identifies the terms *selective mutism* and *concealment.*

[7] The pause characteristics are presented below.

called an alternative one – it is an independent replica filling the place of the expected verbal expression" (2002: 11).

Assigning the selective mutism the delimitation function of the expression allows to speak about pre-verbal selective mutism and post-verbal selective mutism, that is the one that precedes the statement or occurs after its completion (Śniatkowski 2002). In speaking, however, there are only breaks between subsequent statements, particularly when the statement which is made constitutes a long message. Then, pauses can be indicated between its successive elements. Their unfilled form, which was indicated earlier, should not be identified with selective mutism that is 'just a conscious abstention from saying the words" (cf. Śniatkowski 2002: 11). Consequently, one can indicate the differences between pause and selective mutism: (1) pauses are found inside the statement, selective mutism at its ends; (2) pause will always be an element of expression, selective mutism is an alternative to speech; (3) selective mutism can be an independent communication (Śniatkowski 2002: 12).

Śniatkowski puts forward the following functional division of the phenomenon of selective mutism (Fig. 3). The author drew a distinction between the informative and communication skills from John Lyons (1983). Communicative selective mutism is meaningful for the sender of the speech, whereas the informative selective mutism is significant for the recipient.
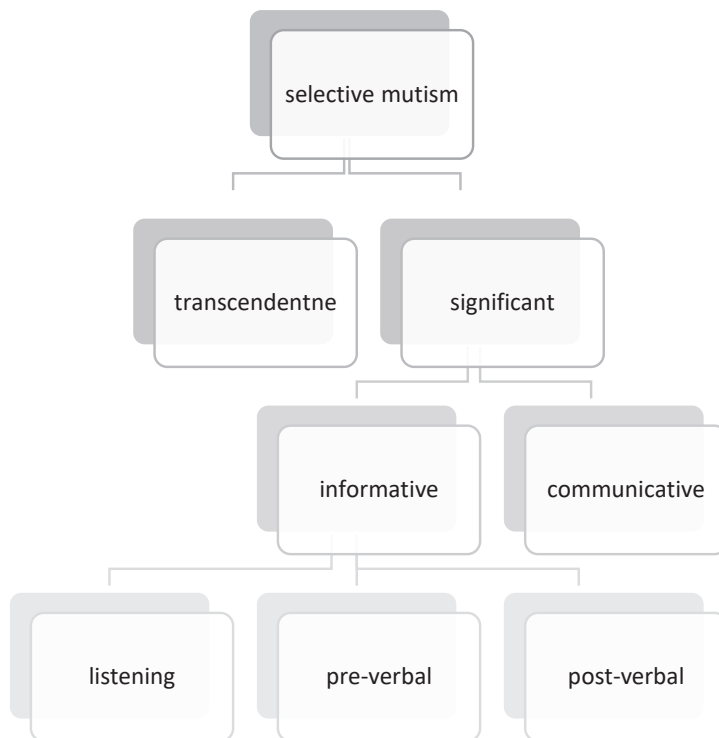

Fig. 3. Functional differentiation of the phenomenon of selective mutism (cf. S. Śniatkowski, 2002: 12)

Finally, the original assumptions are worth emphasizing. Selective mutism understood as silence during which the statement is made, does not carry additional content for the participants of the communication act, i.e. it is neutral. This selective mutism is the environment of the speech itself and it is the ground for speaking. Selective mutism carrying meaning is itself a message. Referring to the above-mentioned scheme, it should be noted that the meaning of the selective mutism also constitutes the information about the adopted reception attitude and the limits of speech.

Concealment

Concealment is considered to be a separate phenomenon of mutism whose application is always meaningful. 'Concealment brings information and influences the recipient' (Pisarkowa 1986: 25). The decision to conceal particular content is always a signal for the listener. It can take the form of meaningless tacitness, silence, however, it may use speaking as a veil of the concealed content.

Concealment enables to clear the message of unnecessary, obvious or unwanted information. It is the sender of the message (at any time of its creation) who may decide to conceal the content. Therefore, this phenomenon plays the eliminating function, yet, also a stylistic one when during the implementation of the message, we mark the omission of specific content or break the voice, interrupting the started sentence (Śniatkowski 2002; Michalik, Cholewiak and others 2016).

Pause

Pause as a phenomenon diversified in terms of formal and functional constitutes a real or potential break in the verbal expression. Some scholars believe that it violates fluency of the expression, while others perceive it as a manifestation of the naturalness of the course of the speaking process (Śniatkowski 2002).

O. von Essen points out that the sender uses pauses while speaking 'usually for the purpose of drawing air, but also to prepare the next statement' (1967: 256–257). The precise characterization of pauses allows to indicate the conscious or unconscious strategies applied by senders during the creation of statements. Pauses used in the process of making the statement which are between successive phrase phrases, should be shorter than 2 seconds (long pauses have a significant value) (Woźniak 2012). Pauses which are more frequent, longer or filled with paralinguistic sounds can significantly hinder the reception of messages. The pauses which are too short will affect the ease of reception as well. Therefore, the proper use of this agent constitutes a useful skill that can be observed in the sender. Consequently, the appropriate application of this measure in communication can be considered as a manifestation of communication competence.

Diversification of pauses in terms of length and sound form relates to their formal aspect. Therefore, we can talk about long and short pauses[8],[9]. The indicated division is most often found in the phonetic notations of the spoken texts, where | is a short pause, and || is a long pause (Śniatkowski 2002). The sound form of the pause enables to distinguish: 'pauses of silence (unfilled) and filled pauses' (Śniatkowski 2002: 15). These figures are described in the psycholinguistic classification of pauses as *silent pauses* and *filled pauses* (Zellner 1994: 44).

Śniatkowski adds partially-filled pauses to the above-mentioned distinction. The author lists three variants of the implementation of the pause in speech which are briefly described below:

- proper pauses –i. e. unfilled one that are implemented as a moment of silence, arising between the next linguistic components of expression;
- completely filled pauses – phonic elements, occurring while speaking. They can take one of three forms:

a) lexical unit (here most frequently as a repetition, one of the elements of expression or an individual in the phatic function);
b) articulated sound (in the form of a drawn vowel or consonant group);
c) an inarticulate paralinguistic sound (e.g. coughing).

- partially-filled pauses – pauses that constitute a heterogeneous element during the sounding (Śniatkowski 2002: 15–18).

There is no doubt that occurrence of the different type of the pause is associated with the process of formulating the statements. After all, pauses occur within its scope. The man prepares to communicate the message during its time of duration. The articulatory organs that take the position of Inter-Speech during the pauses remain ready (Pluta-Wojciechowska, Sambor 2017)[10]. 'An unfilled pause is the adoption of the particular position by organs of speech at the time when no verbal statement is made, yet, the statement itself is not finished yet. The filled pause is taking the position by organs of speech at the time when no verbal statement is made, however, the adopted position of the organs is connected with the extraction of sound' (Pluta-Wojciechowska, Sambor 2017: 170).

The reasons for occurrence of pauses in the statements vary. They may result, among others, from individual physiological limitations of the man or the course of cognitive processes (Zellner 1994). Functional characteristics of pauses can distinguish between grammar and non-grammatical pauses (Śniatkowski 2002).

The function of grammatical pauses is text segmentation, that is why they are referred to as segmentation pauses or delimitation pauses. Punctuation signs (punctuation pauses) are their reflection in the written text. In speech, the implementation

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[8] Pause lasting over 1 sec. it is classified as a long one, in turn a pause less than 1 sec. long. it's a short pause.

[9] The distinction between three length characteristics (short, medium, long) pauses is possible taking into account the ratio of 'longest to shortest pauses in relation to the general rate of speech of a given person' (Śniatkowski 2002: 15).

[10] The position of Inter-Speech is described by Danuta Pluta-Wojciechowska and Barbara Sambor atwork *Pomiędzy słowem, frazą i zdaniem, czyli o pozycji Inter-Speech w normie i patologii* (Gdańsk 2017).

of these kinds of pauses can take one of two options: a real or unreal grammatical pause. The first variant concerns the break in the speech occurring with the change of the intonation line. The second one is accompanied only by the change of tone (Śniatkowski 2002).

Non-grammatical pauses fulfil stylistic functions. In the further division proposed by Śniatkowski, stylistic pauses are divided into intentional and unintentional ones. Intentional non-grammatical pauses are deliberate actions of the sender. They can serve to shape the stylistic text through its segmentation – intellectual pauses or give expression of emotional character – impressive (emotive) pause[11]. On the other hand, unintentional non-grammatical pause sindicate the current development and verbal nature of the message. They can be divided into editorial pauses that appear during the creation of statements and may be a manifestation of indecision (reflection pauses) or striving of the sender to express the message precisely (correction pauses) and expressive pauses that are expressed by an unintentional break in the statement reflecting the emotions of the sender (Śniatkowski 2002).

Latency of expression

As a separate phenomenon, latency of expression that constitutes the time value between the end of the question/statement of one of the participants in the dialogue and the beginning of the answer/expression of another person should be characterized. In other words, it is a break between the language messages of people involved in the verbal interaction. During this break the person initiating the dialogue is waiting for a replica of another participant (Zyss, Zięba 2015; Cholewiak 2016).

Latency of expression, due to the fact that it precedes the replica, can be identified with pre-verbal silence. Its value – measured in seconds – allows to characterize the sender of the message (the value of latency can determine the time of planning the first segments of the speech).

Ending

Mutismis a broad and interesting research area, moreover, it constitutes an area whose exploration enables to ask numerous questions, not only of the linguistic, but also of philosophical or psychological nature as well. We use mutism in various situations, when we are silent – instead of speaking, and while speaking, we use mutism to let our listeners understand what we are talking about. In this case, the proclaimed proverb: 'Speech is silver, and silence is gold' takes on a slightly different meaning.

Remembering those for whom 'mutism' is not a choice, we can assess the described area of interest of the applied linguistics in a negative way. On the other hand, we should be aware that without it speaking may not actually occur in the minds of the recipients.

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[11] W stosunku do opisanych pauz niegramatycznych zamierzonych S. Śniatkowski stosuje określenie pauzy interpretacyjne (psychologiczne) (2002: 102, 104).

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Niemówienie – jeden z obszarów badań lingwistyki stosowanej

Streszczenie

Niniejszy artykułu definiuje jeden z obszarów badań lingwistyki stosowanej, jakim jest „niemówienie". W jego obrębie umieszczono następujące zjawiska: milczenie, przemilczenie i pauzę. Artykuł zawiera ich charakterystykę, a także autorską definicję „niemówienia", które rozpatrywane jest z jednaj strony jako niezbędny warunek zaistnienia wypowiedzi i jej właściwego odbioru, z drugiej przejaw zaburzeń komunikacji językowej lub innych nieprawidłowości występujących podczas tworzenia wypowiedzi słownej.