

Silence and Culture

“Speech is not equally valued in all societies, or even consistently throughout the United States. The qualities of cogency (the ability to be convincing), precision and delivery which may be encouraged in speech communication classes in the United States may, in some cultures, be regarded negatively.” The importance given to words varies from culture to culture. To Americans, words are considered very important. We often want to fill what we consider to be awkward pauses of silence with words. We even “give our word’ to assure our truthfulness. Other cultures such as Japan, China, Thailand, Swaziland, Ethiopia, and Kenya value silence. Asian cultures associate silence with wisdom and it is used to express power.” The desire not to speak is the most significant aspect of feature of Japanese language life. The Japanese hate to hear someone make excuses for his or her mistakes or failures. They do not like long and complicated explanations. If one has to say something, it is said in as few words as possible.”² What does this mean for a public speaker? It is important to know which cultures emphasize public speaking, and which do not reward the speech-making process. In some instances, it may be in your best interest to submit a report than to give a speech. It is important to know when which style is preferred. In Korea, oral communication is not valued and written communication is dominant. “To read is the profession of scholars, to speak the act of menials.”³

1. Candon, J.C., Jr. (1978). Intercultural communication from a speed communication perspective. In F.C. Casmit (Ed.), Intercultural and international communication. Washington, DC: University Press of America.
2. Klopff, D.W. (1991). Intercultural encounters: The fundamentals of intercultural communication. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Morgan.
3. Yum, J.O. (1987). Korean philosophy and communication. In D.D. Kincaid (Ed.), Communication theory: Eastern and western perspectives. San Diego: Academic Press.