

Forms of Silence in the Quaker Meeting: a sociolinguistic analysis

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日 時：September 12, 1994 (12:30-14:00)

場 所：ILC-N 301

<Talking in Silence: Ministry in Quaker Meetings>

The Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) which began in the seventeenth century, was one of the more radical experiments of the Protestant Reformation. Unlike most such experiments it has survived, retaining its central belief in an individual's direct access to God without the need for meditation through priest or sacred text. The Quaker 'church' is organised into Meetings which have regular services known as Meetings for Worship. The basis of worship is silence: members sit together and meditate. Meetings for Worship are public occasions, open to all, and it is permissible for anyone present to break the silence by speaking; such speaking is known as ministry.

The paper describes an empirical study of the role of speaking in Quaker Meetings, using as models for description (1) conversation, (2) formal settings, (3) continuing states of incipient talk. Empirical data were collected of 14 Meetings for Worship (in England, Scotland, Ireland and the USA). The results were as follows:

1. the total number of speakers in the 14 Meetings was 72, a mean of 5.1 per meeting occasion, with a range from 4-7.
2. the total amount of speaking time in the 14 Meetings was 197.25 minutes, a mean of 14 minutes of spoken ministry (and 46 minutes of silence) per meeting occasion.

The range of filled time: 20.25-7.5 minutes.

3. the mean length of each piece of ministry or spoken contribution was 2.75 minutes, a range of 0.25-10.25 minutes. Of the spoken contributions 70% were 3 minutes or less.
4. of the 72 spoken contributions, 41 were by men, 31 by women.
5. most Meeting occasions started ministry in the first 15 minutes, but late on in that period. There was general variability in the timings of the last spoken contribution. There was some tendency for meeting occasion with late first ministry also to have late last ministry.

The spoken data were examined for style of speaking in terms of: religious language, content, cohesion, context and pauses. There proved to be considerable conformity across Meetings. It is clear that speakers who minister on Meetings for Worship know what style is expected: there is tacit agreement of what topics are mentionable and how they are typically chained together on a Meeting occasion. Disfluencies rarely occur although there are occurrences of flawed performance (too long, too intimate, etc.).

It is concluded that the conversation model is unsatisfactory (no closures, no adjacency pairs, no turntaking sequences, not random, probably not non-fluent). And yet it is open to all to speak, there is only one speaker at a time there is a sequence leading from first topic. It is not obviously a formal occasion since there is no participant who has a privileged role position whereby s/he controls turn-assignment, nor are there conventionally determined transition points. At the same time it is a formal setting, a longer gathering in which it is desired that purposeful talk take place.

The Meeting for Worship as a continuing state of incipient talk is more persuasive.

The analogy here is with members of a household in their living room, employees who share an office, passengers together in an automobile. Such arrangements allow for silence (an 'adjournment') after a speaker's utterance. Although the Meeting for Worship has most in common with this third model, it also has elements of the conversation and the formal setting. It is after all both a social occasion and a speech event and as such has a strong link with oral narrative performances.

Speaking in Meetings for Worship, it is concluded, is conventional, almost ritualised. Although the invitation to speak is genuinely made to all, the legitimacy of religious speaking is controlled through learning. Quaker ministry, like other forms of speaking, is constitutive of the social life of its domain.

(Lecture in English)

Reference:

Davies Alan 'Talking in silence: ministry in Quaker Meetings' in Coupland N.(ed.), *Styles of Discourse*, London: Croom Helm, 1985, 105-137.