Silence and Concealment in Political Discourse
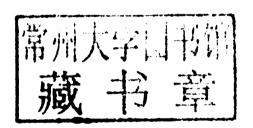
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Silence and Concealment
in Political Discourse

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Silence and Concealment in Political Discourse

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List of abbreviations

ARD *Arbeitsgemeinschaft der öffentlich-rechtlichen Rundfunkanstalten der Bundesrepublik Deutschland*; German public broadcasting channel
CDU *Christlich-Demokratische Union*; German conservative party
DM   *Deutsche Mark* – German currency before the introduction of the Euro
FAZ *Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung*; conservative daily broadsheet
FDP *Freie Demokratische Partei*; German liberal party
FR   *Frankfurter Rundschau* – left-liberal daily broadsheet
SPD *Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands* – German social democratic party, equivalent to British Labour Party
SZ   *Süddeutsche Zeitung*, Munich; left-liberal daily broadsheet
taz *die tageszeitung*, Berlin; left-liberal daily broadsheet
ZDF *Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen*; German public broadcasting channel

Notes on translations in this book:

Longer quotations from the German primary sources (esp. Chapter 4, 5 and 6) have been translated into English by me, MS, and checked by native speakers of English. The original German quotations can be found in the appendix. Where a clause or complete sentence has been cut from the original, this is indicated.

In order to keep the length of quotes at bay, occasional cuts have been made from within clauses. These are indicated in the original German quotes in the appendix, but not in the English translations. English and German syntax and word order can be quite different from one another so that the decision where to indicate a cut would have caused problems in some cases.

Quotations from academic literature in German have also been translated into English by me, this is indicated with my initials MS in square brackets at the end of the citations. These translations have also been checked by a native speaker of English along with the complete manuscript.

Acknowledgements

Table of contents

Introduction

Silence and concealment in (the study of) political discourse

Present political and communicative culture cherishes verbal communication. The last decades have seen increasing demand for and implementation of government transparency and a huge increase in the provision of mediated political communication up to the tipping point of over-saturation and scepticism about political spin. The last decades have also seen an increase in the esteem of talk as a means to solving problems, of communicative exchanges as necessary for the pursuit of happiness, as well as an increasing perception of 'good communication' as a skill that helps people advance their personal and professional development (Cameron 2000; Peters 1999). In such a context, which applies to most Western democracies, silence and concealment in political discourse becomes a peculiar phenomenon. What happens when politicians remain silent about something they are expected to talk about? Are there ways and justifications for politicians to make their silences publicly acceptable? What constitutes 'the public's' expectations of speech in politics? Who voices and confronts silent politicians with expectations of speech? What is the agenda of those who become advocates of 'the public's' right to know?

The present study addresses these questions by taking a detailed look at three cases in which politicians failed to meet publicly voiced demands to speak out, and by analysing the discourses this triggered about politicians' silence and concealment. Therefore, the current study does not so much attempt to find and discuss outright silences and to prove cases of concealment in political discourse, but it looks at silences in political discourse that are identified, named and criticised as cases of silence and concealment by and in public discourse. Hence, the source for studying silence and concealment in political discourse is public metadiscourse *about* it. This study does not directly try to answer questions such as who in a certain situation was silent about what to whom; it does not attempt to identify possible meanings of concrete silences from an interpretative point of view; it does not measure and analyse tenths of seconds of silences (cf. Jefferson 1983; Zuo 2002), e.g. in political interviews; but in dealing with such a public discourse *about* silence in political discourse, the study looks at the meanings of silence in political

discourse in so far as it is publicly *debated*: Which meanings are ascribed to silence in the metadiscourse about it? What is the basis for criticism or justification of silence in political discourse brought forward in the metadiscourse about it?

For these reasons, cases were chosen where silence and concealment loomed large enough to trigger not only the occasional remark about a singular, sporadic occurrence of silence, but an ongoing, substantial metadiscourse about silence that features a variety of comments about it from different sources (cf. Chapter 3). Much as Verschueren (1985, 73–121) explores "the semantics of silence" by studying the "linguistic action verbials" referring to it, i.e. expressions signifying acts of silence and concealment, this study explores forms and meanings of silence and concealment in political discourse by studying metalinguistic reference to it from public discourse. Based on his analysis of the repertoire for metalinguistic reference to acts of silence, Verschueren identifies a range of aspects such as codes, sounds, topics and contexts of silence as well as causes of and motives for silence. Similarly, by looking at metadiscourse about silence in political discourse, this study identifies contexts, topics, (claimed) meanings, causes and motives of silence specifically in political discourse. It shows that silence can play a crucial role in metadiscourse about political discourse, i.e. that in some cases not only what is 'given', but also what is 'absent' is noted, and considered meaningful in public discourse. Moreover, this study will be conscious of the characteristics of public (mediatised) discourse and will therefore also critically discuss the interpretations and evaluations of silence that it features, including the idealisation of openness and transparency by participants which are not always credible in their claims.

It seems fair to say that the study of what gets left out looms large in the analysis of political discourse. It is also fair to say that nevertheless, there are surprisingly few studies that explicitly deal with silence and concealment in political discourse. The establishment of pragmatics with its explanatory value regarding implicitness, as well as sociolinguistics and, later, discourse analysis with their study of language in use and language in social contexts with unequal power relations, triggered an ongoing interest in the study of political discourse. Pragmatic concepts as well as the cognitive conceptualisation of metaphor after Lakoff and Johnson (1980) are used in the analysis of political discourse in order to capture hidden meanings as well as the relation between what is highlighted and what is hidden. (Critical) Discourse Analysis integrates these approaches; there is the broader concept of discourse to analyse language in use in social contexts, but where there is detailed analysis of linguistic data, pragmatic concepts are often applied (cf. Reisigl 2011 for an account of the relation between (Critical) Discourse Analysis and Pragmatics). The literature analysing political discourse under these premises is too extended to be discussed here, but Chilton's (2004) introduction to the study of political discourse might be mentioned

as an example: he deals with implicature, deixis, entailment and presupposition as well as metaphor. Within more of a conversation analysis framework, much attention has also been devoted to evasion in political interviews, whereby McKenzie (2005) emphasises that "what is of just as much importance to what *is* said, is what gets left *unsaid*" (449; italics in original).

Bull's (2003) analyses of political interviews show the high degree of evasiveness in politicians' answers. The thirty five (!) ways of not answering questions identified in his research are related to the face-threatening nature of the questions addressed to the interviewed politicians. It is worth noting that the results of this research also show that outright silence, i.e. absence of words, never seems to be an option for interviewed politicians: Harris (1991, 82) and Clayman (2001, 404) point out that to give *some* sort of response, if not an answer, is so strong an obligation that it cannot be neglected. The democratic principles of transparency and accountability have at least to be *enacted* by showing responsiveness, even if evasion is such a widespread phenomenon. At least on the surface, politicians need to be seen as offering to engage with 'the public's' demand of information e.g. by agreeing to be interviewed, and adhering to the obligation to answer questions. "Indeed it may fairly be claimed that the *interactional* accountability of answering questions is the fundamental basis for the *public* accountability of public figures." (Clayman/Heritage 2002, 235; italics in the original, MS)

The most overt form of not answering a question seems to be a (verbalised) refusal to answer a question, which is such "a particularly strong breach of etiquette" that it is mostly accompanied by justification as to why an answer is refused (Clayman 2001, 421). Increased scepticism towards politicians and an increased demand for information and transparency during the last four decades has heightened the adversarial nature of questions fired at politicians, which – it could be argued – has provoked increasing evasiveness. As the research on evasion and also Roberts (2006) in his discussion of government secrecy show, this pressure does not necessarily trigger the desired effect since there is a constant adjustment and as a result, strategies of avoidance might just become more subtle and refined.

Regarding the range of studies dealing with hidden meaning (e.g. Idema 1998; Pozhidaev 2007; Shenhav 2007; Kulick 2005; Pappert 2008) and evasion (e.g. Bull 2003; Clayman 2001; Harris 1991) in political discourse, it is surprising that the notion of 'hiding' was hardly ever taken further so as to attempt to systematically foreground what is absent from political discourse (cf. Pappert/Schröter/Fix 2008; Schröter 2008; Schröter 2010). The study of metaphorical conceptualisations in political discourse (e.g. Musolff 2004) actually shows which aspects are highlighted by it, and that it is also possible to consider hidden aspects; e.g. a metaphorical conceptualisation of the globalisation process as a storm hides the aspect of (human) agency. Concepts such as discourse hegemony (see e.g. Fairclough 1995a; 1995b; 2001),

agenda setting and news values (e.g. Watson 1998) allow selection criteria to be traced, as well as the processes which determine that certain issues are discussed in public and that certain perspectives find expression while others get marginalised or left out. The study of implicitness in political discourse allows the potentially absent to be retrieved, i.e. how alternative viewpoints are suppressed in a stream of implicatures and presuppositions suggesting certain inferences and evaluations while ruling out or sidelining others. "In general, for each possibly relevant thing, there is a corresponding 'anti-thing', an absence. In its particularity, this anti-thing is not at all equivalent to no-thing, although it may look the same." (Bilmes 1994, 73)

These absences are common and widespread, but not total; with some effort it is possible to read between the lines and denounce or resist certain implications. With some effort, it is also possible to bring neglected topics onto the public agenda. More difficult absences can result from silencing (Thiesmeyer 2003b), censorship (Anthonissen 2003, 2008; Jaworski/Galasiński 2000; Galasiński 2003), and "conspiracies of silence" (Zerubavel 2006 (cf. Wodak 2003)).

Silencing has been studied mostly in a Critical Discourse Analysis framework (cf. Thiesmeyer 2003a), drawing attention to power structures and constellations of discourse hegemony (Hetzel/Hetzel 2007) that determine which perspectives are preferred and whose voices are heard in discourses.

> A major function of silencing is to contain this potential for opposition by identifying categories of persons and ideas about which speech and texts will be unacceptable, that is, categories of forbidden speech and 'forbidden reading'. This process is complemented by the circulation of acceptable speech and texts that express some things at the expense of others; it is thus a discursive displacement. (Thiesmeyer 2003b, 9)

For example, it is typical for societies to have discourses about minorities in which the minorities themselves are hardly ever heard. The result of silencing would be an imposed silence. On a structural level, those who participate in silencing others, e.g. by talking *about* them rather than talking *with* them, mostly do so without any specific intention to cause this effect – as, although we contribute to the maintenance of the 'order of discourse' (Foucault 1991), we are not always aware of it (Trouillot 1995).

> The creation of silence must therefore be seen as a potentially gradual process of deprivation of speech rather than a sudden and possibly unmotivated falling into silence. Silence is thus an endpoint in a lost battle for the right to speak, just as the full participation in dominant discourse is the result of a struggle for power and an enactment or a justification of the position of power. (Herdina 1996, 30)

Censorship seems to involve more of a conscious effort to suppress certain topics or viewpoints, and since it is associated with illegitimate rule, attempts at censorship are kept secret as well.

> Interestingly, the (meta-)semiotic signs (or better, filters) with which the censor 'regulates' communication are not to be seen or noticed by the public, hence in its 'purest' form, censorship is a means of imposing an apparent void, or nothingness, on the communicative process. This function is best served by silence. (Jaworski/ Galasiński 2000, 186)

Silencing and censorship are also closely related to conspiracies of silence which involve a collective effort of avoidance which renders certain topics taboo.

> There are social practices beyond media uses of language, whereby a community disallows certain acts, including speech acts of various kinds, because they are in some way offensive to views and beliefs widely held and respected in that community. Censure is often related to social taboos (...). Forms of censorship related to publishing tabooed information, ideas or views, are mostly constitutionally or legally defined. (Anthonissen 2008, 405)

Hewitt (2001) for example points out Marx as "the one great figure of political and economic history of whom we cannot speak" (22); he is the great heretic in the context of current consumer capitalism whose ghost must be exorcised by not naming. With the argument that Marxist ideas have been thoroughly discredited by the actions of socialist regimes, a widespread sense of taboo has emerged; i.e. there is no need for censorship in order to prevent general appreciation. Zerubavel (2006) investigates conspiracies of silence which "presuppose mutual denial, whereby at least two people collaborate to jointly avoid acknowledging something" (4); i.e. "conspiracies of silence are socially patterned." (5) However, unlike the notion of silencing, which is basically something that some people do to others, even if not intentionally, denial

> involves active avoidance. (...) Furthermore, it usually involves refusing to acknowledge the presence of things that actually begs for attention, thereby reminding us that conspiracies of silence revolve not around those largely unnoticeable matters we simply overlook but, on the contrary, around those highly conspicuous matters we deliberately try to avoid. (9)

A very notable example of this would be the widespread reluctance to deal with the Holocaust in German public discourse and memory politics for the first two decades after the end of World War II. Whereas whistle blowing, critical thinking beyond what is 'given' on the surface, tracking hidden meanings, and creating attention for neglected topics or groups *can* be socially prestigious in the end, trying to break conspiracies of silence mostly is not (Zerubavel 2006, 61–78).

However, silence may also be used in subversive ways. In his study of everyday positioning of ordinary Germans in Nazi Germany, Bauer (1990) points out that the non-performance of expected affirmative acts like the *Hitlergruß* and participating in propaganda events, e.g. refusing to sing along Nazi songs, might have

been small – if insignificant – everyday acts of resistance. The subversive potential of silence has most notably been exploited in art (e.g. Phillpot, Copeland, Perret 2009; Jaworski 1997, 2003; Ulsamer 2002, 217–225; Beeman 2006, 30ff; Sontag 1969). In an increasingly communicative culture, in which economic interests assign value to communication (Cameron 2000), in a climate of resignation about political discussion (Verheyen 2010) and about the sincerity of democratic deliberation which has become discredited by obvious spin (Louw 2010), notable absence and refusal to engage might become increasingly subversive in parallel. Disrupting the endless flow of communication and shielding against the intrusion of it for the sake of placing a growing number of adverts ever closer to potential customers might be considered small acts of resistance in the face of a growing demand to engage in and to receive communication (cf. Cameron 2000). Withdrawal from communication can be used for the purposes of subversion, to indicate resistance or self-determination, but Thurlow and Jaworski (2010) also show on the basis of their analyses of luxury tourism advertising that elite status is constructed with the notion of absence of sound, people, interference, (verbal) interaction and activity. The adverts emphasise remoteness, undisturbed and untouched spaces coined by the absence of sound.

> The repeated absence of signage, of people, of talk and other human interactions in our data is consistent with what we see as an increasingly 'anti-communicational' or rather anti-interactional ethos in super-elite mobility and in the lifestyles of the (absolutely) weathly in general.(Thurlow, Jaworski 2010, 212).

A critical view on on power relations with regard to silence would have to include not only the notion of silencing of groups or individuals with little power resources, but also consider "elistist ideology of segregation and isolationism" (ibid.) versus the crowded, noisy, sometimes policed and/or supervised by social services and therefore more accessible or exposed spaces inhabited by the poor.

Considering what has so far briefly been reviewed, it seems somewhat surprising that the notion of absence has not been developed with greater consequence in the study of political discourse. However, this becomes less surprising when one looks at the methodological problems that the search for absence involves. This book's emphasis on metadiscourse is one way of dealing with it (cf. Chapter 3). What is 'given' offers an internal structure, e.g. of meaning, topoi, different perspectives etc., whereas 'structures of the unsaid' (Jalbert 1994) often do not lend themselves to more than speculation (see Chapter 3 for a discussion of methodological possibilities). It might be for this reason that Ulsamer (2002) asserts that the "development of research [on silence, MS] is not straightforward, but is volatile between disciplines as well as within specific disciplines." (23 [MS]; cf. Wandt 1988)

In light of what has been outlined so far, the aim of the present study is to inspire more pointed and also empirical studies of silence and concealment in political discourse, despite the methodological challenges.

One fruitful way of doing this is looking at metadiscourse about what is perceived as absent. This circumnavigation of some of the methodological problems is not just a stopgap, but it adds value as it allows for the study of perceptions and evaluations of silence upon which this metadiscourse is based. Taking these perceptions into account is furthermore in line with the premises that this book establishes about meaningful silence – as opposed to conventional (e.g. ritual) and non-communicative silences (Chapter 2; cf. Schröter 2005). Meaningful, communicative silence depends on an intention (to remain silent or to conceal) as much as on (a disappointed) expectation (of speech), which is moderated by relevance; for there would normally not be any effort to conceal nor an expectation of speech when the issue at hand is completely irrelevant for all involved. Without a disappointed expectation of speech, an intentional, meaningful silence would not be perceived in public discourse, hence there would be no metadiscourse about it. Metadiscourse about silence and concealment reveals these (disappointed) expectations of speech, and analysing the metadiscourse also enables the researcher to investigate the basis of these expectations, i.e. ideals of democratic transparency and communicative openness. These premises – intention, expectation and relevance – will therefore be discussed in detail in the following Chapter 2, which draws on literature about silence more generally, i.e. not specifically in public political discourse. It will also be acknowledged in Chapter 2 that the interpretation of silence for discourse participants as well as for the analyst depends on the context. The constellation of intention, expectation and relevance which is considered crucial is well in line with the recent sociocognitive theorising of 'context' as undertaken by van Dijk (2008). Chapter 2 ends with a brief outline of what this means for political discourse and, in particular, for the chosen cases.

Chapter 3 describes in more detail the methodological approach to analysing metadiscourse and the Critical Discourse Analysis approach taken here in order to do so. It aims to situate the present study of metadiscourse within existing conceptualisations of metalanguage, language ideology, strategic use of metalinguistic comments in public discourse, and language ideological debates. It also provides more detailed information about the rationale for choosing the three cases of sustained metadiscourse that will be analysed empirically in this book, and about the material on which these are based.

The following Chapters 4, 5 and 6 provide empirical analyses of different cases of silence and concealment in German political discourse. All quotations from German originals were translated to enhance the accessibility of this research, since its scope is not limited to Germany and German Studies, but has strong

implications for disciplines such as discourse analysis, pragmatics, political science, and media communication studies. For (Critical) Discourse Analysis, the study could further analyses of metadiscourse and trigger discourse analyses of silence and the way its occurrence is determined by discourse context. It should be of interest for (Critical) Discourse Analysis to see how on the one hand the metadiscourse about silence reveals a language ideology that appreciates openness and regards silence with suspicion, and how on the other hand politicians who deliberately conceal try to create the impression of straight talking. With regard to pragmatics, the strong emphasis on communicators' intention is counterweighted with an equally strong emphasis on recipients' expectations which in the case of silence need to be considered since they contribute to the very existence of the phenomenon. It is also of interest within a pragmatic, but similarly discourse analysis interest how the investigated metadiscourse reveals a struggle over assigning communicative purpose and intentions to acts of silence and concealment. With regard to political science, the study has something to offer for the study of political deceit and mendacity in their function to conceal disagreeable truths (see e.g. Jay 2010, Runciman 2008) – in this book, the phenomenon of concealment and the perception of it in public discourse are studied in detail. In line with this, a more balanced approach is taken, where concealment is not solely regarded a moral failure of individual politicians, but a critical look is also taken at those who advocate demands to speak out. It also relates to other issues that have been of interest in political science, such as personalisation of politics and political rituals (see esp. Chapter 7). Regarding the study of media communication, an understanding is developed of how the (mediatised) metadiscourse about silence and concealment (co-)constructs the phenomenon of political silence and concealment in the first place, building on studies critically assessing media advocacy and the interdependency between media and political discourse.

The conceptualisation of silence, the methodology and findings are proposals meant to enhance the study of silence especially within (Critical) Discourse Analysis. As conceptual and methodological approaches, they can also be applied to other contexts and are not limited to the chosen case studies. The three cases are taken from German political discourse, but Germany shares with other Western democracies the general valuation of communicative openness and transparency – discussed in Chapter 7 – because of which silence and concealment are regarded with suspicion. The implications with regard to the above questions are not at all limited to Germany, and therefore this book is relevant for the study of political discourse more generally. Between Western democracies, regulations that specify the relation between secrecy and transparency might differ in detail and the appreciation of communicative openness might vary in degrees across topics (e.g. sex) or domains (e.g. in institutions), but the general valuation of transparency