

The Sound of Silence: Speech Pauses Are Interpreted Similarly Across Cultures

New study: people evaluate speech pauses and cognitive states in conversation in similar ways across cultures

What can a pause in a conversation tell us about the speakers' cognitive states? A new study led by Dr. Theresa Matzinger from the University of Vienna suggests that people judge the length of speech pauses – and the traits inferred from them, such as helpfulness, knowledge, or confidence – in surprisingly similar ways, regardless of their cultural background. The findings have now been published in the journal *Interaction Studies*.

Pauses as silent signals across languages

Previous research with Polish-speaking participants and conversations in Polish between Polish and Chinese interlocutors had already shown that listeners draw conclusions from the length of pauses before a response: the longer the pause, the more hesitant and less helpful the responding person appears – at least when speaking the same native language. But is this phenomenon culturally determined? Or do people interpret pauses similarly across the globe?

To answer this question, the researchers reversed the setup of their original study: this time, they played short conversations in Chinese to 100 Chinese participants, in which the length of the pause before a response (0.2 or 1.2 seconds) was varied. The responses came either from native Chinese speakers or from Polish learners of Chinese with a noticeable accent. After each conversation, participants rated how willing, knowledgeable, or confident the responding person seemed to be.

The same pattern – regardless of language and culture

The surprising result: Chinese participants evaluated long pauses almost identically to their Polish counterparts in the earlier study. Responses with longer pauses were perceived as less helpful when the speaker was a native speaker. However, when the speaker was a non-native speaker, the length of the pause had little effect on judgment – listeners seemed to account for the language barrier. Similarly, in knowledge-related questions, both cultural groups viewed longer pauses as signs of uncertainty or lesser knowledge, regardless of the speaker's native language.

Better understanding of intercultural communication

"Our findings show that people have similar expectations and interpretations in conversation across cultural and linguistic boundaries – especially when it comes to pauses and the cognitive states inferred from them," explains lead researcher Dr. Theresa Matzinger from the University of Vienna. This has far-reaching implications for the dynamics of intercultural communication – for example, in international companies or during negotiations between stakeholders from different cultural backgrounds who are communicating in a non-native language. "If we understand which nonverbal signals are perceived similarly around the world, we can help prevent misunderstandings and make communication more effective."

In future studies, the researchers aim to further investigate how universal these mechanisms truly are – also in other language combinations and contexts.

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Wissenschaftlicher Kontakt

Mag. Theresa Matzinger MSc. PhD

Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
Universität Wien

1090 Wien, Spitalgasse 2

Tel.: +43 680 2404691

E-Mail: theresa.matzinger@univie.ac.at

Web: <https://anglistik.univie.ac.at/staff/staff/detail-seite/user/matzint8/inum/1063/backpid/30750/>

Social Media (X, Bluesky): @thematzing

Social Media Post: Pausen als stille Signale: Menschen aus verschiedenen Kulturen interpretieren Gesprächspausen erstaunlich ähnlich! 🌍

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