

An emic perspective on silence: Experiences of an adult Mexican migrant in the U.S. social setting

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ABSTRACT

This qualitative case study explores the personal experience of Daniela, a Spanish-speaking adult immigrant from Mexico, who lived and worked in the United States, as she navigates her ways through an everyday social context distinct from her own cultural origin. The article presents Daniela's view on the silent practice of herself and others whereby her perception takes shape through a process of constant adaptation and struggle with challenges such as anxiety, separation due to language and ways of communicating. Amidst all these emerges the question of language choice as Daniela moves between English and Spanish for contextual reasons that unpredictably reproduce various degrees of social isolation, power disparity and economic pressures. With insights from such anecdotal accounts, the discussion argues for the importance of comprehending silence by situating the topic in its immediate social circumstances rather than as a stand-alone construct; and eventually draws implications for second-language acquisition (SLA) in a real-world context.



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Sometimes I tried to imitate the pleasant songs of the birds, but was unable. Sometimes I wished to express my sensations in my own mode, but the uncouth and inarticulate sounds which broke from me frightened me into silence again.

—Mary Shelley, *Frankenstein: Or, the Modern Prometheus*

1. The silence of ‘the Creature’

Silence, deployed as a metaphorical idea, can symbolize repression, spiritual insight, or many other things. It is a topic of proverbial wisdom around the world, although its meanings and usage are culturally conditioned. The polyvalence of silence has an extended history. In the Hebrew Bible, when Hannah prays silently for a child, the priest, Eli, thinks she has been drinking (1 Samuel 1:13). In the epigraph above, Dr. Frankenstein's creation, even as he finds voice within Shelley's novel, laments a silence that the written word cannot seem to assuage. He believes in his otherness as, at the same time, he demonstrates his capacity for human emotion and begins to narrate “the accomplishment of a long language acquisition trajectory” (Parrino, 2015, p. 21).

In my readings of silence, I try to extend the most generous interpretations to those striving for a new language, in particular to Daniela, a Mexican migrant whose testimonios about speech/silence boundaries and the usefulness of silence in her own language-acquisition journey constitute the heart of the analysis. Looking at silence from a sociocultural theoretical framework—privileging a reading

of silence within a particular social setting and web of relationships—comes in contrast to constructs such as an individual's willingness to communicate (WTC), defined as “readiness to speak in the L2 at a particular moment with a specific person” (MacIntyre & Doucette, 2010, p. 162). The flip side of the WTC construct—a construct continually being modified with more attention to “situated” WTC (Yashima et al., 2018; Syed & Kuzborska, 2020)—is unwillingness to communicate, which, given the focus on individual behaviour in the theorized moment a person decides whether to speak or stay quiet, implies a failure of a kind when the second-language learner does not cross the Rubicon and become audible (Dörnyei, 2005). Literature reviewed below relates to Daniela's situation as a migrant from México, with 11 years already in the United States, whose English-language acquisition journey continues in a social setting.

1.1. Human migration and second-language acquisition

Learning an additional language, on the face of it, attests to a social situation; in other words, it characteristically involves crossing a threshold, movement, or risk of some kind. According to the International Organization for Migration (2020), there were 272 million international migrants in 2019, or 3.5 percent of the world population (p. 3). Of that number, there are 10.9 million Mexican-born persons living in the United States (Israel & Batalova, 2020). The 2,000-mile U.S.-México border is perpetually contested space, the focus of passion and screeds over who should cross, where and how they should cross, when they should cross and why. Along with the borderlands debate comes one over language and fears of multilingualism, of linguistic corruption of both Spanish and English, of mutual unintelligibility and other matters. For some, an imagined purity—of language, of family connection, of race—is at issue. These public discourses help effect a self-consciousness and a linguistic ranking imposed by dominant institutions such as school, church and family. “In childhood we are told that our language is wrong”, writes borderlands theorist Gloria Anzaldúa (1987/2012). “Repeated attacks on our native tongue diminish our sense of self. The attacks continue throughout our lives” (p. 80).

Migration in search of labour entails distinct motivations for learning an additional language. Ortega (2009) reviews the vital distinction between circumstantial and elective second-language (L2) learners (pp. 243-245). Elective learners differ in fundamental ways from those who “must learn the majority language for reasons over which they have little choice and which are typically associated to larger-scale world events, such as immigration, economic hardship, postcolonialism, war or occupation” (p. 243). Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000) use the term “functional bilinguals” to describe those who often have had no choice in acquiring another language, in contrast to “bicultural bilinguals”, who focus on expanding cross-cultural awareness. Creative melding of linguistic forms becomes a “language for survival” (Zentella, 1997, p. 13) in an oppressed community, as opposed to language acquisition in the service of self-aggrandizement. Three-year longitudinal case studies among adult migrants resettling in Europe drew attention to those moving involuntarily, for political or economic reasons. “[L]anguage acquisition”, noted the resulting European Science Foundation (ESF) study, “takes place in a context characterised by social, educational and linguistic problems” (Perdue, 1993, p. 1). Mexican communities in the United States, in particular, are characterized by “linguistic heterogeneity” (Martínez, 2006, p. 81) as they blend multiple Spanishes and Englishes. Contrary to some opinion, however, contemporary migrants to the United States learn English faster than previous generations (Waters & Pineau, 2015, p. 313), even while contending in some cases with “linguistic isolation” and lack of access to social capital (p. 310). The many forms of exclusion in migrant communities include those related to communication failures (Velázquez Vázquez, 2011), separation from English-speakers, and isolating work schedules.

1.2. Silence in language learning

A growing literature in second-language acquisition (SLA) strives to observe, categorise, and evaluate silences in face-to-face interaction and in other situations. It is a multi-disciplinary effort with examination of numerous cultures and speech contexts, although language learners typically are situated in such research in classroom rather than naturalistic settings. Many efforts have been made to define and classify silence (e.g., Bruneau, 1973; Jensen, 1973; Jaworski, 1997, p. 3; Sobkowiak, 1997, pp. 43-44; Nakane, 2007, pp. 11-12, 31-33; Muñoz, 2014, p. 25), with an emerging understanding that defining silence in terms of absence creates practical problems for those wishing to study it, especially when the focus is on culturally situated human beings attempting to find voice in a new language. This notion of absence can prove elusive and discourage further research, with a result that silence has in the past been treated with other “para-verbal cues”, like laughter, that throw

into relief the utterances they separate rather than meriting study in their own right. This neglect of silence forms part of a critique of applied linguistics and its lack of attention to the body and to other means of non-verbal communication, such as gaze and gesture (Canagarajah, 2017, p. 13). No one definition of silence has come out of this myriad of linguistic approaches, with the criteria for the meaning of silence tending to match the research question at hand. Susan Sontag (1969), in an essay on the aesthetics of silence, managed to capture the ambivalence inherent in treatment of the topic by writing, “‘Silence’ never ceases to imply its opposite” (p. 11). Research among the Oglala Sioux in South Dakota and Cherokee in Oklahoma pointed to a “mask of silence” as a form of protest (Dumont, 1972, p. 346).

Rather than seeing silence as individual preference in the moment, some research seeks to position silence as occurring within a social world. Psychological approaches regard silence as “a psychical moment, as well as a linguistic stage, in the complex process of moving from one language to another, and from one *self* to another” (Granger, 2004, pp. 6-7; emphasis in original). A socio-cultural or social constructionist orientation to L2 learning reframes the L2 learner, in fact, moving to participate in a new community rather than merely acquiring a new linguistic code. Research emphasizing contextual dimensions of silence has taken place recently in video-mediated telecollaboration (Akiyama, 2017), in small-group tutorials (Jin, 2017) and in other academic settings where silence is judged as the product of multiple factors (Hanh, 2020) and as a resource, rather than liability, for facilitating verbal communication (Bao, 2020; Bao & Thanh-My, 2020). Norton expresses informants’ challenges as seeking the “right to speak” more than a quest for competence (Norton & McKinney, 2011, p. 84). In the socio-cultural perspective, with links to Vygotsky, an L2 speaker’s experience and their speech or silence is mediated by social or classroom practice. Tracking over one year a newly arrived kindergartener from México, researchers notice a silence that is “socially situated and culturally constructed within a particular context” (DaSilva Iddings & Jang, 2008, p. 570). From the time that Krashen (1985) wrote about the theorized relationship between silence and language acquisition, other linguists have been working to place silence within a more comprehensive explanation of human communication (see Ephratt, 2011). Second-language socialization (SLS), for one, contextualizes silence within a complex interaction of individual and social forces, in which outcomes might be partial L2 appropriation or outright rejection (Duff, 2007).

While the literature suggests numerous links between Daniela’s situation as a migrant in the U.S. social setting and possible interpretations of her silences, there has been little research that asked migrants in the United States to track their silences or to offer their own explanations. As detailed in the methodology section below, given the complications attending observation of silence in a natural setting, the most expedient approach to the research questions appeared to be asking participants, including Daniela, how they would answer such questions themselves. In attempting to fill this gap in research on day-to-day silence among English-language learners in the U.S. setting, I lift up the following research questions for discussion:

- (1) RQ1: Where is the boundary, for Daniela, of speaking or staying silent in English?
- (2) RQ2: What environmental variables influence Daniela’s silence in English? What are her “silent strategies”?

2. Methodology

The methods in this study represent application of the “social turn” in second-language research (Block, 2003, p. 1). The qualitative methodology assists in studying social questions, as opposed to individual learner differences, that arise from acknowledging the culturally embedded nature of language exchange. Additional-language learners, better termed “emergent bilinguals” (Woodley et al., 2020, p. 277), are actors situated in society, whether in their home cultures or in the culture hosting the target language. Questions such as learners’ levels of access and participation in the host country, negotiation of power dynamics and the impact of non-nativelike linguistic performance on identity (see Ortega, 2009, pp. 233-251) reflect recognition that language acquisition is more than an individual question of self-determination or aptitude. In the same spirit, this study of silences in language acquisition strives in its method for an emic, insider’s perspective and aims “to understand the experiences of language learners in naturalistic contexts and from the perspectives of the learners themselves” (Deters, 2011, p. 53). This embrace of a diversity of perspectives leads to ontological awareness of “multiple realities” (p. 55) and the welcoming of first-person testimony as a legitimate

data source, with the assertion that narratives of emergent bilinguals offer richer material for investigators than quantitative results (Pavlenko & Lantolf, 2000, p. 157).

A case-study design was selected due to parameters and questions—namely, learners’ self-assessments of silence—whose outcomes “are unclear, unknown, or unexplored” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 114). I decided from the beginning to let those like Daniela, with intimate knowledge and an active builder of stories of language acquisition, to make their own definitions and interpretations about silence and when or if silence appeared in their daily experiences. An earlier study of L1 silences notes that “speakers themselves are in a considerably better position than are observers to shed light on the potential reasons for their speechlessness” (Berger, 2004, p. 150). The research ethos, therefore, is subjective, interpretive and inductive, as case studies are characterized in qualitative-research submission guidelines for *TESOL Quarterly* (TESOL International Association, n.d.). Distinct from formative language-learner case studies of the 1970s and 1980s that Duff surveys (2008, pp. 36-37), the data here were not obtained longitudinally (see Schumann, 1977; Schmidt, 1983; Duff, 2008, pp. 2-13, for case-study designs that analyse participant speech samples over as long as three years). Nor is this research of sufficient depth to be considered “ethnographic” in the sense of including nuanced characterization of “the culture of the group or entity under study” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 116; emphasis in original).

Silence, indeed, apart from pragmatic pauses when taking speech turns, to mark disagreement and so on (Camargo Fernández & Méndez Guerrero, 2014), is difficult to observe or to measure. Even when I try to describe the phenomenon solely through my own perception as a “neutral” observer, I cannot account for the tumult of inner speech (de Guerrero, 2005). Thus, silence remains inscrutable as to ultimate meaning. This project, in its self-imposed limitations, should not be confused with investigations of a “silent period” in SLA. Defining such a silent period, if it exists, is also problematic (Granger, 2004, pp. 14-22). Eliciting silence in an additional language, on its face, seems like an odd endeavour. Linguists can target phonetic and morphosyntactic tokens for elicitation, but what would be the approach for eliciting silence? It is certainly possible to observe naturally occurring silences. But what do they signify? Can one tell the difference between a native-language silence and a second-language silence? Thus, one confronts a methodological quandary centred on naming the “it” that can be defined for research purposes. In its method, therefore, the case-study research in this paper chooses an abstract entity, silence, to query and allows Daniela to judge the presence and quantity, as well as quality, of such an abstraction in her own experiences of learning English.

2.1. Participant and setting

Daniela, as well as the two other participants in the original multiple case study (Turnbull, 2019), was recruited from a metropolitan community-based education centre, where I previously had been a volunteer. No previous relationships existed, however, between the participants and me. Teachers in the centre’s beginning ESL courses themselves recruited participants. The stipulation for research was that I would look for cases with “typical” backgrounds, meaning that those I would ask about silence would be distant from native-like competence in English, yet would have a long-standing familiarity with bilingual contexts in the United States. All those interviewed were native Spanish-speakers, and all interviews were conducted in Spanish. Participants received a small stipend for sitting for at least three interviews and for compiling two weeks of daily second-language-use surveys.

The focus of this paper, Daniela (a pseudonym), is from Michoacán, a state in west-central México. Her mother attended primary school, and she recalled that her father reached third grade. She herself finished sixth grade but did not proceed to the secondary years; instead, she began helping her mother at home and, later, her father, an agricultural worker, growing lettuce, onions, and strawberries. She had worked in other parts of México, as a shop assistant in a larger city, and remembered traveling north to Guanajuato for religious gatherings, at which she heard dialectical variations of Spanish. When interviewed, Daniela, in her mid-thirties, had lived close to 11 years in the United States; she worked as a meatpacker, a job she had held for nearly three years, on the second shift, from late afternoon until leaving shortly after midnight. One limitation on her acquisition of English was the necessity of wearing noise-mitigating headphones on the job, although, in any case, her co-workers were primarily Spanish-speakers. She placed as a low beginner on the Best Literacy scale (Form C, 37).

2.2. Data collection and analysis

Two aspects of data collection took place in the same period: daily responses to language surveys and semi-structured interviews. The daily surveys were distributed and collected on paper, two weeks for each participant. These daily questionnaires asked about overall English usage during the previous 24 hours; where and in what situations English use occurred; subjective evaluations of the effectiveness of the conversations; and if English-language interactions had incorporated notable “silences”, according to participants’ reading of the term. The paper surveys were collected immediately before scheduled interviews. Conversations with each participant lasted between 30 minutes to one hour, with the idea that each would be exploratory and open-ended, although oriented around guiding questions asked of all respondents (see Table 1 below for Daniela’s short answers to some of the standardized queries). By mixing the ways that informants thought about their use of English—to incorporate daily self-monitoring, one-on-one interviews, and a focus group (all spread over one month)—the aim was to gain access to their thoughts at different moments and partially to mitigate the reality of inconsistent first-person perceptions. The range of data-collection techniques allowed for contradictions to emerge and for sensitivity to occasions when participants might have been unsure of themselves, trying to meet my expectations, or still sorting through their own ideas.

Interviews allowed subjects to revisit topics from previous interviews or the content of survey questions, encouraging them “to talk as long as they like on any topic that particularly interests them, to tell stories or narratives and even to go off on tangents of their own” (Schilling, 2013, p. 108). Interviews generally progressed from detailed background questions to more freely formed prompts later, as topics became potentially more sensitive. It is a model of shared meaning construction with interest in how oppressed populations experience transitions and, more specifically, the navigation of multilingual terrain (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, pp. 120-121).

Language-use surveys were not subject to any quantitative analysis but served as points of cross-reference for interviewees’ own comments about attitudes toward English and subjective impressions of their inter-linguistic capabilities. Regarding interviews, translations are my own, although native Spanish-speakers have also reviewed them. Coding of interview transcripts took place inductively, meaning that categories emerged from respondents’ own language choices (Brown, 2001, p. 241). Categories were then conceptualized more broadly to allow further analysis (Dörnyei, 2003, p. 117). Such data “chunking” allows for identification of themes as part of a “systematic cognitive process involving comparing, contrasting, looking for linkages, similarities, and differences, and finding sequences, co-occurrences, and absences” (LeCompte & Schensul, 2010, p. 199). The process of developing a theme codebook followed that outlined in La Pelle (2004). The result was a three-level codebook, arranged hierarchically, so that information pertaining to the research questions could be sorted and analysed at the end.

3. Findings and discussion

3.1. The boundary between speech and silence

To address the first research question—Where is the boundary, for Daniela, of speaking and staying silent in English?—one must first consider Daniela’s language-learning history in more detail. For family reasons, she ended her schooling after sixth grade and travelled from rural Michoacán to larger cities for work. Starting at 16 years old, she began to interact with other types of Spanish, what she calls a “more educated” variety. At religious retreats, she heard other dialects and Indigenous languages that she did not understand. Despite ending her formal schooling early in life, Daniela speaks with awareness of the potential of language and of her own potential as a language learner. She says of interacting with city dwellers during her two- or three-month temporary jobs in México, “Sometimes you don’t know how to say things. You don’t know how to use the right words”. But she acquired new vocabulary and “later you’re going to understand how to use many [new] words”.

In her written surveys of English-language use for this study, Daniela consistently ranked her effectiveness between 30 and 50 percent. In her daily comments, she described a self-conscious strategy of venturing only the language that she had used successfully before. On one day, she wrote, “Only what I am able to pronounce so that [people] understand me is what I say”. The most dependable place for her to practice was the job. In fact, the only two other settings in which she mentioned using English were her English classes and while shopping—never with family, with doctors, in government offices, at social gatherings or in any of the other locations named in surveys and semi-directed

interview questions. On two of the 14 days surveyed, she admitted to not using English at all. On three days, she only used English at work, where, as mentioned above, speaking was limited by noisy machinery. Six times, she reported being “not sure” that someone avoided speaking English with her. “Maybe they thought that I don’t understand English”, she wrote about several different incidents. One time she was unsure if she herself had opted for silence over speech, suggesting that the reason was “because there are only a few words that I know in English”.

Expanding on the survey data in interviews, Daniela referred not to a single second-language environment, such as a store or interlocutor, as the most challenging, but “the moment of speaking” (*el momento de hablar*) writ large. At that instant, she describes an internal cognitive hiccup, the sensation of not being able to remember the word she wants to use “until a little while has passed”. She refers to such cognitive delays with both input (reception) and output (production). The result, for her, is the same: “In the moment, I don’t get it right”. The L2 *l’esprit de l’escalier*, for Daniela, occurs at work and in shops; the lapses are not confined to certain places. Similarly, she does not name one place where she feels most comfortable experimenting with language. Rather, the almost daily experience of facing the *momento de hablar*, for its frequency or for some unknown reason unique to Daniela, has become a comfort zone in that she accepts the unpredictability. This was not the only occasion among the participant interviews in which spoken testimony partially contradicted, or seemed to contradict, what informants wrote down in the paper surveys. While Daniela, in writing, reflects that she offers no more in speech than what her interlocutors will understand, in the interviews she replies:

If I don’t understand or don’t know what to say, no—well, no, it doesn’t bother me. Because I say, “No, I don’t understand you”, or, “Yes, I understand you”. That’s it. But I feel the same, whether I say that I understood a tiny bit of what they were talking about, if I understand only a few words, or if I don’t understand, or don’t know. I say, “I don’t know what you said”.

In this manner, Daniela for the most part manages to bypass self-criticism in her interview answers to emphasize survival and resourcefulness. A few things she understands in English, most things she does not. To her, these are facts, not value judgments. In her internal classification system, she ranks her capacity to communicate in English as four out of 10. Several times she repeats, “What I understand is what I’m able to say”. Although the contexts in which she uses English are circumscribed, she does not consciously avoid unfamiliar places or situations:

I go anywhere, just like that. Many times, I’ve gone places where there are only English speakers. And I ask them things in Spanish, and they tell me they don’t speak Spanish. So, I—I bring a word to my mind. One, two, or three words that I can say in that moment so that they understand me, that’s what I try to say. I try to say [the words] so that I—speaking a tiny bit of English, one, two, or three words, if they understood me then I feel comfortable. And I know that I am obligated to say one, two, or three [words]. Whatever I know, I have to say it when I’m with people that don’t speak Spanish.

The theme of obligation, positively construed, recurred in the original multiple case study. For Daniela, on her arrival in the United States as a single woman in her early 20s, she faced an economic imperative to earn money. To work, she had to take public transport. Not knowing English could not deter her. Spanish-speaking co-workers gave her notes on her daily commute, what colour trains to take, where to catch the right bus. She tried not to let language limit her:

Where I was living there are a lot of shops and there were Chinese [stores], and some others Indian. . . . I also—I didn’t stay cooped up by saying, “If I go out, I’m not going to understand or they’re not going to understand me, or I—” No. I went out. I went to look at the shops. I looked at the shoes, the clothes, whatever. I kept looking at things. And if they spoke to me in English, I didn’t understand. But later, as I say, little by little, [I learned] with a cousin or my cousins. I heard things that [people] said. But mostly my cousin, then she did teach me a few words. Then later she tells me, “No, so, you tell him, ‘No, no thank you’, tell him no, thank you, that you don’t want it”. Things like that. And then she told

me, “No, don’t say anything more than, ‘Okay’, and that way you’re saying that it’s all right”. Like that, some little things, and I tried to remember them. And then I would go anywhere, even though they didn’t understand me or even though I didn’t understand.

Daniela confesses to being much more comfortable with the spoken word than with writing. But to her, these anxieties about writing can be worked out in the classroom. Human interpreters help her get by in medical and government offices. With family, in church, on the telephone—these are Spanish-only settings. Her love of shopping, however, has lured her into a world of multilingual exchange, where, ever since leaving México, “The language has never worried me. Never”. When initially making purchases in the United States, she studied the cash-register screens until she learned the spoken numbers. With the boost from such self-generated confidence, Daniela now believes that she can initiate small conversations while shopping, for example, or when talking about others’ children, or ordering coffee. The chats for which she provides the most detail are transactional and are those in which Daniela can voice her preference. She mentions storekeepers showing her items for purchase:

And when I see it, I say, “Oh, that’s beautiful”, and then what I can say in English. I say it’s beautiful, that I like it. And I say that the colour, the names [of the colours]—I use the name of the colour, and I tell them that it’s beautiful. Like that. A few things.

3.2. Silent strategies and interpretations of silence

Turning to the second research question—What environmental variables influence Daniela’s silence in English? What are her “silent strategies”?—I move to look more intently at contextual influences on Daniela’s self-described silences. Data from the three one-on-one semi-structured interviews contain 444 speaking turns for Daniela, of which 118, directed mainly by the pre-set interview protocol, regarded silent strategies and interpretations of silence. On 67 occasions, she spoke about differences between Mexican and U.S. social contexts—some of these differences explaining her occasional reticence—although never did she refer to a situation where she might have felt discriminated against as the result of her Mexicanness.

Table 1 lists the questions in the one-on-one interviews that deliberately targeted silences. Daniela was asked these questions (in Spanish), in the sequence given. The table can serve as a reference while reading the narrative answers, which address various themes addressing silence and social context.

Table 1. Interview Questions about L1 and L2 Silences, with Short Answers

Question	Daniela’s response
Are you quieter in English than in your mother tongue?	Yes
Are there situations in which you stay silent instead of speaking in English?	Yes
Do you think that silence is useful in some situations, or is it a problem?	Yes, useful
Are there positive and negative silences in your country?	Yes
Do you limit your speech more in English than in Spanish?	Yes
Do you think it is more important to stay silent in the United States than in your native country?	Yes
Are there things that you need to say in English that you cannot get across?	Yes

To begin, Daniela was asked if she avoided places or situations where she might have to speak English. Some literature classifies avoidance in non-native-speaker discourse as non-communication, or a variety of non-engagement (Gass & Varonis, 1991, p. 124). Either party can initiate the problematic communication (which is non-communication). Gass and Varonis provide examples of a student avoiding a non-native-speaker conversation partner when “particularly tired”. The native-speaker in this case “would turn around and walk the other way so as not to engage in what would undoubtedly be a difficult and stressful conversation”. Another person in Gass and Varonis’s study tells of avoiding bank tellers in San Francisco because “he feared communicative difficulty” with those who appeared to be non-native-speakers of English (p. 124).

It is important to note, though, that Daniela characterizes herself by nature as a quiet person. She claims the role of listener in both the L1 and L2—"I feel happier listening than talking and talking"—balancing her listening strategy with the occasional aside to male or female English-speaking co-workers, wondering if they are tired or liked the work they were doing that day. But sometimes the silences are involuntary, a kind of cognitive surrender:

The problem would be when you're tired. Because, when you're tired, even my head hurts. So they can be talking in Spanish and you won't understand. . . . Sometimes you don't give conversations any importance. So, then I don't understand. Not in Spanish or in English. If you're tired, weary, when you're tired even in your head—it pains you. That's the problem. When you're tired like that, [with] a tired mind, I don't understand [anything].

Interactional avoidance is also a solution for those who, for whatever reason, do not want to learn the L2 (Siegel, 2003, p. 192). However, since Daniela has persisted with L2 education even after a long sojourn in the United States, the explanation is less likely.

Among the interview themes that dealt with silent strategies, silence because of perceived linguistic inferiority and feared miscommunication prevailed as the topic mentioned in the most interview sequences. The L2 learner's anxiety about communicative competence has consistently shown itself a key variable, for instance, in modelling of the willingness-to-communicate concept. In one of the earliest WTC models, the concept was expressed as "state communicative self-confidence", itself constituted by perceived competence and lack of anxiety (MacIntyre et al., 1998, p. 549). That these are the "most immediate determinants of WTC" (p. 549) when considering language-learner traits has been affirmed in multiple studies (e.g., Hashimoto, 2002; Mystkowska-Wiertelak, 2021), both in language classrooms and in an L1 when talking to doctors—another context of perceived disparities in fluency. Baker and Watson (2015) conclude that "[w]hen patients feel that they can communicate, it influences the likelihood that they will" (p. 635).

Daniela has her own version of this gnawing concern about garbled messages, which she expresses as something most closely approximating the WTC construct: the worry that, at the moment of speech, miscommunication becomes an inevitability. Receiving incomprehensible input seems less of a concern for her. She has a one-word response for these situations: "sorry". "I say, 'A little English'. A little. And now they know that I'm not understanding them". Regarding her own speech production, however, she affirms that silence has become even more of a companion for her in the United States than it was in México. In describing how she assimilates content learned in community-centre English classes, Daniela reproduces her inner speech and the mechanics of interlanguage process:

Right now in class, I've learned some—some—like some questions and some responses. But even with that, sometimes it's forgotten when the time comes to talk. At the time of speaking, I say [to myself], it's [just] one thing: "I already had it here. I already knew how it's said". And no, it's gone. It's forgotten. Then it's trying to remember. Remembering to be able to say it or explain. Because it's forgotten. Or sometimes you know one word but the other is missing. And I say [to myself], "Oh, but it's said like this and like this". And no. Sometimes you forget it at the moment of speaking or asking. Because sometimes you can't say the complete sentence. The complete sentence. Only half comes out, and the other half—but there are a lot of situations where I say, "Ay, how do you say this?" And you stay that way, "How do I say it? What is it?" Because sometimes you only remember half. Half the sentence.

Turning to the phenomena of mental rehearsal, turn-taking, inner speech and listening, Saville-Troike (1988), borrowing from the sociological analysis of David Riesman, applies the phrases "inner-directed" and "other-directed" to childhood second-language learners (pp. 567-568). The idea is to counter the impression that limited speech production in an L2 indicates passivity, rather than the active participation of a learner who has "gone underground" and uses private speech to make sense of L2 input. She sees inner-directed learners during this "silent period" (see Krashen, 1985, pp. 9-12) refraining from initiating exchanges and producing "little if any overt social verbalization in the second language" (Saville-Troike, 1988, p. 568). The process has also been attested among intermediate and advanced adult L2 learners of Spanish. Centeno-Cortés and Jiménez Jiménez (2004)

view private verbal thinking (PVT) as part of the L2 reasoning process and affirm that not all unfinished or fragmented L2 utterances are breakdowns, but “when accompanied by a long silence . . . could also indicate that the thinking went underground in the form of inner speech” (p. 20). Private speech might act as internalization, rehearsal, covert participation, self-regulation during a task, or as a form of self-criticism or understanding (pp. 8-9; see also [de Guerrero, 2005](#), pp. 154-160).

Given that it seems to serve her disposition, Daniela advocates explicitly for silent acquisition. Utilizing community resources, primarily other L1 Spanish-speakers learning English and her community-centre language classes, she has made a study of chain restaurants such as Starbucks and McDonald’s. The relatively fixed menu items, predictable language exchanges and most especially the foreknowledge and potential for rehearsal suit Daniela’s learning style; at relatively low risk, she can experience successful linguistic and economic transactions and learn to appreciate novel items like iced coffee, which does not feature in México. Now, she passes on her techniques to friends. For one woman, who likes hamburgers with bacon—extra bacon—Daniela arranged for her to practice with a bilingual server, whom she instructed, “Tell her that you want it with extra bacon”. To her friend, she said, “Listen”. Since the woman’s husband, too, is bilingual, Daniela advocated that her friend take a more active role in such exchanges. “He orders”, Daniela says, referring to the husband. “And he pays. So, I told her, ‘If you don’t order, at least listen. Listen to what he’s saying’. I tell her, ‘Listen. And for whatever you like, learn how it’s said’, I say, ‘so that you can ask for it like that’ ”.

I do not claim any linkage here between internalization and social production, with private speech the conveyor ([de Guerrero, 2005](#), p. 157). It is worth taking pedagogical note, though, of Daniela’s mindful approach and of her broader application of an action-reflection model to language and daily affairs:

A positive silence is when one is thinking most of the time about situations that one has. . . . It’s not being silent only to be angry or to be sad. It’s for thinking about a solution. Sometimes one is thinking silently, and maybe in a moment one can convey to another person, “Now I’ve thought about what I’m going to do. Now I’ve thought about it”. And one can have another attitude now that you know what you’re going to do. People sometimes, [they say,] “She was really quiet, and then she began to smile. She knows what she’s going to do”. And they’re surprised, right? “And now what are you talking about? I saw you really quiet and now you know what you’re going to do”. And one changes one’s attitude. . . . And [then] maybe one starts a conversation with another person. And the silence is over. . . . And one changes their attitude, and it makes you happier. And one ceases their thinking, because now you’ve thought how to fix a problem that was making you spin around. And there are positive conversations, positive, now that you’ve changed your mind. And now you say, “I’ll do this differently”. And there are positive conversations. From silence. That’s what I think.

With regard to the conditions of emotional and legal self-protection, fatigue, and anger, Sifianou (1997, pp. 72-74) references Brown and Levinson’s work to affirm how silence expresses various politeness strategies, with negative and “off-record” forms of politeness of special interest in this brief synthesis of results. By staying quiet, a person acknowledges negative-face needs, from Brown and Levinson’s formulation, by not interfering with another person’s freedom while at the same time protecting their own distance and emotional neutrality, as when one remains silent on public transportation. According to Sifianou, silence is most closely related to the indirectness, ambiguity, and vagueness of off-record politeness: “[S]ilence allows the actor to evade responsibility for having committed a particular act and at the same time to reduce the degree of imposition” (p. 73).

Silence as positive politeness comes from the intimacy of not having to use words to be understood. For the second-language learner, this form of silence is more difficult to achieve in the L2; thus, in Sifianou’s analysis, negative or off-record forms of politeness, based on avoidance, would be more useful: “[I]t is easier to safeguard territories and social distance through silence” (p. 78). L2 silence, most especially, can preserve tranquillity in lieu of venturing into terrain that might prove face-threatening to oneself. Ephratt (2012) also judges that silence serves interactional purposes, including that of the person who wishes not to transact in an unfamiliar tongue, where their silence can communicate, “I do not share this code” (p. 74).

Yet, in many situations, the inherent ambiguity of silence puts the onus for interpretation on the receiver. These are high inferential demands, flowing from silence's indirectness. "Silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness", writes Tannen (1985, p. 97), in that it transmits meaning without verbal content. In talking about silence as self-protection and explaining how English has not intimidated her, Daniela refers more than once to her silence on buses and trains. As a new resident in the United States, with little L2 competence, she protected herself on mass transit by studying the route beforehand with advice from fellow Spanish-speakers. In the meantime, she listened and took in information. "I learned to talk on the bus and the train", Daniela says. "Right away I began to move around all over the place, even though I didn't understand anything. Because some workmates that I knew taught me to . . . I don't know really, that if I take this train, that the other one passes here in another colour, and from here you can go here and from here you can go there". Now, as someone experienced in city ways, she likewise travels in silence with other commuters, confident in her directions, yet able to break silence if needed to ask or answer questions about the route and specific stops.

Interpreting and employing silence proved more difficult for her in México, where another's L1 silence could be read as tiredness, anger, sadness, arrogance, preoccupation and so on. Although prodding the person in Spanish was a possibility, Daniela's mother was a different challenge, because a wall of silence made it hard to navigate the relationship. To Daniela, the silence was an angry one:

That is what I thought. My mom is really mad. . . . And when I began to see my mom like that, [she said to me,] "You don't talk to me, I don't know why". That is what she said, that she didn't know why I didn't talk to her. Things like that. For me it's that my mom was angry. And that's how I grew up, believing that she was always angry. Because she was never able to talk with me. And if I asked her, she said, "Don't ask me those questions. I don't know". Things like that: "No, don't ask me. Go take care of your business". Like rejecting me for having asked her something, for wanting to talk to her. That is what I felt. And that is what I also see in other people. So, the same. The same. And now you can know if people are angry, if they're happy, if the silence is for good or bad. You come to know people. You know people.

In this manner, perhaps even more so in a second-language setting, Daniela has become a reader of silences, her own and those of others. "It's not only in speech that you can understand that they're angry or happy", she says of the silences that she witnesses in the United States. "Also, the body language. That there are happy people. They're smiling. And others show their anger and it's evident in the body. They make aggressive movements or . . . It's seen in the body".

What strategies does Daniela employ to circumvent silence? In addition to electronic means, L2 repair strategies or silence-filling alternatives mentioned by Daniela and the other two original study participants include hand signals, use of demonstrative adjectives (*this one*, *that one*, etc.) as referential aids, metalinguistic queries about vocabulary and research and rehearsal that include leveraging bilingual Spanish-English speakers and community-centre teachers for help with language and cultural navigation. Daniela treats her initial purchases of iced coffee as an L2-acquisition case study, or how an L2 originated from what had been conceptual and lexical silence. In the interest of space, the narrative is not reproduced here, but out of unfamiliarity with iced coffee—"for us, in México, we don't drink coffee at midday, neither hot nor cold"—new knowledge is born from a conversation with her aunt, who told her exactly the sequence of words needed to acquire an iced coffee for her aunt and herself.

The importance of differences between the U.S. and Mexico social contexts already has been mentioned. Contrastive analysis with the linguistic culture of Michoacán, México, occurred in interviews with Daniela when she was asked explicitly to compare attitudes toward silence in the two cultures. Her comparisons reflect Harder's (1980) assessment of the language learner as someone in a "reduced" position, needing to master a linguistic code but also to acquire "patterns of action", and the necessary interdependence of both tasks (p. 263). In Harder's terms, they learn both *system* and *actualization*, making L2 performance even more transformative for shaping new patterns of language and life simultaneously, with the patterns inextricably related. The informants' recollections of their L2 selves also recall the dimensions of loss enumerated in Pavlenko and Lantolf (2000), connected to the "double displacement" of place and language that Eva Hoffman names in her memoir *Lost in*

Translation. The losses include, but are not limited to, linguistic identity, subjectivities, frame of reference, inner voice, and attrition of first-language cultural and lexical familiarity (pp. 162-163).

Daniela's stance regards language conditions—that is, the social situations that prompt communication—in the two cultures as bearing some likeness to each other. While she might vocalize more concern for a persistently quiet L1 speaking partner, whether in México or the United States, she feels that, with patience, one will discover the reason behind the silence:

Sometimes [they say,] “Ay, before coming to work I got really upset”. That sometimes they got angry at home. Or if they are older people, sometimes they say, “Ay, I’m thinking that I have a problem” with their child, their husband. Sometimes they are thinking about all that, and they don’t talk. They don’t even look happy in their face, people look sad. And later they say that it’s because they have a problem, because they didn’t sleep, because they’re thinking about the problems they have. Sometimes, whatever answer they give explains why they are silent, quiet. And it’s that they’re thinking about their situation.

Here she talks about memories from México. But she remembers almost the same conversation at her current job, further affirming for her the cultural similarities: “A black woman told me that . . . so we were working and later she told me that she was really sleepy. And I understood that she was sleepy. And I understood that she said she had gotten up at six in the morning. That she had only slept until six”. Again, the bodily expressions facilitated Daniela's interpretation of the English words: “It was the same, her body looked completely tired. . . . So [here] they have the same feeling. You see it in the face”. Individual interactions do not seem to shape Daniela's cultural attitudes or L2 self as much as the totality of environmental factors. The knowledge that one can speak and be understood in México provides a fixed condition, some security, even if the content of speech is identical. For this sense of security, Daniela in the city prefers life in a Latino barrio and compares the reality to an imagined, less manageable existence in which the environmental stresses of English enclose her:

Because [now] you go out, and you know that you will meet many people. If you have to ask something in Spanish, we understand. We understand, and you can talk and ask about anything when you are in the same barrio that speaks the same language. You understand everything. Everybody understands you, about everything. In contrast, if you lived—I'd say if you lived in a purely American neighbourhood, with people of colour who only have English, then yeah. I would stay silent. Silence. Only listening to how the people talk, and you don't understand. You understand the words, [but] what they are talking about you cannot understand. Surrounded by people like that.

Daniela's case helps show that it is perhaps unwise to infer from an emergent bilingual student's silences that they are demonstrating unwillingness to communicate. In fact, such silences may be strategic, an instance of the student “going deep” to make sense of L2 input. Such inner rehearsal time may bear fruit, though not necessarily, as spoken production, as Daniela demonstrated with her studied noticing, rehearsal, and then articulation to place food and coffee orders. Language instructors might refer to Daniela's practice as a potential model and, indeed, as a form of authenticity, something resembling the legitimate peripheral participation of religious congregants, athletes in training, spectators, new friends, patients, and students in a classroom—all examples offered by Lave and Wenger (1991) as potentially transformative everyday learning (Hanks, 1991, p. 18).

4. Conclusion

In sum, the self-limiting or self-silencing patterns that Daniela describes perhaps relate to extra-linguistic explanations with origins inside and outside the self. Ali (2010), for one, employs a theory of self-silencing developed by Jack (1993). The sojourning Caribbean women in Toronto and New York that Ali interviews do not confront a language barrier but mention differing social expectations of women in their new societies as well as pervasive discrimination. Self-silencing represents more than a choice to speak or not but an insidious loss of self that relates to the immigrant experience and how it can “compromise one's emotional well-being” (2010, p. 234). These individuals believe that, in Norton's (1995) words, they have lost the “right to speak” (p. 18). Freire's (1970/2000) work in

critical pedagogy raises the related spectre of the internal oppressor, a demon duplicating in a person's subjective experience a set of external norms that characterize a domination system. In these relationships between dominators and the oppressed, the former "steal the words of others" and grow accustomed to the intoxicating, anti-dialogical condition of the other being's silence (p. 134).

This paper indicates that, in fact, innumerable extra-linguistic variables influence L2 speech production for Daniela. There is an echo here of earlier work showing that willingness to communicate, a concept born out of inquiry into language-learner motivation, depends on a long list of contextual and individual factors. As in research into second-language-learner motivation, one of the challenges is to explain "the complex interrelationship of the individual organism, the individual's environment, and the broader sociocultural context" (Dörnyei and Skehan, 2003, p. 616). Here I have tried another approach to the willingness-to-communicate formulation by associating WTC explicitly with silence, with which it had already been associated implicitly. The concept of silence under review was defined indirectly within the survey and interview questions as refraining from L2 speech when an opportunity presents itself. Since the interest was in subjective, individual perceptions, the term *silence* was otherwise left to the participants' own interpretation. They acknowledge the presence of silence in their efforts to speak an additional language and regard it as a kind of refuge, lamentable for them at times but also useful in managing their exposure to existential and economic pressures. It perhaps is not the "fully cognizant silence" of Sheriff's (2000) informants in facing persistent racism in Rio de Janeiro (p. 128) yet reflects awareness of the continued vitality of their first language in shaping their identities, even in a different linguistic surrounding. The other notable approach here to operationalizing WTC has been to ask how it functions in a naturalistic environment. Adult ESL learners were recruited from a community-based language programme, but their classroom interactions were not the focus, as in a large amount of earlier work on WTC.

Any conclusions, however tentative, relating to the initial research questions must be shaped to identify future areas for inquiry and be faithful to participants' own descriptions. Regarding the effects of social distance and personal narratives of English-language interaction on WTC, I have commented on the prevalence of L2 input and output, for Daniela, in work and economic transactions. These tendencies accord with members of a minority language group's so-called instrumental motivations (Siegel, 2003, p. 185), but have been more fruitfully analysed under the rubric of investment. Norton and McKinney (2011) directly speak to the difference between these concepts. Contrary to thinking primarily about a language learner's material desires, investment regards L2 use not solely as an instrument for gain but as a reshaping and reimagining of identity (p. 75). Daniela's rehearsal of her first iced-coffee purchase, for instance, shows herself as a capable and adaptable L2 user more than it shows someone who wants to try a new beverage. One also sees in Daniela's vignettes how verbal fluency is not required in multilingual marketplace exchanges. "In the face of linguistic obstacles to communication", writes Calvet (1998), "markets show us how, despite everything, people communicate" (p. 88). Such accounts further encourage SLA research in places beyond school. Daniela's own recourse to and recommendations concerning L2 learner silence in the marketplace challenge WTC studies that fail to consider that not speaking might complement a person's L2 WTC rather than subverting it.

As to extra-linguistic factors that contribute to the participants' perceived silences, and to the silences of others, in social settings, I identify in Daniela's stories some openness to silent strategies when she doubts her L2 competence, when she is tired, and when the situation is volatile and the outcome of L2 speech unknown. The latter silence in the face of unpredictability recalls Basso's (1970) findings among the Western Apache. Daniela maintains her individualized mappings of places and people to avoid and different strategies for intentional silence. Berger (2004) in his first-language research concludes that most speechlessness is involuntary and remarks on embarrassment and guilt his informants report when choosing to stay silent (p. 168). Daniela's positive associations with silence and language acquisition seem to make potential self-shaming less of an issue.

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