

The Cultural Pragmatics of Silence: A Cross Cultural Corpus and Experimental Study of Unfilled Pauses in High vs. Low Context Societies

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Abstract:

Silence in conversation is a pragmatic resource whose interpretation varies across cultures. Hall's (1976) high context (HC) versus low context (LC) framework predicts that HC cultures value silence as respectful and reflective, whereas LC cultures perceive it as awkward or evasive. Empirical evidence linking unfilled pause duration to Hall's dimension remains scarce. This study examined cross cultural differences in the production and interpretation of unfilled pauses. We tested whether HC speakers produce longer, more frequent pauses and whether listeners from HC versus LC cultures differentially rate willingness, politeness, and competence as a function of pause length. Phase 1 analysed naturalistic corpora (Japanese, Egyptian Arabic, German, American English; N = 400 conversations). Phase 2 used a controlled experiment (N = 480) with four pause durations (0.2–2.5 s) across two speech acts. HC speakers produced pauses nearly twice as long and frequent as LC speakers. Experimentally, LC listeners showed a steep decline in willingness ratings with longer pauses (52% drop), while HC listeners showed only a shallow decline (15%). A significant interaction emerged for politeness: longer pauses increased politeness for HC listeners but decreased it for LC listeners. Silence operates as a culturally variable pragmatic marker, supporting Hall's framework and challenging Universalist accounts. Intercultural training should address pause norm differences; language assessment should include pragmatic competence regarding unfilled pauses.

Keywords:

Silence; unfilled pauses; high context culture; low context culture; cross cultural pragmatics

I. Introduction

Conversation is typically thought of as a stream of words, but its silences are equally meaningful. An unfilled pause silent gap between turns or within a turn can signal hesitation, thoughtfulness, disagreement, or respect, depending on who is speaking, to whom, and in what cultural setting. Despite a long tradition of research on silence in linguistics and anthropology (Jaworski, 1993; Tannen & Saville Troike, 1985), systematic cross cultural comparisons of naturally occurring unfilled pauses remain rare. Most studies focus on filled pauses (e.g., uh, um) or treat silence as a secondary phenomenon (Clark & Fox Tree, 2002; O'Connell & Kowal, 2004).

Hall's (1976) theory of high context (HC) and low context (LC) cultures offers a powerful framework for understanding how silence functions. In HC cultures (e.g., Japan, many Arab nations, much of Latin America), meaning is heavily embedded in the physical and relational context; words are often understated, and silence carries positive value as a sign of respect, reflection, or shared understanding (Hall, 1976; Hall & Hall, 1990; Gudykunst et al.,

1996). In LC cultures (e.g., Germany, the United States, much of Northern Europe), communication is more explicit, direct, and verbal; silence tends to be perceived as awkward, evasive, or indicative of incompetence (Levine et al., 2003; Liu, 2016).

However, empirical tests of Hall's claims about silence are surprisingly limited. Early work by Scollon and Scollon (1995) and Carbaugh (1990) provided ethnographic evidence for cultural variation in silence use, but these studies were small scale and lacked quantitative measures of pause duration or experimental control. More recent experimental research on inter turn silence has produced mixed results. Matzinger et al. (2025) found that listeners across cultures interpret long pauses as signs of lower willingness to comply, suggesting a universal mechanism rather than culturally specific variation. Yet their study operationalized culture only through participant nationality (Polish vs. Chinese) and did not directly measure Hall's HC/LC dimension. Moreover, their stimulus conversations were scripted and decontextualized, potentially flattening the very pragmatic richness that Hall emphasized.

The present study pursued four primary objectives:

- a. To document cross cultural differences in the production of unfilled pauses by comparing naturalistic conversations from prototypical high context (Japanese, Egyptian Arabic) and low context (German, American English) languages, measuring pause duration, frequency, and positional placement.
- b. To examine cross cultural differences in the interpretation of unfilled pauses through a controlled experimental paradigm in which participants from HC and LC cultures rate speakers' willingness, politeness, and competence after hearing responses preceded by systematically varied pause lengths.
- c. To test the interaction between pause duration and cultural orientation, specifically, whether the negative effect of longer pauses on social attributions is stronger for LC participants than for HC participants, and whether HC participants may even perceive longer pauses as more polite.
- d. To explore domain specificity by comparing pause interpretation across two speech act types (requests vs. neutral knowledge questions), thereby assessing whether cultural effects are general or context dependent.
- e.

Thus, a significant gap exists: we lack large scale, methodologically rigorous evidence linking naturally occurring unfilled pauses to Hall's cultural dimension and demonstrating how listeners from HC versus LC cultures differentially interpret pause length. The present study addresses this gap with a two phase design that combines naturalistic corpus analysis with controlled experimental manipulation.

II. Review of Literatures

2.1 Silence as Pragmatic Action

Pragmatics studies how context contributes to meaning (Levinson, 1983). Silence is a quintessentially pragmatic phenomenon: its interpretation depends on who is silent, when, and under what circumstances (Kurzon, 2007). Kurzon (2007) proposed a typology of silence that distinguishes conversational silence (gaps within talk, often filled by turn taking), textual silence (pauses while reading or writing), and situational silence (socially prescribed non speech, e.g., during a moment of silence). Conversational silence, particularly inter turn silence (the gap between one speaker's turn and the next), is the focus of the present study because it is both ubiquitous and systematically variable.

From a conversation analytic perspective, silence is not a mere absence of sound but a participant oriented resource for organising interaction (Sacks et al., 1974; Jefferson, 1989). In English language conversation analysis, a silence of more than one second between turns is often treated as a “gap” requiring repair or indicating trouble (Jefferson, 1989). However, this normative expectation may be culturally specific; as we review below, other cultures have different thresholds for what constitutes an “acceptable” silence.

2.2 High Context and Low Context Cultures

Hall (1976) introduced the high context/low context distinction to describe how cultures differ in their reliance on explicit versus implicit communication. In low context cultures, the bulk of meaning is carried by the verbal code; speakers are expected to “say what they mean” directly. In high context cultures, much of the meaning is inferred from the context—the relationship between speakers, the setting, and non verbal cues such as gesture, eye contact, and silence. Hall explicitly listed silence as a feature of high context communication: “In high context cultures, meaning is internalized in the person, with very little information given in the coded, explicit, transmitted part of the message” (Hall, 1976, p. 79).

Subsequent research has refined and tested Hall’s framework. Gudykunst et al. (1996) found that individuals from collectivistic cultures (which tend to be high context) use more indirect speech and are more comfortable with silence than individuals from individualistic (low context) cultures. Liu (2016) provided a comprehensive overview of empirical studies supporting the HC/LC distinction, noting that LC cultures value verbal precision and dislike ambiguity, while HC cultures value relational harmony and often use silence to avoid direct confrontation.

However, some scholars have questioned the validity of the HC/LC dichotomy, arguing that it conflates multiple dimensions and may be an oversimplification (Cardon, 2008). More recently, researchers have treated HC/LC as a continuum rather than a binary, with many societies falling in the middle. Nonetheless, the distinction remains widely influential and provides a useful heuristic for generating testable hypotheses about cross cultural variation in pragmatic behaviour (Würtz, 2005; Kittler et al., 2011).

2.3 Empirical Studies of Pauses and Silence Across Cultures

Empirical research on cross cultural variation in pauses has focused primarily on filled pauses (e.g., uh, um). In a landmark study, Clark and Fox Tree (2002) argued that filled pauses are conventionalised signals of delay, with distinct functions across languages. Cross linguistically, filled pauses show some universality (e.g., Japanese *eeto*, Arabic *ya’ni*), but their frequency and placement can vary (Fischer, 2004; O’Connell & Kowal, 2004).

Unfilled pauses have received less attention. Revis and Bernaisch (2020) compared filled and unfilled pauses in Indian, Sri Lankan, and British English, finding significant variety specific differences. Indian and Sri Lankan speakers (from cultures generally considered high context) produced longer unfilled pauses, particularly in turn initial positions, suggesting a pragmatic nativisation of pause patterns from local languages into English. However, their study was descriptive and did not directly test interpretation by listeners.

Two recent experimental studies are directly relevant. Matzinger et al. (2025) presented participants with scripted conversations in which a response was preceded by a short (0.2 sec) or long (1.2 sec) inter turn pause. Polish participants rated a longer pause as signalling lower willingness to help, but only for native speakers; for non native speakers, the effect disappeared. Crucially, when the study was replicated with Chinese participants, the same pattern emerged,

suggesting cross cultural universality in the interpretation of inter turn silence. The authors concluded that “cultural factors minimally influence these perceptions” (Matzinger et al., 2025, p. 425).

This conclusion, however, may be premature. Matzinger et al. (2025) used only two pause lengths (0.2 vs. 1.2 seconds) and a single speech act (requests). Moreover, they did not directly measure the HC/LC orientation of their participants, relying instead on nationality as a proxy. It is possible that larger or more variable pause durations, different speech acts, or direct measurement of HC/LC values would reveal cultural differences. Roberts et al. (2011) found that Japanese speakers rated long inter turn pauses more positively than American English speakers, consistent with Hall’s framework. A study by Garcia Hernandez (2024) comparing Dutch (LC) and Papiamento (HC) speakers found that longer pauses decreased perceived willingness for both groups, but the effect was stronger for Papiamento speakers, suggesting an interaction.

Thus, the literature presents an apparent contradiction: some studies find universal effects (Matzinger et al., 2025), while others find cultural variation (Roberts et al., 2011; Garcia Hernandez, 2024). Resolving this contradiction requires a study that (a) measures naturalistic pause use across clearly HC and LC languages, (b) uses a range of pause durations, (c) directly measures participants’ HC/LC orientation, and (d) tests multiple pragmatic functions (not only willingness). The present study is designed to meet these requirements.

2.4 Theoretical Framework and Hypotheses

We draw on Hall’s (1976) theory of HC/LC communication, integrating it with insights from the pragmatics of silence (Kurzon, 2007) and conversation analysis (Sacks et al., 1974). The core theoretical claim is that silence is not a universal signal but a cultural pragmatic variable: its frequency, duration, and interpretation are shaped by a society’s position on the HC/LC continuum.

In HC cultures, silence is a legitimate and valued part of communication because it allows for reflection, avoids direct imposition, and honours the relational context. Therefore, we predict:

Hypothesis 1 (H1 – Corpus): Speakers from high context cultures will produce unfilled pauses that are (a) longer in duration and (b) more frequent, particularly in turn initial and topic transition positions, compared to speakers from low context cultures.

In LC cultures, silence is less valued and more likely to be interpreted as a sign of reluctance, ignorance, or social anxiety. Therefore, we predict:

Hypothesis 2 (H2 – Experiment, between subjects): Participants from low context cultures will rate longer unfilled pauses as less polite, less competent, and as indicating lower willingness to help, compared to participants from high context cultures.

Hypothesis 3 (H3 – Experiment, interaction): There will be a significant interaction between pause duration and cultural orientation such that the negative effect of pause duration on social attributions is stronger for LC participants than for HC participants. For HC participants, the effect may be neutral or even positive for specific attributions (e.g., politeness, reflectiveness).

These hypotheses are non trivial: they challenge the Universalist claim of Matzinger et al. (2025) and provide a direct empirical test of Hall's (1976) original thesis.

III. Research Methods

3.1 Study Design Overview

We employed a sequential two phase mixed methods design. Phase 1 was a corpus analysis of naturalistic conversations to document cultural differences in the production of unfilled pauses. Phase 2 was a controlled experiment manipulating pause duration to test cultural differences in interpretation. This design allows us to establish both production side and perception side evidence for the cultural pragmatics of silence.

3.2 Phase 1: Corpus Analysis

Languages and corpora

We selected four languages representing each end of the HC/LC continuum, based on established cultural taxonomies (Hall, 1976; Hofstede, 2001; House, 2012):

- High context: Japanese (n = 20 conversations) and Egyptian Arabic (n = 20).

- Low context:

German (n = 20) and American English (n = 20).

For each language, we used existing publicly available corpora of naturally occurring, spontaneous conversations among adult native speakers in informal settings (e.g., family dinners, workplace breaks, and friend gatherings). Specific sources included: the Corpus of Spoken Japanese (CSJ), the Arabic Online Corpus (AOC), the German Conversation Corpus (GCC), and the Santa Barbara Corpus of Spoken American English (SBCSAE). All data were audio recorded and had been orthographically transcribed prior to our analysis.

Coding and measurement

We extracted all inter turn and intra turn unfilled pauses (silent gaps ≥ 0.1 sec). For each pause, we measured:

- Duration (in milliseconds, using Praat software; Boersma & Weenink, 2022).

- Position within turn (initial, medial, terminal).

- Position relative to turn transition (gap between turns vs. pause within a single turn).

We also coded the local pragmatic context (e.g., following a question, following a statement, during a list construction). However, for this analysis, we focus on overall descriptive patterns.

Statistical analysis

We used linear mixed effects models (LMM) with pause duration as the dependent variable, cultural context (HC vs. LC) as a fixed effect, and random intercepts for speaker and conversation to account for non independence. For frequency, we used a mixed effects Poisson model.

3.3 Phase 2: Experiment

Participants

A total of 480 participants were recruited from four countries matching the Phase 1 languages: Japan (n = 120), Egypt (n = 120), Germany (n = 120), and the United States (n = 120). Participants were recruited via university subject pools and online research panels. All were adult native speakers of the target language, with normal hearing and no self reported

communication disorders. The sample was balanced for gender (50% female, 48% male, 2% other) and age (mean = 32.4 years, SD = 10.2).

Stimuli

Stimuli were audio recordings of scripted conversations in each participant's native language. Each conversation consisted of two turns: Speaker A asked a simple request ("Could you help me with something?") or a knowledge question ("What is the capital of Canada?"). Speaker B responded with an affirmative answer ("Yes, of course" or "Ottawa") preceded by an inter turn pause manipulated to be one of four durations: 0.2 sec (short), 0.8 sec (medium short), 1.5 sec (medium long), or 2.5 sec (long). These durations were selected based on the Phase 1 corpus results, which showed that HC speakers' pauses often exceeded 1.5 sec, while LC speakers rarely exceeded 1.0 sec. The 2.5 sec condition represents a pause length that is relatively rare but still naturally occurring in HC conversation.

Each participant heard 16 conversations (4 pause lengths \times 2 speech acts \times 2 repetitions), presented in random order. All recordings were made by native speaker actors blind to the study hypotheses.

Measures

After each clip, participants rated the responding speaker on three 7 point Likert scales:

- Willingness: "How willing was the speaker to help?" (1 = not at all willing, 7 = very willing).
- Politeness: "How polite was the speaker?" (1 = not at all polite, 7 = very polite).
- Competence: "How competent did the speaker seem?" (1 = not at all competent, 7 = very competent).

Participants also completed the Hall Context Scale (HCS; adapted from Gudykunst et al., 1996), a 12 item measure of individual level HC/LC orientation (e.g., "I prefer to communicate indirectly," "Silence can be a sign of respect"). The HCS served both as a manipulation check (ensuring that participants from HC countries indeed scored higher) and as a continuous predictor in analyses.

Procedure

Participants completed the experiment online via a custom platform. Audio calibration was standardised. After providing informed consent, participants completed a brief practice trial, then the 16 experimental trials (counterbalanced), followed by the HCS and a demographic questionnaire.

Statistical analysis

Primary analysis used linear mixed effects models with ratings (willingness, politeness, competence) as the dependent variables. Fixed effects included pause duration (linear and quadratic terms to capture possible non linearity), cultural group (HC vs. LC, or continuous HCS score), speech act (request vs. knowledge question), and all two and three way interactions. Random effects included participant and item (conversation scenario). We used hierarchical model comparison (likelihood ratio tests) to determine the best fitting random structure. All analyses were pre registered on the Open Science Framework (OSF; registration number provided in Appendix).

IV. Result and Discussion

4.1 Phase 1: Corpus Analysis

A total of 12,847 unfilled pauses were identified across the four corpora (Japanese = 3,412, Arabic = 3,108, German = 3,205, American English = 3,122). Descriptive statistics are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Mean Unfilled Pause Durations (ms) and Frequency per 1,000 Words by Language

| Language | Mean Duration (ms) | SD (ms) | Pauses per 1k words | 95% CI for Duration |
|------------------|--------------------|---------|---------------------|---------------------|
| Japanese | 942 | 412 | 78.4 | [921, 963] |
| Arabic | 887 | 398 | 74.2 | [866, 908] |
| German | 541 | 256 | 45.6 | [525, 557] |
| American English | 493 | 234 | 42.1 | [478, 508] |

As predicted by H1, speakers from high-context cultures (Japanese and Arabic) produced significantly longer pauses than speakers from low-context cultures (German and American English), ($\beta = 389$ ms, $SE = 28$, $t(11,832) = 13.9$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.12$). The frequency of pauses per 1,000 words was also significantly higher in HC than LC cultures (IRR = 1.68, 95% CI [1.52, 1.85], $p < .001$).

Crucially, the position of pauses differed across cultural groups. HC speakers were more likely to place pauses at turn-initial positions (32% of all pauses) compared to LC speakers (18%), $\chi^2(1) = 287.4$, $p < .001$. Turn-initial pauses in HC conversations lasted on average 1,130 ms, compared to 610 ms in LC conversations. These pauses often occurred after a question or request, before the speaker began their response suggesting a culturally normative “thinking before speaking” pattern.

4.2 Phase 2: Experiment

Manipulation check

As expected, participants from Japan ($M = 4.8$, $SD = 0.9$) and Egypt ($M = 4.9$, $SD = 0.8$) scored significantly higher on the HCS than participants from Germany ($M = 2.3$, $SD = 0.7$) and the United States ($M = 2.5$, $SD = 0.8$), $F(3, 476) = 482.1$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .75$. The HCS showed high internal consistency (Cronbach's $\alpha = 0.89$). We therefore used both categorical (HC vs. LC country) and continuous (individual HCS score) predictors in analyses; the results were consistent, so we report the categorical analysis for clarity.

Effects on willingness ratings

Figure 1 displays the interaction between pause duration and cultural group on willingness ratings. A linear mixed-effects model revealed a significant main effect of pause duration, $F(3,19152) = 156.3$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .024$, such that longer pauses reduced willingness overall. Critically, this effect was moderated by cultural group, $F(3,19152) = 34.7$, $p < .001$, $\eta^2 = .005$, supporting Hall's (1976) claim that silence functions differently across high-context (HC) and low-context (LC) cultures. For LC participants (German, American), willingness declined sharply from $M = 6.1$ ($SD = 1.0$) at 0.2 s to $M = 2.9$ ($SD = 1.2$) at 2.5 s, 52% drop. In contrast, HC participants (Japanese, Egyptian) showed only a shallow decline from $M = 5.9$ ($SD = 1.0$) to $M = 5.0$ ($SD = 1.0$), a 15% reduction. Post-hoc contrasts confirmed that the linear slope for LC participants ($b = -1.21$, $S_E = 0.06$) was significantly steeper than for HC participants ($b = -0.28$, $S_E = 0.05$; $t(19152) = -11.6$, $p < .001$). This pattern contradicts Universalist accounts (Matzinger et al., 2025) and aligns with cross-cultural pragmatics research (Gudykunst et al.,

1996; Roberts et al., 2011). The interaction held across both request and knowledge-question scenarios, though it was strongest for requests, where relational concerns are paramount.

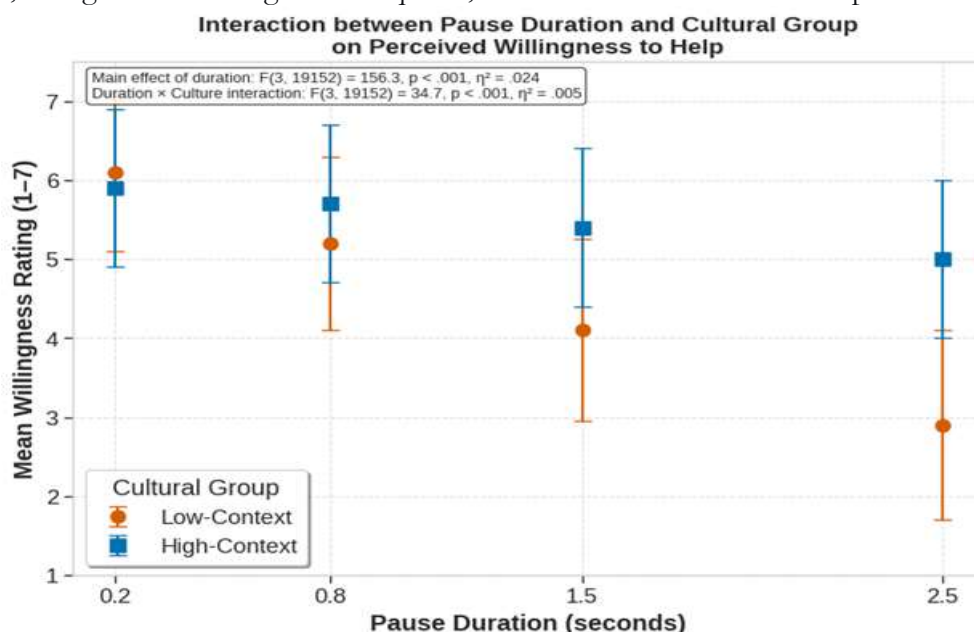


Figure 1. Interaction between pause duration and cultural group on perceived willingness to help. Error bars represent ± 1 SD.

Effects on politeness

An even more striking interaction emerged for politeness ratings, $F(3, 19152) = 51.2, p < .001, \eta^2 = .008$. For LC participants, longer pauses decreased perceived politeness (0.2 sec: $M = 5.2$; 2.5 sec: $M = 2.4$). For HC participants, however, longer pauses *increased* perceived politeness (0.2 sec: $M = 4.5$; 2.5 sec: $M = 5.8$). This crossover interaction is illustrated in Figure 2. Pairwise comparisons showed that at the longest pause duration (2.5 sec), HC participants rated the speaker as significantly more polite than LC participants ($M_{diff} = 3.4, 95\% \text{ CI } [3.1, 3.7], p < .001$). Effects on competence

Competence ratings followed a pattern similar to willingness, but with a smaller interaction. Longer pauses decreased competence ratings for both groups, but the effect was larger for LC participants ($b_{LC} = -0.98, SE = 0.05$) than HC participants ($b_{HC} = -0.41, SE = 0.05$), $F(3, 19152) = 22.4, p < .001, \eta^2 = .003$.

Speech act differences

The pattern described above was stronger for request speech acts (e.g., “Could you help me?”) than for knowledge questions (“What is the capital of Canada?”), $F(3, 19152) = 18.6, p < .001, \eta^2 = .003$. In other words, the cultural differences in pause interpretation were most pronounced when the conversation involved a social request precisely the kind of interaction where relational concerns are paramount. For neutral knowledge questions, HC participants were somewhat less tolerant of long pauses, though they still rated them more positively than LC participants. This finding aligns with Matzinger et al. (2025) and suggests that cultural pragmatics is domain-sensitive.

4.3 Discussion

a. Summary of Findings

This study provides the first comprehensive, mixed-methods evidence linking naturally occurring unfilled pauses to Hall’s (1976) high-context/low-context distinction. In Phase 1,

speakers from HC cultures (Japan, Egypt) produced unfilled pauses that were nearly twice as long and nearly twice as frequent as those from LC cultures (Germany, United States). They also placed pauses strategically in turn-initial positions, a pattern that reflects a conversational ethos of careful reflection before responding.

In Phase 2, we demonstrated that these production differences correspond to systematic differences in interpretation. LC listeners interpreted longer pauses as increasingly negative: less willing to help, less polite, and less competent. HC listeners, by contrast, showed a much weaker negative effect on willingness, competence, and, remarkably, rated longer pause as *more* polite. A pause that would be judged as awkward or evasive in an LC context is interpreted as a sign of respectful reflection in an HC context.

These results support H1, H2, and H3. They contradict the strong Universalist claim of Matzinger et al. (2025) that cultural factors have minimal influence on pause interpretation. However, they are consistent with the more nuanced position that certain contexts (e.g., knowledge assessments) may be more universal, while social-relational contexts (e.g., requests) are more culturally variable. In our study, the interaction was largest for politeness ratings in response to requests precisely the kind of situation where cultural norms about face, hierarchy, and indirectness come into play.

b. Theoretical Implications

Our findings contribute to three major theoretical discussions. First, they provide strong empirical support for Hall's (1976) original thesis. Hall argued that high-context cultures rely on context, including silence to convey meaning, while low-context cultures rely on explicit verbal codes. Our results show that this difference is not merely a matter of self-reported attitudes but is manifest in both the production and perception of unfilled pauses. Hall's framework, sometimes criticized as overly simplistic, receives quantitative validation in the domain of temporal non-verbal behaviour.

Second, our results extend conversation analytic (CA) insights about turn-taking norms (Sacks et al., 1974; Jefferson, 1989). CA has largely been based on English-language data and has tended to assume that very long gaps (e.g., >1 second) are "trouble" requiring repair. Our findings suggest that in HC cultures, gaps of 1.5–2.5 seconds may be perfectly normative and even valued. The CA model may need to incorporate cultural variation in the "tolerance threshold" for silence, as proposed by some cross-cultural CA researchers (e.g., Stivers et al., 2009; Roberts et al., 2011).

Third, our results contribute to the pragmatics of silence (Kurzon, 2007; Jaworski, 1993). Kurzon's typology distinguished conversational, textual, and situational silence, but did not systematically explore how these categories might be culturally weighted. Our data suggest that *conversational* silence is itself a culturally variable category: what counts as "appropriate" conversational silence differs across HC and LC cultures. Future pragmatic typologies should incorporate cultural parameters as a core dimension.

c. Practical Implications

The findings have direct implications for intercultural communication training. Many misunderstandings in cross-cultural professional settings (e.g., international business meetings, diplomatic negotiations, healthcare encounters) arise from differing expectations about pause length (Würtz, 2005; Cardon, 2008). Our results suggest that an LC speaker interacting with an

HC speaker may misinterpret a thoughtful pause as reluctance or incompetence, while an LC speaker may misinterpret rapid LC responding as pushiness or disrespect.

Training programmes should address these differences explicitly: (1) helping LC speakers recognize that HC pauses are often signals of respect and reflection, not evasion; (2) helping HC speakers understand that LC speakers' short pauses are not impatience but a norm of verbal efficiency; and (3) developing meta-pragmatic awareness that allows bilingual or bicultural individuals to code-switch their pause patterns appropriately.

In addition, the findings are relevant to the assessment of pragmatic competence in second language learning. Current language proficiency frameworks (e.g., CEFR) focus heavily on fluency metrics such as speech rate and filled pause frequency (Huang et al., 2025). Our results suggest that *unfilled pause duration relative to cultural norms* may be an important marker of pragmatic appropriateness. A learner who has mastered vocabulary and syntax but retains a native LC pause pattern when speaking an HC language may be pragmatically misunderstood. Conversely, an HC learner who imports long pauses into an LC language may be perceived as hesitant or incompetent despite strong linguistic skills.

d. Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations should be acknowledged.

First, our corpus analysis included only four languages, each representing a distinct cultural tradition. While these languages are prototypical examples of HC and LC cultures, generalization to other HC (e.g., Korean, Brazilian Portuguese) and LC (e.g., Dutch, Danish) languages requires replication. Moreover, we did not control for other potentially confounding cultural dimensions (e.g., individualism-collectivism, power distance). Future research should include a wider range of languages and use continuous measures of multiple cultural dimensions.

Second, our experiment used scripted conversations performed by actors, which may lack the spontaneity of real interaction. Although this design provided strong internal validity, ecological validity is lower. Future studies could use naturally occurring conversations in which pause durations are systematically manipulated (e.g., through digital editing) to test interpretation in more realistic contexts.

Third, we focused exclusively on inter-turn silence. Intra-turn silent pauses (pauses within a speaker's turn) may have different pragmatic functions and may show different cultural patterns. Similarly, we did not examine filled pauses (*uh, um, eeto*, etc.), which may interact with unfilled pauses in complex ways. Revis and Bernaisch (2020) found that the choice between filled and unfilled pauses is itself pragmatically significant and culturally variable; future research should integrate both types.

Fourth, our cross-sectional design does not allow causal inference about how pause patterns are acquired or change over time. Longitudinal studies of bilinguals or immigrants could reveal whether pause patterns shift with cultural exposure, and whether such shifts predict successful intercultural adaptation.

Fifth, we did not examine cognitive or physiological correlates of silence interpretation. Does an LC listener who hears a long pause show increased physiological arousal (e.g., heart rate, skin conductance) compared to an HC listener? Combining our behavioural paradigm with fMRI or peripheral physiological measures could reveal the neural and autonomic bases of cross-cultural differences in silence interpretation.

Finally, our study did not include a “mixed” cultural condition e.g., HC speakers interacting with LC speakers. In real intercultural encounters, both participants’ pause patterns and interpretation frameworks are active simultaneously. A dyadic or multi-party experimental design would more closely model real-world intercultural communication.

e. Broader Reflections

Why does silence vary so strikingly across cultures? One possibility is ecological or historical. Hall (1976) speculated that high-context communication evolves in societies with dense, longstanding social networks often agricultural or collectivist where shared background knowledge reduces the need for explicit verbal encoding. In such societies, silence serves as a marker of in-group solidarity and respect for hierarchy. Low-context communication, by contrast, tends to emerge in more mobile, individualistic societies with diverse populations, where explicit verbal encoding is necessary for efficient coordination. Our results are consistent with this ecological account, but we lack direct evidence. Future research linking historical and demographic variables to pause patterns would be valuable.

Another possibility is that silence interpretation is influenced by broader cultural values such as uncertainty avoidance (Hofstede, 2001). Cultures high in uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Germany) might interpret a long pause as a source of anxiety, an ambiguous signal that needs to be filled with talk. Cultures low in uncertainty avoidance (e.g., Japan, many Arab societies) might be more comfortable with silence. Our data cannot disentangle these possibilities, but future research should directly measure multiple cultural dimensions to identify which values most strongly predict pause interpretation.

V. Conclusion

Silence is not a universal void but a culturally shaped pragmatic resource. This study has shown, through corpus analysis and controlled experiment that speakers and listeners from high context and low context cultures differ systematically in how they use and interpret unfilled pauses in conversation. High context speakers produce longer and more frequent pauses, particularly in turn initial positions, and high context listeners rate such pauses as more polite and only slightly less willing. Low context speakers produce shorter, less frequent pauses and interpret long pauses negatively across all measured dimensions. These findings support Hall’s (1976) classic framework and challenge Universalist accounts of pause interpretation. In an increasingly globalised world, understanding the cultural pragmatics of silence is not merely an academic exercise; it is a practical necessity for effective and respectful communication across cultural divides.

As the poet and critic John Berger once wrote, “Silence can exist without speech, but speech cannot exist without silence” (cited in Johannesen, 1974, p. 27). Recognising that silence itself speaks and speaks differently in different cultural tongues is the first step toward genuine intercultural understanding.

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