

CULTURES IN CONVERSATION

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Silence, and Third-Party Introductions: An American and Finnish Dialogue (with Saira Poutiainen)¹

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Several winters ago, I (DC) was living with my family as foreigners in Finland, where I was teaching and doing research. As a recipient of a Fulbright Grant, I had been asked to participate in activities at two universities. I had been anticipating an initial trip to the second Finnish university, the University of Suomi, for a couple of weeks.² After settling in at our Finnish home, I was excited about traveling to Suomi, where I would meet the Finnish colleagues with whom I would be working periodically over the next several months.

On arriving there, I marveled at the modern facilities and the advanced technologies available in classrooms and computer rooms. I also felt energized by the natural landscape, with the main part of the university being located on a hill with nice views through pines onto a large lake. It was a beautiful winter day, with a deep blue sky above a snow covered ground. I felt energized and was ready to go!

But I was not ready for what happened next. On meeting my Finnish host, Professor Silvo, we began walking through the building where my office would be located. As we moved down a hallway of office suites, I noticed that some people—on seeing us—seemed to be avoiding us by moving quickly into their offices. After this happened a couple of times, I asked my host if I might be able to meet my future colleagues, especially Professor Virtanen. I knew we shared some interests in our studies and thought that perhaps I had seen him out of the corner of my eye, going into an office. Professor Silvo replied that we could meet him later, perhaps on my next visit in a couple of weeks.

Given my customary ways, these introductory events seemed puzzling and cumbersome. I wondered to myself, "Why can't Professor Virtanen at least say 'Hi'?" And "Why aren't the others here more forthcoming with their greetings?" I was accustomed to meeting people quickly, with perhaps a "Hello" and a quick exchange of smiles, names, and pleasantries. But nothing of the sort was happening here on my first trip to Suomi. I was puzzled. Moreover, on meeting someone, the exchanges seemed, at least to me at times, quite cumbersome. I had heard and read about "the silent Finn" and was not sure when I should step into a conversation. Moreover, when I did so, I was not sure what to say, how long I should speak, nor what obligations I had to open or close the conversation.

What follows is a record of one such meeting that occurred on this, my first trip to Suomi. The meeting involved me with a group of colleagues that I had only met on this day, but whom eventually, over the years, have become friends. The introductory event, on this occasion, involved a Finnish university administrator, two Finnish faculty members, and me. *In particular, the event involved me in my role as an American Fulbright Professor who was to meet an important Finnish university administrator (Professor Jussi Virtanen, male). More specifically, in this exchange, I am being introduced to the administrator by a Finnish professor (Anna Silvo, female). We are being accompanied by another Finnish professor (Jussi Levo, male). The event begins as the two Finnish professors escort me down a university corridor to meet the administrator, Jussi Virtanen. He is visible through a slightly opened door.*³ This is what happened:

1. Anna Silvo knocks on the door.
2. Jussi Virtanen: *Jaa*. [Yes].
3. Silvo: *Hei, anteeks. voinko mä esitellä sulle meidän uuden Fulbright professorin?* [Hi, excuse me, could I introduce to you our new Fulbright Professor?].
4. Virtanen: *Joo*. [Okay.] (Virtanen rises from his desk, walks around in front of it so he is facing Silvo on his right, Carbaugh in front of him, and Levo on his left.)
5. Silvo: Jussi, I would like you to meet Dr. Carbaugh.
And (Silvo looks at Carbaugh while gesturing to Virtanen) Professor Virtanen.
6. Virtanen: Hello. (Shaking hands with Carbaugh).
7. Carbaugh: Good to meet you.
8. (10 to 16 second pause)
9. Virtanen: So, uhm, when did you arrive?
10. Carbaugh: Well, we arrived in early January and we've been here for about a month now.

11. And it's been very good to be here. We've been able to see just a little bit of Finland but
12. what we've seen we like very much. We feel like we're at home. With the good help of
13. people like Anna and Jussi, they've made us feel even more at home.
14. (12 to 20 second pause)
15. Virtanen: Have you been meeting people here?
16. Carbaugh: Well, yes, uh, we met several people this morning and uh I've heard a little bit
17. about their research projects and that's been very interesting. It sounds like there are
18. many interesting things going on here. And uh I'm just so impressed with your physical
19. facilities. The buildings are so nice and your lab seems very well equipped.
20. (10 to 16.9 second pause)
21. Virtanen: So what are you going to do while you are here?
22. Carbaugh: Well uh mainly I have teaching obligations at another university. I have a
23. couple of lecture series. And then here at Suomi I'll be teaching and doing some
24. seminar work. And so most of my time will be spent teaching here and there.
25. (10 to 13.5 second pause)
26. Carbaugh: Well, it's been very good to meet you and I look forward to spending time at your university.
27. Virtanen shakes hands with Carbaugh, nods, smiles, and bows slightly. *Silvo, Levo, and Carbaugh turn and leave.*

As this event began, I felt rather comfortable. up through line 7 at least. However, at this point, as this event unfolded, I met what was for me a pause in the conversation that went well beyond what I anticipated in its place. As the seconds ticked by, and as is typical when sensing something may have gone awry, alarms began to sound in my mind. Perhaps I had done something wrong, or perhaps I was supposed to be doing something different, or saying something else. Why was this pause lasting so long? Finally, and thankfully from my view, Professor Virtanen broke the silence and asked me when I had arrived. I told him when we arrived, how things were going, and tried to indicate that Anna and Jussi had been fine hosts to me. I tried to offer some information that he could take up, ask me about, or build on. After doing

this, however, there was no uptake on the matters I had mentioned, but again, an even longer pause! Perhaps up to 20 seconds long! What was going on? Had I done something wrong? My collar began to moisten as I looked to Jussi and Anna for nonverbal cues about what to do next. Both were delightfully calm, small smiles at the corner of their mouths. Were they smiling at me? All nonverbal indications from them seemed positive and good. Evidently, from their view, things were proceeding quite well, thank you! At the time, I found this hard to believe, especially when the next question from Professor Virtanen did not seem to relate to anything I had said earlier, but initiated another topic altogether, about the people I had been meeting.

And so the event went. As we cycled through the question–answer–silence sequence another time, it occurred to me that perhaps it was my responsibility to conclude our meeting. After all, I thought—perhaps unwittingly initiating an escape from the conversation—I may be taking too much of the administrator’s valuable time. So, eventually, after the fourth and shortest of the pauses, I broke in with a closing, thanking Professor Virtanen for meeting me and indicating an interest in seeing him again.

Weeks after this exchange, I was having lunch with Professor Silvo. We were discussing a student project about uses of silence when the aforementioned exchange came to mind. I asked her about it and she said, yes, the use of long pauses in conversation—at least longer “when compared to the ones you Americans tend to do”—is common in Finnish conversation. But also, she said, these pauses are especially long when conversing with Professor Virtanen, even by Finnish standards! After discussing this for awhile, I asked her a question to which I thought I already knew the answer. “Should I have waited for Professor Virtanen to close the conversation?” She smiled kindly, said again how long his pauses tended to be. “You know,” she said, “he’s very Finnish.” Then she answered my question: “Yes, it is up to him to close the conversation. He wanted to give the proper amount of time to meeting you.” As a Finnish reader of this essay commented, “When meeting someone, we want to make sure there is enough time to really talk about something.” I had not known enough to give Professor Virtanen, and this event, its “proper amount of time.”⁴

We have provided some initial reactions to this event as they were formed, early on, by the American in it (DC). Now, let us add some additional reflections about this same event from a Finnish view. How might the conduct of this event, and initial reactions to it, be formulated from a Finnish participant?

When I (SP) look at this exchange, I cannot help but hear some common and important features of Finnish communication. According to my experience, these features are present and active in many

intercultural communication situations, like this one. For example, consider Professor Silvo's response to DC about pauses in Finland being longer "when compared to the ones you Americans tend to do." Professor Silvo's comment here reflects her own considerable intercultural experiences, including living in the United States for several years. Clearly, she knew firsthand how Finnish and American pauses may differ in length. Perhaps more generally, such comments reflect the strong sense Finns can have about their way of communicating and how it contrasts with others' ways, such as American, German, and Japanese. For various reasons, Finns are interested in knowing what others think about Finns and Finnish communication. The images Finnish people have about themselves, relative to others, are partly based on images of others they have contacted personally or, especially for the younger generation, perhaps seen in Finnish popular culture and television. (Many popular American television programs are shown daily on Finnish television thus providing a daily contrast between this mediated "American" world and the Finnish one.) Based largely on these images, some Finns—especially those who have not traveled to the United States—may believe they "know" how Americans communicate, how they talk, and what they sound like. Thus, Finns may know that their pauses are at times much longer than those typical in some "American" scenes. When understanding this kind of intercultural encounter from the Finnish perspective, I believe it is important to remember this: One's prior personal contacts, experiences, and exposure to mediated images may establish expectations about others' communication, for example of Finns as being relatively silent or of Americans as being more talkative, with those expectations perhaps shaping parts of this kind of encounter.

A second important point to stress is the perceived language skills of the Finnish speakers. Although often in situations of speaking a foreign language with cultural others, and in spite of an obvious fluency with a foreign language, Finnish speakers may lack confidence or assurance in using that foreign language.⁵ In our quoted scenario, English is required of the Finnish speakers, and this may be the second, third, or even the fourth language of a Finnish speaker.⁶ Recall, in this scene, that Virtanen has to speak English not only with a respected native English speaker (DC), but also in the presence of two of his co-workers who are important to him.

To focus on the kind of hallway interaction just described, one event that may be getting done when DC first visited Finnish universities might be called, from the Finnish perspective, "getting to know, or getting acquainted with the workplace or house" (i.e., *tutustua taloon*). When one is doing, "getting acquainted with the workplace," a main initial activity involves walking around and seeing the facilities, the im-

portant offices, and hearing from the host about the workplace, its history, people, relationships, and the preferred daily procedures. Perhaps Silvo and Levo, and other faculty, were doing activities that are deemed appropriate to that kind of Finnish activity, that is, to helping DC "get acquainted with the department, workplace, or house." Such an activity, in Finland, doesn't necessarily involve verbal introductions with the people working in that department. The main activities in this Finnish activity of "getting acquainted with the house" would involve seeing the facilities and hearing about the workplace from a host or hostess. Naturally, of course, one might see people during such a visit, but here's an important point: In Finland, during this *tutustua taloon* activity among Finns, there would be no felt obligation to talk with visitors nor to be verbally introduced to them. A nod, a slight smile, and/or a "Hello" if passing them in the hallway would be quite enough, if that was even needed. "Getting acquainted with the workplace," that is, in this Finnish way, may require very little by way of verbal interaction with those one sees beyond the host. Minimizing verbal interaction can also be a way of not wasting DC's and other participants' time in relatively "superficial" matters, or in what some Finnish speakers call "unnecessary talk."

On this first visit, the host, Silvo, mentioned to DC that it may be best to meet some of her colleagues, including Professor Virtanen, after this first visit, at a later date. Indeed, Finnish viewers and readers of the introduction episode have called this event a "handshaking delegation" that can seem very distant and formal. Perhaps this is because of several reasons. Formal introductions are not part of the normal, daily professional communication in this Finnish scene, nor typically a part of initial visits. Formal introductions often require special preparation. As contrasted with a Finnish greeting such as an exchange of nods, a formal meeting may, perhaps even should, involve exchanging significant information and ideas. To get to know someone, or to meet someone formally, takes more time and is usually done directly and concisely by discussing one's official affairs, business, and duties. Professor Virtanen may have wanted the time to prepare for his first meeting with Professor Carbaugh, a highly respected guest, and perhaps Professor Virtanen wanted to make sure that the first meeting would be rewarding and productive for both Professor Carbaugh and himself. That kind of Finnish interaction might involve the Finnish style of "asia-talk," or "matter-of-fact" speaking. This style, prevalent in scenes of education, consists not so much of small talk and pleasantries but of substantial exchanges of important information on a variety of matters or topics. As such, asia-talk involves preparation in order to engage in direct, concise, and substantial discussion about one's official affairs, business, and duties that are worthy of the occasion.⁷

Notice then, from a Finnish view on these matters, several features of this conversation: Finnish interactions of this kind can presume something about American speaking based on the ways Americans have acted in the past, including images seen in Finnish popular culture. As a result, in scenes like the one already introduced, Americans may be relied on—by Finns—to talk a lot. Finns, on the other hand, especially when speaking a foreign language like English, may prefer to speak very little. The reliance on nonverbal conduct is readily intelligible to Finns, as in the folk event “getting acquainted with the workplace.” In this event, only the assigned host is required to entertain the guest verbally. Moreover, Finnish events like these—the third party introduction and getting acquainted—do not necessarily incur the obligation from others of verbal communication with the guest. As a result, workers may move into offices quite appropriately without speaking to a visitor. Similarly, when being introduced to a visitor in Finland, only very little information needs to be exchanged verbally. If one is involved in such a formal meeting, this typically takes place in a small group and at a specified date and time. Further, both third-party introductions and getting acquainted rituals may be conducted through a folk style of *asia-talk*, which is rather straightforward, direct, and matter of fact about official affairs and duties. Note how this is quite unlike an American form known as “small talk,” which may involve lengthy verbal exchanges of pleasantries.

Being mindful of these few Finnish cultural features, then, a participant might monitor the presented encounter somewhat differently than we did initially. Perhaps the Finnish communication, here, moves between actions one does when “getting acquainted with the workplace,” and a more formal and meaningful meeting through the matter of fact, *asiallinen* style. With it, participants may anticipate a direct style of speaking, exchange information matter of factly, and interpret ideas accordingly. Understanding our exchange on the basis of these Finnish premises, suggests these further specific insights about it.

After Silvo introduced DC and Virtanen to each other (on line 5 through line 7), Virtanen asked DC about his time of arrival (line 9). DC’s response to that question occurs on line 10, “We arrived in early January,” but is followed by several more utterances about Finland, his feelings, and friends. Note how that same pattern is repeated as Virtanen asked his second question (on line 15): “Have you been meeting people here?” DC’s answer is on line 16, “We met several people this morning,” but again is followed by additional descriptive commentary about research projects, physical facilities, and laboratories. From a Finnish perspective, especially one accustomed to a kind of *asia-talk* that is concise and direct, DC has given a sufficient answer on line 9, and again on line 16. In those lines, from a Finnish view, he has

already satisfactorily answered the questions. Such answers, like these, are what might be preferred as *asia-talk*, something short, matter of fact, and directly responsive to the queries. No more speaking is really required than this. As a result, the rest of DC's responses, although descriptive—and perhaps produced in a spirit of American small talk or exchanging pleasantries—may not be that significant, at least to Finns. A Finnish listener might even wonder: Why are these details forthcoming from DC? In fact, a Finn might, indeed, ask silently: What is he talking about? Isn't DC saying something else than what Virtanen asked of him? For example, when DC says on line 12, "We feel like we're at home," or on line 13, "Anna and Jussi, they've made us feel even more at home," a Finnish listener might wonder if DC is indeed telling the truth and being honest. Having said so much in this way, DC may easily be heard, like those Americans seen on TV, as so very American, talkative, even exaggerating a bit, and perhaps as being stereotypically superficial ("Can he really feel at home, as he says?"). Is he speaking the truth or just being nice? From a Finnish view, especially one mindful of talking *asia*, he may easily be heard as saying more than was required in this situation and be deemed guilty of stretching the truth a bit.⁸

Focusing for a moment on the Finnish pauses that are active in this exchange, we might ask why they are so long—at least when compared to the ones Americans might expect in their place. As already mentioned, one reason is this: Professor Virtanen is known for using long pauses, even longer than are typical by Finnish standards. More generally, pauses can be much longer in Finnish than in American communication. There are several reasons for this. First, it is customary for Finnish conversations to be punctuated by lengthy pauses, even if they are not as long as the ones in use here. Second, the long pauses might result from the Finnish speaker's speaking a foreign language, thus taking considerable time in order both to interpret the English being spoken and to formulate the proper responses in English. Third, introducing a foreigner (DC, in this scene) is to create a scene that is perhaps a bit unusual to some Finnish participants. The foreigner may do something unusual, like the expressive small-talk behavior, when the Finns might be preferring or expecting a more short, matter of fact *asia-talk*. As a result, expectations must be adjusted, and this takes time. Fourth, the occasion itself is to be respected and long pauses are a way of signifying it as such. Together, then, these features of the conversation lay some possible cultural ground for such long pauses in this situation.

What we have tried to do in our discussion is to notice features in one communication encounter that are deeply cultural. An American may notice people engaged in a practice who are, from his view, not

talking very much, not trying to avoid long pauses, and when speaking, saying so little. Perhaps unwittingly, the American produces an American folk version of communication, small talk, and in so doing, does not quite meet the expectations of the occasion the Finnish participants have established. On the basis of these conversational features, a Finn may notice an American who, as expected, likes to talk a lot. Ready for verbal action, he says more than the occasion seems to warrant; he also says things other than expected, bringing informal affairs to a more formal occasion. Perhaps unwittingly, Finns may produce folk versions of communication including a Finnish form of "getting acquainted with a workplace" and "talking about matters of fact." To summarize with a metaphor, the encounter involves two scripts for the same play, two sets of lines for the same conversational scene, and thus results in a the "staging" of an improvised, intercultural drama.

We have come to understand the encounter, and similar others, through American and Finnish cultural features that are active when a foreigner in Finland is being introduced by a third party. Introductory encounters, as this, can provide a kind of dialogic drama between cultural discourses. As such, we note the preparation and propriety that may be preferred for a Finnish version, as Professor Silvo said about Professor Virtanen: "He wanted to give the proper amount of time to meeting you." A proper, formal meeting, from the vantage point of this script, requires time and adequate preparation. When this scene was discussed with other Finns, they produced these comments: "The whole scene certainly sounds very familiar! Slow pace, pauses, direct questions"; it sounds "delightfully familiar"; it "reminds me of formal parts of weddings and birthday parties"; or, it is like "thousands of similar events when introducing foreign visitors to university officials. Very typical, delightfully typical." The intercultural dynamics seem to strike a chord. Yet, understanding them is a tall order indeed.

Our understanding has come partly through the ideas of propriety and preparation, in a Finnish version of the play. Finnish propriety means that one should conduct a formal introduction in the proper way, with the appropriate degree of decorum and respect. If possible, one should give the event forethought, learning what one can about the others, and preparing questions that are proper and fitting for the occasion. In fact, the questions used in this encounter—"when did you arrive?," often followed by "When will you leave?," "Have you been meeting people?," "What are you going to do while you are here?"—are very typically used in such exchanges by Finns with foreigners. Moreover, silence and patience in such exchanges is an acknowledged way of giving the occasion its proper due. Exchanges such as these should not be too short, and thus one expects a proper silence, even quietude, as a sign that the occasion is being conducted properly, politely, and re-

spectfully. As many Finns have pointed out, good human relations, like Finnish coffee, take time to brew. Giving the event the proper time makes it that much better, and one cannot hurry the process! So Finnish standards of propriety and preparation are active in a silence, signifying that the visitor and the occasion are being treated respectfully and properly. This is good.

As a result of these cultural premises and preferences, a Finnish interactional sequence can be produced during an introduction: pacing tends to be slower "than Americans tend to do"; verbalizations might be prepared ahead of time; and silence is quite comfortable and acceptable in order to prolong the situation and thus to make it more meaningful and more respectful of social relations. Additionally, there are important nonverbal messages that are difficult to notice from the quoted transcript but are nonetheless worthy of comment. Notice that Mr. Virtanen rises from his desk and walks in front of it to stand directly in front of DC. This is a gesture of respect for the occasion, and the visitor, from Mr. Virtanen. Further, Professors Silvo and Levo are situated at the side of DC. This is a gesture of support by them, of him. More nonverbal subtleties are also active here, including differing uses of the eyes and faces. Noticing these nonverbal actions helps us understand how this event, and scene, was structured in a Finnish way to convey respect and support of DC and the occasion.

A popular American version of this play is different, for there are, of course, other features, other premises and preferences operating. Ideas perhaps active in American professional and business scripts as this may come to the fore, particularly with regard to being introduced, with these guided by an emphasis on quantity, and efficiency. On arriving, one may walk through a hallway and meet a large number of people, the feeling being that one has been greeted by, and introduced to, the whole group. Unlike the Finnish ideas of propriety and respect, an American idea may be "to get to know"—in this way—as many people as quickly as possible. The American interactional script accompanying these ideas may be conducted at a quicker pace, pauses being short; spontaneous verbalizations playing into the scene rather than prescribed comments; and the words, more than the nonverbal actions, being the crucial site of communicative messages. (In a recent visit to an American university, I enacted this kind of script, being introduced to 17 people in 45 minutes.) Against this backdrop, within this American version of the play, silences of even a short duration, "compared to those Finns produce," can be sources of discomfort for some Americans. As one Finnish observer said about the aforementioned exchange, DC "suffers from the pauses!"

We have offered a series of observations on some initial interactions and an intercultural encounter, as these have occurred in actual situa-

tions by Americans and Finns. We have interpreted some of the features involved in this one encounter from Finnish and American perspectives. Based on several other similar events, we believe that these features suggest ways of structuring acts and sequences of this kind. We have thus noticed how these communication practices are shaped by cultural premises and preferences, cultural notions of sequencing and further how these practices are explained by participants through cultural terms for those practices such as "getting acquainted with the workplace" and *asia-talk* in Finnish, or by *small talk* in American English. Each draws attention to different cultural forms of communication, through sequential enactments and cultural terms, with each identifying kinds of communicative practices being produced. Further, we discussed various cultural premises about verbal and nonverbal action, about what is proper and preferred as communication in such scenes in Finland and the United States. By focusing our attention on specific and actual intercultural interactions like these, by interpreting them through these cultural features, and by exploring some of the premises active in these interactions and terms, we have provided an admittedly partial and suggestive account of Finnish and American communication, by way of introductions.

ENDNOTES

1. The authors acknowledge the helpful suggestions for improving the essay from several students of Finnish culture and communication including Michael Berry, Jaakko Lehtonen, Marjatta Nurmikari Berry, and Liisa Salo-Lee. To them we extend our sincere thanks. An earlier version of the essay appears as: "By Way of Introduction: An American and Finnish Dialogue" (see Carbaugh & Poutiainen, 2000).
2. The names of people and places that we use in this paper have been changed so to honor the confidence of our colleagues.
3. The following transcript is based on a videotape of this intercultural encounter. In the videotape, all participants from the original event are re-enacting the event as they recalled it, based on DC's field notes. Analysis of this transcript is based on this and similar introductions in which DC was involved. For the timed silences on lines 8, 14, 20, and 25, the first number is SP's estimate of a customary length of such a pause, with the second number being the actual time of the pause on the video clip. A Finnish production team produced the video.
4. Uses and interpretations of silence vary not only by speaker, but also by regions within Finland. As a Finnish reader of the essay commented, "a Karelian Finn [from the east] may have filled some of those silences," unlike Virtanen, a Hamé Finn.
5. This is especially difficult when native Finnish speakers are expected not only to speak a second language, but to do things, like a USAmerican English version of "small talk," which is done in that sec-

ond language by its native speakers, but not done quite that way in Finnish. On a related point, Finns themselves can be quite reticent in using their own language. This is a source of the oft-repeated joke, from Finns to others: "Finnish people can be silent in several languages!"

6. It is not unusual for Finnish students to have studied and be fluent in English, Swedish, and German, in addition to Finnish.
7. There is a special Finnish attitude associated with this style; it suggests that the discussion, as such, should be done "without a hurry," in Finnish, *istua rauhassa*. For these observations, we are drawing partly on Richard Wilkins' dissertation work at the University of Massachusetts on "asia-talk" (1999).
8. In Finland and many European countries, Americans are often regarded as superficial because of such behaviors.