
Coding Personhood Through Cultural Terms and Practices

Silence and Quietude as a Finnish “Natural Way of Being”

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All known languages include within them terms and phrases that describe communicative action specifically and pragmatic action generally. A special subclass of those terms identifies ways of speaking and ways of being silent. This study explores Finnish terms for, and social practices of, quietude (in Finnish, *hiljaisuus*). Descriptive and interpretive analyses demonstrate a Finnish “natural way of being” (*luonteva tapa olla*), as when people are undisturbed in their thoughts and actions (*omissa oloissaan*). Results reveal a Finnish communication code that structures some cultural scenes as occasions for positive silence, exhibiting a social model of personhood for which this is a valued, respected, and natural practice. The study discusses the larger, cross-cultural program of research into communication and personhood of which it is a part.

Keywords: *ethnography of communication; metapragmatics; personhood; cultural identity; intercultural interactions; communication codes*

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Being alone does not mean loneliness but a withdrawal into one's chosen peace.

To the Finn quietness and the hospitality which takes others into consideration are not mutually exclusive. Finnish literature's most beautiful portrayals of friendship and love present the silence of being together. A firm relationship with another is not brought about by exchanged words but by way of shared unspoken gestures. (Koivusalo, 1999, pp. 51, 50)

A Finnish exchange student, Tiina, was attending high school in Iowa, America's heartland. She was living with a friendly host family who wanted to show her all they could of their home town and its surrounding environs. As Tiina recounted her time in America, she mentioned her dear friends and exciting events she had seen, including college basketball games. However, she also puzzled over many features of American culture including its eating habits, relations between boys and girls, the curriculum of the high school, television programs, and fan behavior at sporting events. Yet none of these recollections animated her nearly as much as a particular dynamic that occurred when she was with her host family.

Tiina described the dynamic like this: As a part of the family's weekly routine, typically on a Sunday, members would go for a ride in their car across the Iowan countryside. As was part of this custom, the family would engage in social conversation while traveling together. The Finnish student enjoyed the ride, was quite comfortable listening to the conversation and watching the towns and fields pass by. Yet after a while in the car together, after traveling through several cornfields and conversations, the father would turn to Tiina and ask, "Is everything OK?" The first time she was asked, the question puzzled Tiina. Caught off guard she replied simply, "Yes." The car would continue rolling along, the conversation would pick up again and turn to other matters, with her attentive to it but not verbally engaged in it. Eventually, the father would ask again, with some concern, "Are you sure you are alright?" Growing a bit more uncomfortable, Tiina replied, again, "Yes." During some of the drives, the father would, according to Tiina, become angry and demand to know why she was being so quiet and not saying anything! Tiina reported that these events were difficult for her, made her very uncomfortable, and were nearly impossible for her to understand.

As the young woman recalled this dynamic, she expressed bewilderment about it. She reported how time after time, and over time, the matter escalated, culminating too often, and uncomfortably, in the father's exasperated question, through a raised voice, "Are you sure everything is OK?" with her replying in an equal amount of dismay, "Yes"; or his asking, "Why aren't you saying anything?" and her replying, "I don't have anything to say." Tiina was left thinking, "Why wouldn't everything be OK? Why am I being pressured to talk all the time?"

This opening event brings to light a particular kind of question: What activity is presumably at play when people speak together? What preferences or obligations does it bring to a social scene? And in turn, and similarly, what activity is presumably getting done when people are together in silence? What preferences are woven into

such scenes? This article responds to those questions while exploring cultural conceptions of speaking and silence. We shall see that people, like Tiina and her host family, not only use language in cultural ways but are silent in cultural ways as well. We will gain access to these expressive ways through cultural terms that give these events, of speaking and silence, their particular shapes and meanings. We will see further how each helps shape the other, between and within codes. Analyses of each proceeds through a specific theoretical framework that formulates communication codes based upon cultural terms and the events they make relevant.

Communication Codes Through Cultural Terms

Every communication system includes terms, symbols, and gestures that are used to comment upon that system. These have been variously understood as a metadiscourse (Craig, 1999a, 1999b; Taylor, 1992, 1997), as a metalanguage (Lucy, 1992), as language action verbs or meta-pragmatic terms (Verschuere, 1985), and as key terms (Wierzbicka, 1997, 2003). One subset of these metacommunicative phenomena can be understood as cultural terms for communicative action, that is, as terms and phrases that are used prominently and routinely by people to characterize communication practices that are significant and important to them. For example, Garrett (1993) has analyzed a complex form of talk in ancient China that is identified, in its English translation, as “pure talk.” Baxter (1993) has identified two principal, yet differently valued, media for communication in an academic institution that are discussed as “talking things through” and “putting it in writing.” Similarly, Hall and Noguchi (1995) identified “kenson” as a Japanese form of common sense. Most recently, Katriel (2004) has explored “soul talk, talking straight, and talk radio” as three communication forms that gave shape and meaning to 20th-century Israeli society. In each of these studies, the author explored indigenous practices of communication by identifying cultural terms for them; observed routine enactments of the practices so identified; and investigated the various meanings, premises, and rules for these events.

The studies reported immediately above have cited and used, as part of their analytic strategy, a particular theoretical framework for investigating metacommunication practices (Carbaugh, 1989). That framework was induced based upon careful cross-cultural study of 50 such terms in 17 cultural communities. Since its publication, several research reports have used, among other investigative tools, this investigative framework (e.g., Baxter, 1993; Baxter & Goldsmith, 1990; Bloch, 2003; Carbaugh, 1999; Fitch, 1998; Garrett, 1993; Hall & Noguchi, 1995; Hall & Valde, 1995; Katriel, 2004; Sawyer, 2004; Wilkins, 2005). This program of work has now explored more than 100 such practices in several different languages including American Sign Language, Chinese, Danish, English, Finnish, German, Hebrew, Japanese, Russian, and Spanish.

The investigative framework, in short, draws attention to two kinds of metacommunicative phenomena: (a) cultural terms used to identify communicative action and (b) the communicative actions referenced and related to those terms. Descriptive elements in the framework draw special attention to the variety of uses of such terms in conversation, as well as the variety of actions potentially being identified including communicative acts, events, and/or styles. These form the descriptive bases of the accounts. The additional value in exploring these phenomena is the unveiling of rich meanings, literally and symbolically, that these terms and enactments make salient. The second set of elements in the framework explore these, the interpretive elements, structuring explorations of the deep significance, the ethos and ideology at play, drawing attention to the meanings participants are making through these terms and actions. These include the meanings literally about communication itself (especially its modes, structuring norms, tone, and efficaciousness) and those that are more metaphorically about sociality (social positions, social relationships, social institutions) and personhood (beliefs about persons, loci of motives, sites of consciousness, links to history). This is the framework at use in the preceding as well as the following analyses.

This kind of study is ethnographic in scope and focused on developing communication codes as active features in cultural conversations and discourses (Carbaugh, 2005; Carbaugh, Gibson, & Milburn, 1997; Philipsen, 1997, 2002). Earlier studies have identified such terms and practices as central features in cultural discourses about speaking and personhood (Carbaugh, 1988), with Philipsen (1992) emphasizing the importance of these phenomena in the formulation of speech codes, and with Philipsen and Coutu (2005) discussing their potential value in formulations of ways of speaking. The analytic objective is to hear, first, culturally distinctive communication practices, and then within them, deep cultural meanings about communication itself, the nature of persons, social relationships, emotions, and dwelling in nature. Such studies contribute to other, related programs of research such as Aakhus's on "process" (2001), Nelson's on "conflict" (2001), and Huspek and Kendall's on "shit talk" (1991). Each, like the aforementioned works, draws attention to native categories for communication and the social practices these make relevant.

Fieldwork for the ethnographic study reported below began in November of 1992 and is ongoing today. Most of the fieldwork occurred in the Häme, middle lake region of Finland, to the north of Helsinki. Some Finnish commentators, those from within the Häme region and those outside of it, have called this region "the really Finnish part of Finland." Data consist of segments from field observations, interviews, surveys, video documents, and various other materials in which activities are identified by Finns as "a natural way to be." The primary corpus consists of several hundred instances of such terms (discussed below) as well as observations of the activities so identified. Analyses proceeded through the framework discussed above in three phases of descriptive research: Transcribing segments in which such terms are being used, verbal accounts of the terms being used, and observations of activities

so identified. This descriptive phase was complemented by three phases of interpretive analyses, focused on the literal meanings such terms, accounts, and observations make about communication itself, and the more metaphorical meanings being expressed about sociality and personhood. The descriptive and interpretive analyses, together, then, generate basic elements in an ethnographic account of communication, with the account demonstrating how communication is being practiced and coded from a Finnish perspective. The code is summarized later in the article.

The goals of the study are to describe and interpret the social life of communication through the cultural frames of those who live it while developing a general theoretical approach for such ethnographic and comparative inquiry. Earlier studies have focused inquiry productively on clusters of terms that draw associations among practices from a native view. For example, Garrett's study (1993) linked Chinese "pure talk" to "debate, witty talk, and philosophical expositions." In each such study, authors have found focusing on a symbolic cluster of such terms helps bring into view a range of communication practices and the actions those practices are used to do. The main cluster of terms and practices of concern to us here is avowedly a right, proper, and natural way to be, an ideology of interpersonal life identified and validated by speakers of Finnish.

A "Natural Way to Be" ("Luonteva Tapa Olla"): Expressing Finnishness

There is a special kind of social practice identified variously in Finnish as "luonteva tapa olla," or "etta on luontevaa"; the phrases are translated here as "a natural, normal way to be" or "being natural with ease." The phrase is used below (on lines 6, 6a) by a Finnish media personality, Jan Knutas, while talking on-air to a U.S. American correspondent, Morley Safer (1993). The phrase is an effort by Knutas to characterize something about Finnish comportment.

- 1) SAFER: it strikes me uh traveling around this country that (.)
 - a) *Olen matkustellut täällä*
- 2) people are **terribly** shy (.)
- 3) particularly **the men**
 - a) *ja etenkin miehet vaikuttavat ujoilta.*
- 4) KNUTAS: ((Voiceover))
- 5) among ourselves
- 6) we think that is the natural way to be.
 - a) *Ajattelen, että on luontevaa*
- 7) not to sort of (.)stick out
 - a) *olla erottumatta joukosta.*
- 8) It's easy to see that from coming from another country *hh
 - a) *Muualta tulevat*

- 9) you think of it as shyness
 - a) *pitävät sitä ujoutena*
- 10) and it probably is *yes*
 - a) *Sitä se varmaankin on*

In these lines, Knutas is saying something about Finnishness, with this being related to what was mentioned earlier by Safer on Line 2. The verbal line drawn here, like in hundreds of Finnish to English translations before it, links “a natural way to be” to “shyness.” Eventually, Knutas, as other Finnish speakers before him, rather begrudgingly relents to this linkage on Lines 9 and 10. But notice his hedged phrasing on those lines, as “you think of it” that way (Line 9), and “it probably is” (Line 10), suggesting the English term “shyness” does not quite capture the Finnish meaning of things. The quick stamping in English of shyness onto what Knutas describes obscures other Finnish meanings at play here. It is those, and related practices, we will seek to understand.¹

Like Safer, I am a native speaker of English. Unlike Safer, I have lived in Finland and speak a little bit of Finnish. Yet I am admittedly an outsider, and although Finnish custom attends carefully to what outsiders think about Finland, the deck is stacked against me when it comes to speaking about such matters, for I cannot speak as a genuine Finn, nor in fluent Finnish about Finnish things. Nonetheless, I can try to participate in the conversation about such things, will endeavor to do so productively, and offer my efforts in the spirit of developing a shared understanding of such things. Just as outsiders to America, Frenchmen Alexis de Tocqueville and Herve Varenne, have offered most telling insights about American culture, others can sometimes offer an interesting reading of insiders concerns. And thus, the following seeks to understand some of the Finnish practices and premises identified by Finns as “luonteva tapa olla” and to render them, as Finnish does, as something more than “shyness.”

This “natural” (“luonteva, luonnolinen”) way of being is linked, through uses of Finnish investigated below, with a range of related terms, including prominently “olla omissa oloissaan” (being undisturbed in one’s thoughts) and “mietiskele” (being contemplative and thoughtful). There are other terms associated with these that will be considered later, but these three phrases identify the main symbolic territory of interpersonal life of concern to this report, mainly because these are the Finnish terms used by Finnish speakers in my corpus to identify this feature of Finnishness, that is, “a natural way to be.”² And of course, this is not the only feature of Finnishness any more than “straight talk” is of the Israeli Sabra (Katriel, 2004), “kenson” is to a Japanese (Hall & Noguchi, 1995), or “sharing feelings” is to Americans (Carbaugh, 1989). Yet like “straight talk,” “kenson,” and “sharing feelings,” a “natural way of being” is active on some occasions, for some Finns, and by focusing on this one feature of the cultural scene, we can understand some of its shapes and meanings. And so we are asking, What is this “natural way of being” that

Safer identifies as “shyness”? What Finnish code is being so identified and practiced, with these phrases, through these practices?

“Olla Omissa Oloissaan” (Being Undisturbed in One’s Thoughts)

A Finnish man, Heikki, was describing a typical social routine in his life, riding the train from his hometown to a city where he was attending courses at the university. Speaking in English, but using some Finnish terms, he described his time on the train to his interlocutor, Michael:

Heikki: I have moments where I actually decide at home that I am going to *mietiskele* [be thoughtful] or *olla omissa oloissaan* [remain undisturbed] and really don’t feel like talking with anybody. And then that’s what I do.

Michael: But now, when you feel that way, do you ever have to say it, to get the message across [to others, that you want to “*olla omissa oloissaan*”]?

Heikki: No. No.

Michael: Everybody knows what you mean?

Heikki: Definitely. The message is quite clear. If I just don’t say it, and I just don’t talk, it is totally normal. Nobody will come and question me.

In this exchange, Heikki is describing a kind of action, in Finnish terms, as “*mietiskele*” and as “*olla omissa oloissaan*.” He suggests these are actions he plans to do while on the train, and in fact he does this very action when he does not “really feel like talking with anybody.” Furthermore, Heikki makes clear that these actions are part of a taken-for-granted cultural scene, an unspoken script for action, or code that is presumably active on the train. After all, according to him, “the message is quite clear.” When acting in this way in this and similar scenes, these actions are presumably quite natural, even, as Heikki puts it, “totally normal.” In other words, following Heikki’s comments here, as he crafts this Finnish scene, he wants us to understand that people can be quiet, and that this is natural. When there is no speaking, “everybody knows” something important is transpiring. What is transpiring, from Heikki’s view, is important and can be described through the Finnish terms, “*olla omissa oloissaan*” and “*mietiskele*.”

When speaking to users of English, especially “Americans,” Heikki and others emphasize that these actions are important to one’s well-being, and natural ways people engage their everyday worlds, routinely. Note that these terms, therefore, identify and declare productive cultural activities. When alone or together in these ways, something positively natural and good is happening. This is an important point. Why? Some observers from elsewhere, where talk is central to most cultural activity, have concluded about this and similar Finnish scenes that “nothing is happening” because “no one is saying anything.” Note the negatives, “nothing” and “no one” at work in this identification. This kind of interpretation is of course different

from the one Heikki supplies. To him, and the “everybody” he invokes, there is valued, efficacious social action here; rather than “nothing,” there is indeed something important transpiring. We shall see, eventually, how silence and quietude can set the stage for important scenes of social life, where talk is unnecessary, even intrusive.³

What social action is being identified here through these terms? What is its shape and significance? What is Heikki saying when he claims that performing these actions, themselves, makes “the message . . . quite clear.” What communication code is expressively activated through these Finnish actions and these terms? What taken-for-granted version of cultural life is being expressed?

One way of initiating a response to these questions is to remind ourselves that the Finnish cultural scene here is erected on the cultural premise that there is a natural desire is to be quiet and contemplative, to be undisturbed in one’s own thoughts. The phrase, “olla omissa oloissaan,” is a key cultural term in expressing this Finnish code. As used by Heikki and others, it identifies and gives shape to a distinctly, albeit natural, form of Finnish action. Some of the significance of this term and action was described in detail by Marja, a middle-aged Finnish woman:

Omissa oloissaan is a perfectly legitimate, positive state of being, to be actually undisturbed. It’s just a natural need for being alone, undisturbed in your own thoughts, and sort of in your own territory undisturbed. We respect that. People want to be omissa oloissaan so that means that we respect that, because we know that everybody wants to be that way, at least once in a while.

During a conversation with Mika, he also emphasized the need and desire for such activity. He described making plans with his friend for an upcoming holiday:

I will spend a week in the summer cottage in order to be “omissa oloissaan” [to spend time by myself]. Those present will include me, and perhaps my friend. The goal is to let other people know you want to be alone without anybody disturbing you. This is a very commonly used word. It describes a state of mind, when you want to calm down, get away from the hectic life and be alone with your thoughts.

As Heikki, Marja, and Mika discuss their social life, they create a special place for activities they describe as “olla omissa oloissaan.” We can begin to interpret some of the meanings of this term and some of the features in this Finnish action as follows: In interpersonal life, there are moments of quietude; these are natural or normal; at times, we strongly desire and want these moments; in them, we are undisturbed, calm, in our own thoughts; we take for granted that these moments are natural and desirable.

In social scenes, one can be identified as “in one’s thoughts” and thus should be “undisturbed.” But this action is not just attached to an individual. Socially engaged quietude can provide an integral defining form to larger social occasions. When

people are together on a bus or train, with family or friends, it can set the stage for a full cultural act. Marja put it this way: “You can be alone in your thoughts, in your own mental space, but you can also be together with others. Sometimes we are in a room together with family or friends and we can do this together.” When my wife and I visit with our Finnish friends, we have found our delightful and engaging discussions interspersed occasionally with these moments of quietude. Over the years—and this took some considerable time for us to appreciate, coming, as we did, from a “talking culture”—we have come to enjoy these moments immensely, alone in our thoughts for awhile, able to be calm and quiet with others, together, for several minutes on end.

Scenes as these bring with them local meanings and morals about politeness and privacy that are to be respected. Marja put it this way:

We like our territory undisturbed. . . . When you are keeping your distance from others then you are not intruding somebody else’s privacy, but you are not allowing anybody to intrude your privacy either. It’s like having these big bubbles that nobody is intruding. Keep the distance.

This matter can be expressed as one of respect. As Mervi put it,

I associate privacy with respecting other people. We appreciate when people are not talking but listening. We Finns do not think it is impolite to be just quiet in a group. I see privacy as a positive and associate privacy with space which people need for living. We might even enjoy being alone and that is why we do not want to interrupt others by talking all the time. Privacy is being alone in a good way.

“Being alone in a good way” is a social achievement and a matter of social tact, as one exercises a proper propensity for silence, or, from another angle, a proper verbal reserve. In doing so, one honors one’s own and others’ privacy. In the process, meaningful Finnish action is linked to a proper care of self and others, thereby protecting all social actors from unwanted intrusions. As a middle-aged Finnish woman, Pirjo, put it,

We want to protect ourselves from the unknown but we also want to protect the other person from the unknown. We want to respect the other person’s privacy and in a way make sure that she or he really wants to talk. In Finland, it’s OK not to talk all the time and in my opinion most of the Finns don’t feel awkward when nobody talks. We don’t feel that we have to talk just for talking (in order to avoid silence) and we can feel comfortable when nobody is talking. We are comfortable with quietness.

One can be alone in various ways, physically and mentally.

If you are “omissa oloissaan” you are quite often alone, but it doesn’t need to be that way. “Olla yksin” (to be by oneself) is this, but something else. It can be you are physically alone but not mentally alone, as when the telephone is ringing. It can also

mean that you are mentally alone but not physically alone, as when one has marital problems and is “yksin” [alone], mentally alone, in a marriage. Here, it means that there is no comradeship, you are emotionally alone, as one can be alone in the middle of a busy street. Or in a noisy household, for instance, if there is a black sheep who’s alone.

Being alone, then, can carry various meanings of physical, mental, and socioemotional isolation. In the extreme, these can create a form of isolation, especially in the frame of social punishment as a “black sheep” or one in the “doghouse” illustrates. Being alone, then, in a good way, is to draw attention to the positive, undisturbed form of physical, mental, and social aloneness. This provides for the personal and social good.

This cultural form of social life is essential for one’s sense of well-being and also for one’s proper development. A Finnish mother described coming home from a hard day at work:

If one has done something that has been strenuous, then of course one would like to have a moment of that, and usually people respect it. Even children are taught to respect it when parents come home from work. I don’t know if all parents do it, but then children let them breathe for awhile before attacking them.

Marja lamented how people today and children in particular can become overloaded with a fast-paced routine and calendar:

Children nowadays are taken from one thing to the next and then they are rarely allowed to be omissa oloissaan, which means that they would just sit down and figure things out alone and by themselves, then they don’t have to have everything preprogrammed for them. This time alone is a source of creativity for them, because then children will start figuring things out about themselves. It’s also like meditation, some of it is meditation. That way, you get refined in peace of mind and balance and sort things out. Just resting. This can provide one moment of concentration, one moment of focusing your mental energy, sort of inwards. This is a moment of rest and reflection. . . . We can call this lots of things, but we often do not verbalize it. When there is a need, you just do it. And if we see somebody, we see the need and then we respect it. It’s one of those body-language things.

On the basis of these comments, and practices, we can understand several additional Finnish premises for “being alone in a good way.” This practice is indeed a cultural form of practice, giving shape to many possible social scenes involving public, educational, familial, and friendship interactions; these scenes allow a proper privacy for participants, giving relationships a social distance where it is due; the form serves a protective function, giving a social territory for each that is to be honored socially, or not to be intruded; the distance and protection provided by the form are necessary for one’s well-being (as an adult) and one’s development (as a child);

consequently, this form and these premises give shape to actions in a polite, natural, Finnish way, and are, therefore, to be respected.

Of course, any practice can occur in an excessive way, and this is also the case for “being alone in a good way.” One Finnish friend reminded me of this.

If someone wants to be constantly “omissa oloissaan,” one would get worried, although nowadays it is so rare to spend time alone, as the culture dictates the pace of social tempo. It is accepted for an employee or a mother to sometimes be “omissa oloissaan” and in these cases this activity has a very positive meaning. If an unsocial person constantly wants to be “omissa oloissaan,” it has a negative meaning.

The idea that one should honor moments of quietude, alone and with others, does not imply that one is, or should be, pathologically quiet. Sometimes such a person was referred to as a “hermit,” or one who spends too much time alone. Too much of a good thing can be detrimental.

There is also, apparently, a slight variation in the ways this practice plays into different social scenes and institutions. For example, it may be the case that this form of quietude, when active and recounted, casts matters as ones of privacy in public scenes, for example, with neighbors and colleagues; whereas the same practice of quietude may cast matters less as private and more as a necessary protection of personal space in more intimate spheres, that is, with family or friends. In other words, this form of quietude is linked directly to privacy and protection across social scenes, yet concerns of privacy may assume greater importance in public scenes than in more intimate settings.

The above practices and commentary have cast the kinds of activities involved when “being alone in a good way,” a variety of ways. Some of these include “figuring things out by yourself,” “a form of meditation,” “one moment of concentration,” “resting,” “peace of mind and balance,” “focusing your mental energy,” and “reflection.” In Finnish, there is a term that identifies these various actions, “mietiekella.” This identifies a practice that can occur when one is “undisturbed, alone in one’s thoughts.” In fact, being alone in one’s thoughts, quiet and silent (“hiljaisuus”), is necessary for “mietiskella” (contemplation, meditation, reflection). From the Finnish view, then, what is this practice? What makes it important?

Mietiskella

As many others, Marja’s eyes danced as she obviously delighted in describing this form of Finnish activity:

Mietiskella is almost like . . . meditation. It is deep. Usually when you meditate, there is some sort of a physical condition about your environment. Of course some people can do it in the middle of a horrendous situation with lots of noise, but most people

can't. But definitely, when you are doing *mietiskella*, when you are doing that, there is some kind of peace and quiet, be it in your head or also in your head and the environment. I think for most people it requires this "omissa oloissaan" definitely.

The activity brings together two important features in the expression of Finnishness, quietude and thoughtfulness. Together, these define a cultural scene where important matters are addressed, where people's needs and desires can be serviced, where well-being is cultivated, where proper conduct is respected.

Allowing time for thought is necessary for many practical and social matters, as when an employee is offered a new job opportunity. Mika described a work situation where an employee was offered new tasks. The boss suggested he take time to reflect carefully on what he thought about this. The employer did not want the employee to make a hasty decision but to weigh the issues carefully and from different angles. As Mika put it, "It is crucial to take your time and think about things."

Being alone in a good way, then, gives one time to think carefully, to formulate one's thoughts, to focus and reflect. Given such time, one is indeed permitted to reflect about things, to think carefully, ponder matters. In the process, there is the social creation of more freedom for the person for thinking. This is a crucial part of decision-making processes. In fact, it is an essential means toward making good decisions. In the process, it offers a means of respecting others; giving them the proper time; getting their input, investment, and involvement. This enhances the quality of subsequent social actions, creating better instrumental and social outcomes.

A Web of Natural Finnishness

A "natural way of being" as discussed here is linked to many features of Finnish interpersonal life. One important interactional feature of many social situations is "pidattyvainen" (holding yourself in, being properly reserved). This is at times a laudable interactional objective, that is, to be properly quiet and reserved, while being silently attentive to others. Those whose conduct is not enacted in this way may be identified as "erottua" (as sticking out, or as inappropriately standing out). This latter quality is less laudable, and has often been mentioned by my Finnish friends as something "Americans tend to do." One way of acting according to this natural way, that is, as "holding oneself in," and not "sticking out," is to be "varautunut" (properly on your guard) or "tarkkailemme" (observant). If one is interested in speaking with another, this is the kind of cultural action that should precede that talk; that is, one should be guarded and observant before approaching another to speak to them. All of this, being properly reserved, quiet, on your guard, observant, can take place if one is "quiet in a good way." In social life conducted this way, so much can, and should, go without saying!

If the social occasion was deemed appropriate for speaking, what would one do? If one's watchful eye noticed a proper moment for speaking, and guessed another is

perhaps socially available for interaction, it is best, “before I pick up the nerve to come and talk to you” (“ennen kuin uskaltaudumme”) to think through what one wants to say, carefully, prior to speaking. Then, if speaking to another still seems possible and permissible, one should do so, especially in educational settings, in a proper *asialinen* style, that is, in a style that is straight, short, and to the point.

One male Finn’s Web site played with these features of “matter-of-fact” talk in this direct, humorous way:

Communication in Finland can be described in one sentence, if you’ve got nothing to say: shut up. If you, on the other hand, have something to say, say it straight, brutal but truthful, whatever it is. Don’t try any slick small talk. Again the Finnish culture shows not only its elegance but also its efficiency, wordless communication is, in fact, always the most truthful.

In a comment like this, one hears several elements in a Finnish code: Speak only if you have something to say; when speaking, be direct, truthful, and to the point; do not force others to engage in unnecessary talk such as “slick small talk”; much can and should be said without words. Knowing what is being said without words, and how to interpret this in a good way, is essential to understanding this natural way of being.

A Finnish Code

Being “*olla omissa oloissaan*” in a “natural way” is of course a social accomplishment, something one can and must get done with the cooperation of others. As such, it is an achievement in social contexts. In other words, to effectively so be, one needs to indicate that one is so being to others, and one needs to be able to identify others who are so being; and this, according to the code, should be respected. This way of being is, then, a mode and form of social action and must, as such, in some ways invoke, and at times creatively play, a known code that renders such actions coherent, efficacious, and valuable. This is the kind of code Heikki presumed on the train, parents may invoke when coming home from work, and all people presumably need for a sense of well-being and development; this also is the kind of code missed by Tiina when she was in the family car driving across the Iowan countryside.

What are elements in this code? What premises enable the social noticing and the effective acting of this “natural” way? Here we turn to a more formal explication of that code, organized around its central defining premises:

Social and interpersonal life includes, periodically, quietude.

There is a basic want or desire in people, occasionally, to be uninterrupted, or quiet.

These moments, and this want, are natural and normal.

These moments can be produced alone (as isolated actions), or with others (as social events).

These moments can be produced in various social scenes, both public and private. These moments can involve various possible acts such as peaceful reflection, deep concentration, or creative contemplation, but can also be simple moments of relaxation. These moments are linked to privacy, through reserve, which is to be respected. These moments enable a sense of peaceful well-being and allow for one's development. These moments protect one from impositions and intrusions. Speaking with others is a potential threat to these moments, and this want.

Note how the premises summarized here set the stage for a kind of cultural action that has integrity. The stage, so set, is part of a cultural script for proper conduct, itself an unspoken understanding, providing a taken-for-granted feature of unspoken social life. In the process, when there is quietude, something important is transpiring, and this should be respected, for people want and deserve protection from unwanted intrusion. All of this plays upon a socially enacted stage of silent activity. On this stage, and because it can, on occasion, be set in this way, speaking enters with a particular force, not as filling a silence, a presence within an absence, but potentially as a breach, cracking the valuable quietude among those present.

I shall never forget my first bus ride in Finland, late one November night, when I sat in the front seat initiating a conversation with a person across the aisle from me. I thought we were more or less alone on the bus. As I began speaking, however, I felt like I had intruded, and was astonished to discover the bus itself was full, with me being the sole speaker! Such cooperative, socially produced quietude had escaped my notice!

A Finnish cultural scene can be set, then, with quietude as its primary mode, silence as its structuring norm, people being directly and knowingly engaged in this as an efficacious action. When so set, speaking can enter as an intrusion. Of course, not all Finnish scenes are set this way, nor is this quietude always valued. Yet when it is, when people are being undisturbed together and thinking, important messages are activated about the communicative event, the proper acts that compose it, the proper places for quietude and speaking, and the relation of the one to the other.

Scenes and moments as these create a prominent social position for participants, as ones who are thoughtfully engaged in their own thoughts and should not be disturbed. Planning for actions of "olla omissa oloissaan" and "mietiskele," and living them, set the stage for this social position, and its interactional deployment. This is a way of structuring social relations for the moment at least, as properly distant, one from another, protecting each other's space, yet engaged together in a moment of solidary silence. Such moments are desirable, in fact should be created periodically, in various social institutions from the family to education, and are most important when people need peaceful reflection, time to reflect or relax or engage in careful thought.

Such moments and wants provide a distinctive cultural form for, and thus are linked to, Finnish conceptions of the person. In short, and summarizing, one should speak only when one can be relatively unintrusive and when one has something to say that is worthy of another's consideration. Otherwise, one should defer to others by being a

quiet, respectful, and reserved person. Being in this natural way is to be one who can and should watch and listen, rather than one who is engaged in needless chatter. The motives for acting in this way are thus based in a deep appreciation of quietude and the basic human want of a person to be undisturbed or unimpeded. For this to be effectively practiced, a social scene must be so understood and motivated. “Olla omissa oloissaan” and “mietiskele” provide the terms for such moments, and express the motives for a “natural” way of acting. In this sense, these moments illustrate not only a personal desire but, moreover, cultural motives for and moments of action.

Aspects of this Finnish version of personhood have been discussed by analysts and historians of Finnish culture. The epigraphs at the beginning of the article by Markku Koivusalo illustrate the importance in Finnish discourse of being alone, and quietness, linking these explicitly to considerateness and strength in character as well as enduring social relationships. These qualities are active, as Koivusalo (1999) said, in “shared unspoken gestures,” not “by exchanged words” (p. 50). Knowing what is getting said without words, and its importance, is crucial for this aspect of Finnish character to be, indeed, itself. In fact, it is one defining feature of Finnishness.

The Finnish historian Matti Klinge (1990) has discussed how “the Nordic self” is at home on the periphery of Europe, in its beautiful northern hinterlands. Here, Finnish character has been forged while being exposed to nature’s extreme demands of cold, enduring darkness (in winter) and warmer, ever present light (in summer). Withstanding this wide range of conditions both requires and creates a strength of character, an appreciation of simplicity, demanding that one require no more than is needed, while appreciating nature’s emphatically diverse offerings. In such circumstances, and even amidst Finland’s unmatched technologies of today, one appreciates and values how to “go it alone,” to be observant of one’s world and others in it, to get things done without too much fuss, or without demanding more than is required from oneself or others. The ever watchful eye of Finnishness is honed in such a geographic and cultural scene, quietly observing the world express itself, alone, with others, and knowing what to do as a result (see Koivusalo, 1999, p. 49).

There have been diverse political seasons, like winter and summer, that have forged Finland between different circumstances. From the middle ages until 1808 to 1809, Finland was occupied from the west, as an integral part of the Kingdom of Sweden. Swedish appointments of bishops, and the Swedish language itself put Finland, Finns, and the Finnish language in a minority position as vigilant attention to others, especially non-Finns, and what they thought of Finns, became not only a routine occupation, but indeed a necessity for a continuing, productive social and political life. Similarly, from 1809 until 1917, when, from the east, Russia occupied Finland, a similar stance was advisable. A clear, enduring sense is maintained to this day that Finnish life is something Other than that of these, Swedish, or Russian, others.

Although Swedish culture and language infiltrated Finnish life, Russian language and culture did not. As a result of these perduring dynamics, Finnishness is seen as something different from the surrounding others, yet deeply concerned and

preoccupied with what the Others think of it. Finnishness has thus been conceived, historically, in negative terms as NOT Russian, or NOT talkative. Finnish life is felt relative to these others, yet as dependent on neither, thus the famous Finnish saying, "Swedes no more; never Russians; let us be Finns." It is noteworthy that the latter period of Russian rule saw the flowering of the Finnish language and a budding cultivation of a distinctive Finnishness, in literature and character. A Finnish sense of group life, as all cultural features for acting, and general ways of so being, has therefore derived from various historical, geographic, and political circumstances.

Yet even if hardwired to the Finnish cultural and political landscape, the qualities of Finnishness discussed here are not in any deterministic way linked to any one person. In other words, Finnishness as discussed here is a property of Finnish practices, not necessarily housed within any one individual. When speaking on these matters, I am often asked if Finns are, indeed, this way. My response is this: When "olla omissa oloissaan" or "mietiskele," these qualities are indeed active, and they are felt as "luonteva tapa olla." I do not know what is inside any one Finnish person. Some like doing this more than others. Some occasions call for it more than others. Hence, I do think the Finnish practices of concern in this report are cultural practices that presume and create some of the Finnish meanings discussed above. In this sense, Finnishness lives in the world of Finnish practices. No one, in Finland or elsewhere, must perform this practice; but in Finland, there are times when some so act. And it is this action, its terms and conduct, that has held our attention here.

To grapple with that world of coded conduct, we have examined Finnish terms for those practices; observed events made relevant through those terms; and interpreted some of the meanings about communication, social relations, and persons presumed for those terms and for those practices. In this way, we have come to some understanding of a Finnish "natural way of being." Living in this way can provide some coveted moments of "being alone in a good way." These provide bases for Finnish conduct, illustrating a Finnish code for so being. These of course are not the only practices of Finnishness in Finnish society; nor are these the only features of this particular practice. The terms, acts, events, and premises are, however, central to a part of Finnishness, and this provides basic elements in a Finnish code, one tree in a rich Finnish forest, something like a traditional memorial tree, providing seeds for proper and further Finnish growth, cultivating cultural activities in a Finnish clearing, to be seen, thoughtfully and peacefully enacted, yet not heard.

Notes

1. An analysis of this segment for other purposes appears in Carbaugh and Berry (2001) and Carbaugh (2005).

2. The cluster of Finnish terms identified here are largely part of an unspoken code that is presumed and valued. When spoken, the task can be to question this very presumption and value, and thus turn matters into a negative, thereby alleging or identifying their absence.

3. A detailed analysis and rationale for the concept quietude appears in Berry, Nurmikari-Berry, and Carbaugh (2004).

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