



## THE ‘DIMENSIONS’ OF SILENCE

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**Speech** and **silence** have of late been approached not as clear-cut opposites, but as subdomains of the general domain of communication, that is, as manifestations of similar communicative events (Cf Mihăilă-Cova 1977, Ciobanu 1984, Verschueren 1985, Jaworsky 1993, 1998), or “contrasting linguistic phenomena.” (Jaworsky 1993:79)

In terms of feature-relations, the definition of silence as a linguistic/speech act describes a case of “central oppositeness of meaning” manifest as “gradable complementarity” across the semantic fields of silence and speech. Their semantic relation illustrates a prototypical instance of “systemic semantic opposition,” where the pair of “systemic opposites” overlaps functionally as nondiscrete attitudes that control a gradable communicative continuum (Mettinger 1994:94). Therefore, we approach silence as a complementary attitude to linguistic action, or as a communicative act which involves ‘abstaining from verbally expressing personal opinions, feelings, etc. when the situation calls for it’.(1)

Ostensive-inferential as all communication may be, it is also “gradable”, that is, “strong”, when assumptions are made “strongly manifest”, and “weak”, when assumptions are made “manifest only marginally” (Jaworsky 1993:84), as is the case with nonverbal communication. Because it applies to a “relatively restrictive range of pragmatic contexts,” the referential value of silence is minimal. The “content” of silence seems to be “gradable” along two sound-related dimensions, **quality** / **intensity** and **quantity/duration**, the latter often being the “only formal dimension for its description.” (Jaworsky 1998:102)

Silence ‘about something’ which remains ‘unsaid’/‘unuttered’, is perceived as ‘meaningful’ communicative strategy, when talk ‘about something’ is expected but it is intentionally withheld by the agent of the act of silence, or the Tacens (Ts). Because it intervenes “par non-intervention” (Mihăilă-Cova 1977), as absence of matter (i.e., speech) in a structural context which implies its presence, we call it ‘active’ or “eloquent” (Călin 1973:169) silence.

A function of the degree of responsibility or involvement of the Tacens, “propositional” silence is in itself a **behavioural speech act**, performed with a view to avoiding possible negative effects of linguistic action and to maintaining a status quo. Without a definite propositional content or a standard illocutionary mark, silence as ‘the unsaid’ relies on context. (Jaworsky 1993:85) (2)

Acts of silence as *unsaid word(s) – cuvânt nerostit / cuvinte nerostite* can be differently framed in English and Romanian, e.g. My *remark* was unkind – consider it *unsaid* – Am fost nepoliticos – *fă abstracție de ce-am spus / uită ce-am spus* ; *Remarks* of that sort are better *left unsaid* – În asemenea situații e mai bine *să taci / să nu spui nimic*; Some *things* are better *left unsaid* – Uneori e mai bine *să taci* [LDCE: 1577]; He *left* the rest *unsaid* – În rest, *n-a mai spus nimic*; There was a lot that *went unsaid* – Multe *nu s-au spus / Nu s-au spus* multe. [CCD: 1601]

Most of the basic **verba tacendi** in English are “complex lexicalizations.” (Verschueren 1985: 76) *To be silent - a tăcea, a fi tăcut, a nu scoate nici un cuvânt / sunet* is considered to be neither “*too general*”, nor “*general enough*.” (idem: 76-77) It prototypically refers to ‘absence of speech’ or ‘absence-of-an-act-of-speaking’ but it may collaterally mean that the Tacens is ‘temperamentally or occasionally not inclined to talk’, that (s)he is *taciturn - taciturn / posac*, contrasting not only with speech but also with noise, and not necessarily implying that no words were uttered at all. According to Verschueren, *to be silent* can only be used in “marked descriptions” of ‘acts’ of silence that involve a ‘propositional content’, be it ‘a topic’ or simply ‘words’:

(1) ‘Ts utters no words about a particular topic’ (i.e. specification of the domain of the **verbum reticendi**), when the Tacendum (Tm), that is, ‘what the act of silence is about’, or ‘that which is not talked about’, usually introduced by **about**, is not present, like in cases of refraining from speech, e.g. *Ts was silent / uttered no words / did not speak* at all – *Ts tăcea / nu scotea / nu a scos un cuvânt / o vorbă*;

(2) ‘Ts discontinues his / her uttering of words’ (i.e. specification of the domain of the **verbum cessandi**), e.g. *Ts was silent / discontinued discourse / stopped speaking* for a while (before resuming it) – *Ts s-a oprit / a încetat să mai vorbească / ?a tăcut*.

Unlike *to be silent - a tăcea, to say nothing / not to say anything - a nu spune nimic* covers several acts of type (1), whereas with *not speak - a nu vorbi* and *not talk - a nu discuta*, ambiguity is caused by different meanings of *speak*, such as ‘make an utterance,’ ‘utter words,’ ‘state something about a specific subject,’ ‘deliver a speech,’ ‘give a talk,’ ‘have a conversation.’ Just like *to keep silent - a tăcea, a rămâne tăcut*, they may replace *to say nothing / not to say anything*, for example, in a torture situation. However, if the Tacendum surfaces as an **about - despre**-phrase, as in *not speak / not talk about - a nu vorbi / a nu discuta despre*, the phrases behave like *to be silent - a tăcea* and *to say nothing - a nu spune nimic*. (idem: 77)

Romanian, like many other languages, but unlike English, uses monolexemic lexical items to refer to someone being silent in a more or less neutral way. There is no English monolexemic counterpart to the Romanian *a tăcea* (< Lat. *tacere*), the **verbum tacendi** which expresses ‘absence of speech’ and may function as both a **verbum reticendi** (i.e. ‘absence of speech about a certain topic’) and a **verbum cessandi** (i.e. ‘discontinuing one’s speech’). Whereas the units *a nu vorbi, a nu discuta, a nu spune nimic* cover the same semantic areas as their English counterparts. Their basic meaning is (1). Other phrases, like *a păstra tăcerea asupra* and *a trece sub tăcere* (ceva), are used to refer to a secret that the Tacens does not want to disclose.

Abstention from speech or writing or from both is illustrated by different semantic patterns. Numerically the best represented, both in English and Romanian, is the pattern which combines ‘abstention from both speech and writing’, as the domain of **verba reticendi** and **verba cessandi**. Most of these phraseological units refer to abstention from speech. Nevertheless, many of them can refer metaphorically to ‘abstaining from writing’, as in: *They kept silent* for almost half a year before making public the results of the investigation – *Aproape jumătate de an au păstrat tăcerea asupra rezultatelor anchetei*.

Combinations of the two meanings have generated different semantic patterns. Numerically, the best represented both in English and in Romanian, seems to be the pattern which includes **verba reticendi** and **verba cessandi** that refer to speech, writing, or to both, on an equal basis.(3)

Acts of being silent which surface as **verba reticendi** refer essentially to ‘withholding information’ or to ‘absence of communication about a certain topic,’ most often, both in speech and writing:

*to conceal, to hide, to secrete - a ascunde / a tăinui / a nu divulga*  
*to cover up - a ascunde / a tăinui*  
*to veil (in secrecy) - a ascunde, a tăinui, a nu dezvălui, a învălui în tăcere*  
*to keep sth back / secret (4) - a ascunde, a tăinui, a nu spune / a nu divulga ceva*  
*to keep under one's hat - a nu da în vileag*  
*to keep sth under wraps - a ascunde*  
*to put / keep the lid on one's information - a nu divulga informații*  
*not give away sth - a nu divulga ceva*  
*never let on - a nu lăsa să se vadă / să se înțeleagă că, a nu dezvălui, a nu face cunoscut / public*  
*to refuse comment - a refuza orice comentariu*  
*to smother a curse - a înnăbuși / a înghiți / a strivi între dinți o injurătură*  
*to smother up a scandal - a ascunde / a înnăbuși un scandal*  
*to stifle - a ascunde, a mușamaliza o afacere*  
*to suppress - a ascunde / a trece sub tăcere (un fapt)*

**Verba cessandi** collocate with noun phrases which, literally or metaphorically, point to linguistic action events:

*to cease/to close/to end/ to stop/to terminate a discussion/an argument - a termina o discuție, a pune punct unei discuții*  
*to bury the differences/the hatchet/ tomahawk ('to agree to stop arguing about something') - a face / a încheia pace; a îngropa securea*

The next better represented pattern is that restricted mainly to **abstention from speaking by the inactivation of the articulators** (*mouth - gură, tongue - limbă, lips - buze*). The phrases explicitly refer to processes that accompany verbal communication, such as breathing, uttering sounds and to the articulators. Most of them belong to slang and illustrate a correlation between "the oral code of the acts of silence" and "the informal, slangy code of the appropriate describing acts" (idem: 86):

*not breathe a word/a syllable - a nu sufla un cuvânt*  
*not utter a word - a nu scoate o vorbă / un cuvânt*  
*not say 'boo' - a nu zice (nici) 'pâs'*  
*to button up one's mouth - a-și pune lacăt la gură*  
*to close one's mouth - a tăcea din gură*  
*to hold one's tongue - a tăcea, a-și ține gura*  
*to shut one's bazoo - a-și ține gura / fleanca*

The phrases suggest a voluntary, highly intense act of silence, which implies total absence of sound or word production, because the speaker avoids to make an untimely remark or to give a straight answer. They activate the CONDUIT, the CONTAINER, or the WORD as OBJECT metaphors:

*not let out a peep - a nu-i scăpa un cuvînțel / o vorbă*  
*not say 'boo' - a nu zice (nici) 'pâs'*  
*not breathe a word - a nu spune / scoate un cuvânt / un cuvînțel, a nu sufla o vorbă / o vorbuliță*  
*not have a word to say - a nu avea (nici) un cuvânt / nimic de spus*  
*not to open one's mouth - a nu deschide gura*  
*to keep one's trap/yap shut - a-si tine gura/fleanca*  
*to shut one's bazoo / face / head - a-si tine gura/fleanca/? mitraliera (Cf. Are o mitralieră!)*  
*to muzzle oneself - a-și pune botniță*  
*to keep one's tongue in check - a-și ține limba în frâu*

- to put **a bridle on one's tongue** - a-și pune **frîu la limbă**, a-și ține/a-și băga **limba-n gură**  
 to bite **one's tongue** – a-și ține **gura**, a ascunde **o taină**, a se abține (în ultimul moment) **să spună ceva (nepotrivit)**  
 to button **one's lips** / zip **one's lip** - a-și pune **lacăt la gură**, ?a-și coase **gura**,  
 ?a-i fi **gura cusută**  
 to seal **one's lips** - a-i fi **buzele pecetluite**.  
 to lose **one's tongue** – a nu avea **limbă** (5)

The third large group of verba tacendi and phrases focus on ‘**abstaining from speaking**’, (S), which can be extended to ‘**abstaining from writing**’, (W). Compare the two patterns, with unextendable and extendable meaning (6):

- (S) to fall **silent/mute** - a tăcea, a amuți, a deveni **tăcut**  
 to stand **mute** - a rămâne **mut**, fără glas, a sta **fără a scoate(vre)un cuvânt**; a refuza **să răspundă** (unei acuzații)/ **să pledeze**  
 to button up **one's mouth** - a-și pune **lacăt la gură**  
**not utter a word** - a nu scoate **un cuvânt/un cuvînțel**, a nu sufla **o vorbă**  
**not say 'boo'** - a nu zice nici **'pâs'**  
 to shut **one's face / mouth / head** - a-și ține **gura** to hum / hem and haw – a ezita, a șovăi
- (W) to **be silent** - a tăcea, a fi **tăcut**, a păstra **tăcerea**  
 to be **mute** - a fi **mut**, a păstra **tăcerea**, a nu se pronunța  
 to **keep buttoned up** - a tăcea, a rămâne **mut**, a păstra **tăcerea**  
**not say a word** - a nu scoate **un cuvânt / un cuvînțel**, a nu sufla **o vorbă**  
 to shut **up** - a tăcea  
 to beat **about / around the bush** - a bate **câmpii**, a vorbi **vrute și nevrute**, a lua **pe departe / pe ocolite**

Compare:

- He made an attempt to answer the question, but he soon **fell mute** - ... **tăcu / amuți / deveni tăcut**  
 She **stood mute** upon hearing the news. - A rămas fără glas la aflarea știrilor.  
 Have they answered your letter on a possible ecological disaster?  
 No, they **are still mute on** the subject - ... încă **nu s-au pronunțat asupra** acestui subiect.  
 Yes, but they **keep buttoned up about** a possible ecological disaster - ... **nu suflă o vorbă despre...**  
 Yes, but they did **not say a word about** a possible ecological disaster - ... **nu au suflat o vorbă / n-au spus nimic despre ...**

Most set phrases that refer to lack of linguistic action illustrate degrees of silence, that is, **silence acts of high intensity**, and **silence acts of long duration**. Only verba tacendi and tacendi set phrases encode the superlative degree in long and intense acts of silence. They do not surface the Tacendum (i.e. ‘what the Agent is silent about’) which, most often, has to be specified. Rarely do verba cessandi surface the Tacendum, whose nature is usually specified by previous discourse.

Moreover, the scarcity of positive adjectives that modify the noun *silence* accounts for the fact that acts of silence as ‘absence of speech’ are seldom considered to be pleasant. The only modifiers seem to be **solemn**, **golden**, and **hushed**, as in **solemn silence** - **tăcere solemnă**, which applies to some special, serious events, to a religious, a sacred or a secular ceremony (7), and **golden silence** - **tăcere de aur**, a face-saving strategy in a

communicative situation. On the other hand, the noun *silence* has selected a host of negatively biased adjectives, which mark the intensity of feeling or describe the atmosphere. (Cf idem: 115)

Silence can be perceived as *absolute/complete/dead/omnious/perfect/total/utter silence - tăcere absolută/totală*. Hence, to *take a secret into the grave* – a lua/a duce (cu el/ea) *secretul în mormânt*. *Eerie/menacing/threatening silence-tăcere apăsătoare/amenințătoare* foretells a 'storm', whereas *pregnant silence - tăcere semnificativă* is laden with meaning or emotion. *Stony silence* describes a moment of silence after someone said or did something very shocking or unreasonable, e.g. Their suggestion was met with a *stony silence – tăcere de gheață*. *Awkward/embarrassed/stunned silence – tăcere stânjenitoare*, connotes the Tacens' surprise, perplexity, dilemma, discomfort, e.g. There was a moment's *embarrassed silence* – A fost un moment când nimeni nu a știut ce să spună. Long duration is also conveyed by syntagms like *prolonged/long silence* (8) – *tăcere prelungită/grea*, e.g. "Uneori se făceau la masă *tăceri lungi și triste*." [DLRLC:391]

Acts of highly intense silence are described by phrases that derive their expression of intensity from a metaphorical transfer, usually from death to silence or, typically, from inanimate, silent objects, or **symbols of 'closedness'** to humans. (Cf Verschueren 1985: 90)

They often have sinister connotations, like in: *to maintain deathlike / tomblike silence - a păstra o tăcere mormântală/de mormânt, a tăcea ca mormântul pământul*. (9) Realia may vary in English and Romanian:

*to be/become mum as an oyster - a tăcea mâlc/molcom/chitic/ca chiticul/ca peștele*

*to close up like a clam / an oyster - a se închide în sine/în carapacea lui/ei*  
*to clam up - a se bloca, a i se lega limba, a amuți* (especially about someone who suddenly stops talking when they are nervous or shy)

*to be silent as a post - a rămâne tablou / a înlemni / a încremeni* (10)

*to be silent as a stone - ?a rămâne stană de piatră/a fi stană de piatră*

*to be silent as the tomb – a păstra o tăcere mormântală*

*to be silent / quiet / still as a mouse – a fi tăcut, a tăcea chitic/ca peștele /a nu sufla o vorbă/a nu scoate un cuvânt*

In **verba cessandi**, intensity often associates with the abrupt discontinuation of the speech flow, because of some strong emotion, e.g.

*to button up one's mouth - a-și pune lacăt la gură*

*to close up - a tăcea, a se închide în sine* means 'to deliberately not show one's true feelings or thoughts', e.g. Every time we ask her about it, she just *closes up*.

*to dry up - a înceta să vorbească, a se opri din vorbit* means 'to stop speaking in the middle of what sb is saying', e.g. The actor simply *dried up* in the final scene.

*to dummy up* (AmE slang) - a tăcea, i.e. 'to stay silent and not speak', e.g. When I asked her name she just *dummied up*.

*to fall silent - a tăcea, a deveni tăcut*

Some phrases contain verbs that indicate duration (11), such as: *to hold – a ține; to keep – a ține, a rămâne; to leave, to maintain - a păstra; to remain - a rămâne, or to sit, e.g.*

*to keep buttoned up - a-și pune lacăt la gură*

*to keep sth close – a ține (ceva) secret, a tăinui ceva; a nu sufla un cuvânt despre ceva; a fi rezervat (în privința unui lucru)*

- to keep sth dark* - a ține **secret**, a nu sufla **o vorbă** despre ceva, a nu destăinui ceva
- to keep it under one's hat* - a ține ceva **secret/numai pentru sine**, a nu sufla **o vorbă/un cuvânt** despre ceva
- to keep / sit mum* – a tăcea **chitic / molcom / mâlc / ca un pește**; a nu zice nici **pâs / cârc**; a-și ține **gura**, a nu trâncăni; a nu sufla **o vorbă / un cuvânt** despre ceva; a păstra **tăcerea** asupra unui lucru
- to keep the lid on* – a ține ceva **secret**, a nu divulga ceva
- to keep under wraps* - a ține ceva **secret**
- to keep under lock and key* – a ține ceva **strict secret**
- to keep sth within one's lips*
- to keep within the bosom of the lodge / family / church etc.* - a rămâne în **familie**; a-și spăla rufele în familie
- to keep within these (four) walls* – a rămâne **între acești pereți**
- to maintain (a deathlike / tomblike) silence* - a păstra **o tăcere mormântală**
- to leave sb in the dark* (about sth) - a ține **în ceață**, a nu informa despre
- to remain silent* (about / as to) - a **nu menționa / a nu se referi la**
- to hold one's peace* - a tăcea **chitic/mâlc/molcom**; a-și ține **gura**; a păstra **tăcerea**
- to hold one's tongue* - a-și ține **gura**
- to sit on sth.* means 'to delay dealing with sth'

Only *to hold out on* basically means 'to withhold information that someone is entitled to get'. The reasons for the scarcity of linguistic means seem to be either rules of politeness or generally accepted rules of conversation. Therefore, in order to refer to voluntarily or involuntarily withholding information and to insinuate an omission, the best choice is the phrase *to fail to mention* - a nu menționa, a omite să spună , e.g. The speaker cleverly *failed to mention* the company's involvement in the affair. - Vorbitorul a ocolit cu dibăcie problema implicării companiei în afacere. With other meanings, the verb *fail* can be used in different contexts, e.g., Don't *fail* to let me know! - Nu uita să mă anunți!; **Words failed** me to express my joy. - N-am găsit **cuvinte** pentru a-mi exprima bucuria.

A speech act of silence will surface as a locutionary act, with its 'sound' properties, participants, and their reasons for acting as Tacens. Beside intensity and duration, the Tacens' reasons for keeping silent may be lack of opinion or indecision, for example, *stand mute* (12)), strong emotions, such as stage fright (e.g. *to dry up*(13) - a se bloca, a avea **un lapsus**), astonishment, or any unpleasant surprises (e.g. grief, shock, etc). Refusal to speak, obstinacy or other reasons may press a speaker into deliberate silence, like in: *not to breathe a word* – a nu scoate o vorbă or *to be mum as an oyster* – **atăcea mâlc**; refraining from speaking in spite of one's drive to do so, as in: *to bite one's tongue* – a-și ține **gura**, *to button / zip one's lip* - a-și pune **lacăt la gură** (e.g. *You'd better zip your lip* or *you'll be in trouble*), *my lips are sealed* – **buzele-mi sunt pecetluite**, *promit să nu spun nimic*, *to put a bridle on one's tongue* – a-și pune **frâu la limbă** and *to muzzle oneself*; or mixed attitudes, such as discretion, mercy, solidarity, lying, etc (e.g. *to keep secret* - a tăinui; *to conceal* – a ascunde, *to veil*).

The English and the Romanian lexicons on 'propositional' silence show cross-linguistic differences in terms of symbols of closedness and realia in set phrases which refer to the inactivation of articulators. However, the most important one seems to be the fact that Romanian more frequently lexicalizes silence as 'absence-of-an-act-of-speaking' in a single lexical unit verb, *a tăcea*, a meaning which is prototypically referred to by *to be silent* - a tăcea, a fi tăcut, a nu scoate nici un cuvânt / sunet. For example, out of twenty-

one English *verba reticendi* and *verba silendi*, one can only be translated as 'a tăcea', two as 'a ezita, a șovăi', seven as both 'a tăcea' and a set phrase, e.g. *a tăcea (din gură)*; *a-și ține gura*; *a rămâne tăcut*; *a deveni tăcut*; *a fi tăcut*; *a rămâne mut*. Compare:

*to close one's mouth - a tăcea (din gură)*

*to hold one's tongue - a tăcea, a-și ține gura*

*to keep quiet - a tăcea, a rămâne tăcut*

*to fall silent - a tăcea, a deveni tăcut*

*to become quiet - a tăcea, a deveni tăcut*

*to be silent - a tăcea, a fi tăcut*

*to keep buttoned up - a tăcea, a rămâne mut*

*to shut up - a tăcea*

*to hum / hem and haw / ha - a ezita, a șovăi*

*to shilly-shally - a ezita, a șovăi*

The rest of them are more or less similar in structure and meaning to the English ones:

*not breathe a word / a syllable - a nu sufla un cuvânt*

*not say a word - a nu scoate un cuvânt / un cuvântel, a nu sufla o vorbă*

*not say 'boo' - a nu zice (nici) 'pâs'*

*not utter a word - a nu scoate un cuvânt / un cuvântel, a nu scoate / sufla o vorbă*

*to beat about / around the bush - a bate câmpii, a o lua pe departe / pe ocolite*

*to be mute - a fi mut*

*to button one's mouth - a-și pune lacăt la gură*

*to keep sth quiet - a nu sufla o vorbă / a nu spune nimic (despre ceva)*

*to shut one's bazoo - a-și ține gura / fleanca*

*to shut one's face // head / mouth - a-și ține gura*

*to stand mute - a rămâne mut, a sta fără a scoate (vre)un cuvânt, a refuza să pledeze / să răspundă unei acuzații*

Communicative events may take special meanings depending on whether interaction is structured through talk or silence. In its very essence "a highly ambiguous form of communication" (Jaworsky 1993:85), silence can perform positive or negative metapragmatic functions, such as "linking (bonding vs. separation), affecting (healing vs. wounding), judgemental (ascend vs. descend), revelational (learning and self exploration vs. ignorance), activating (thoughtfulness vs. mental inactivity)" (Jaworsky 1998:102). Empirical metalinguistics has mapped the social semantics of silence as a set of criteria for disciplining human personality.

### End notes

[1] Besides conveying a 'propositional' meaning generated by context, acts of silence express some illocutionary force that substitutes non-performed linguistic acts. Moreover, some researchers claim that the understanding of 'silence' should be grounded in the theory of categorization or prototype theory. (Cf. Verschueren 1985: 82)

[2] The felicity of the act is very much culture-bound. Silence and speech are subject to norms in different communities, as part of an "ensemble de règles, distinctes selon les régions, qui permettent, prescrivent ou interdisent la parole et le silence..." (R. Jakobson, *Essais de linguistique générale. Rapports internes et externes du langage*, vol. 2, Les Editions de Minuit, Paris, 1973, p. 38) Therefore, members of different cultural communities must acquire the "silent routine" (idem, p. 56), for situations in which some formulaic linguistic (communicative) behaviour involves remaining silent, mainly in order to minimize face loss. In many communities unwelcome in conversation, silences longer than a few seconds are seen as signs of communication, indicating disapproval, irritation, boredom, or incomprehension. The meaning of silence has been conventionalized, being rather straightforward and less ambiguous, in cases of "formulaic silence," which carry "easily accessible propositional meaning," realized through "conventionalized indirectness," that is "a customary act of saying nothing in reaction to specific stimuli." (Jaworsky 1993: 56)

[3] There is rough equivalence, for instance, of *to make no sign that* (i.e. 'to show no intention to') – *a nu da nici un semn că* and *to give no sign of life* – *a nu da nici un semn de viață*, which are considered to be borderline cases between *verba silendi* and *verba reticendi*. The latter can imply the Tacens' refraining from communicating so that no one should know where (s)he is or whether (s)he is still alive.

[4] Remember also: to keep **quiet** - a tăcea, to keep **sth quiet** - a nu sufla **o vorbă**, a nu spune **nimic** (e.g. Are you going to resign from the committee? You keep **that quiet!** – Să nu sufli **o vorbă!**), and to keep **sb quiet** - a nu lăsa **pe cineva să vorbească**.

[5] The phrases refer to an involuntary act of silence generated by strong emotions, meaning 'not to be able to talk'. However, when used ironically, it implies deliberate action, e.g. She must have *lost her tongue* - *nu are limbă, e mută*. Based on the opposition *lose – find*, another verbial suggests 'recovery of one's speech ability': *find one's tongue* – 'a putea vorbi,' 'a-i reveni glasul,' 'a avea curajul / a reuși să vorbească.' It is used in conversation, fiction and news reporting, e.g. "Some of the *talking* heads on the late-night shows were finally able to *find their tongues*." (*Evening Standard*, 18 Aug 1998)

[6] Most English examples are from Jef Verschueren 1985. Both Italic and Bold types have been added.

[7] Remember *to be received in silence*.

[8] Cf a long silence ensued.

[9] The phrase *to be (as) silent as the grave / tomb – a tăcea / a fi tăcut ca mormântul* is hardly used in American English, whereas in British English it often refers to lack of any noise, like in "It is *as silent as a tomb* in here," and, only accidentally, does it express lack of verbal communication, like in "During the taxi drive she remained *as silent as the tomb*." (Apud Verschueren 1985:91) Remember also the metaphorical extension of the verb *to bury* - *a duce/a lua (cu sine) în mormânt*.

[10] Compare it to phrases that function as *verba silendi*, meaning [Cause to become silent], e.g. *strike sb dumb/mute/speechless*; *leave sb in a puzzle/at a non-plus* or *to nonplus*. Outside the scope of this approach fall: phrases which refer to the silencing effect of circumstances on the audience, such as *to stand mute* - *a rămâne mut / fără glas / cu gura căscată / fără cuvinte*; *a nu fi în stare să scoată o vorbă / un cuvânt*, *a nu ști ce să spună*; *a nu-și găsi cuvintele*, i.e. 'not to know how to express one's feelings' (usu.gratitude); and adjectives (e.g. *dumb, dumbfounded, dumbstruck*) and adverbs (e.g. *dumbly*) that refer to acts of silence which are induced by different degrees of surprise: In spite of our friendly attitude, he stood *dumb* and sullen; She couldn't stand his *dumb* insolence any longer; He stormed out of the room in a *dumb* rage; They were *struck dumb* with horror and grief; Numb with fear, the men followed *dumbly* the order to sit down. [CCD: 439]; In a circle of *dumbfounded* old ladies, she was the only one who finally found her tongue. They were watching, *dumbstruck/dumbfounded*, when the principal got in.

[11] The phrases that suggest intense and long acts of silence never contain adverbials that refer to short periods of time, except jocularly. Compare: She *kept quiet* (for a minute or so). – *Tăcu / Își ținu gura* (câteva clipe); At last, she *kept her mouth shut / did not open her mouth* (for a minute or so). – În sfârșit *tăcu/își ținu gura* (câteva clipe).

[12] It can metaphorically apply to officials who maintain silence on a specific topic, as in: The minister *stands mute* on the issue.

[13] It is also used in the command *Dry up!* - *Taci! Încetează!*

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### Rezumat

*Lucrarea abordează tăcerea ca subdomeniu al domeniului comunicării lingvistice. O selecție de verbe și unități frazeologice în limbile engleză și română, care funcționează ca verba reticendi și verba cessandi, conturează **intensitatea și durata**, 'dimensiuni' graduale ale actului tăcerii ca și 'cuvânt nerostit'. Diferențele cros-lingvistice se manifestă la nivelul structurii unităților lexicale prototipice (to be silent - a tăcea), a 'simbolurilor tăcerii' și a expresiilor referitoare la 'inactivarea organelor articulatorii' (**mouth - gură, tongue - limbă, lips - buze**), care vizează metaforele 'conduit' și 'container'.*

### Résumé

*Notre travail traite du silence comme sous domaine de la communication. Toute une série de verbes et unités phraséologiques en anglais et en roumain, fonctionnant verba reticendi et verba cessandi, mettent en évidence l'intensité et la durée, « des dimensions » graduelles de l'acte de silence en tant que « parole non prononcée ». Les différences cross linguistiques se manifestent au niveau de la structure des unités prototypiques (to be silent – a tăcea – se taire), des « symboles du silence » et, des expressions qui réfèrent à « l'inactivité des organes articulatoires » (mouth – gură – bouche, tongue - limbă – langue, lips – buze – lèvres) qui visent les métaphores « conduit » et « container ».*

### Abstract

*The paper approaches silence as a subdomain of the field of linguistic communication. A selection of verbs and idiomatic phrases of English and Romanian origin, which function as verba reticendi and verba cessandi, outline **intensity and duration**, which are gradual 'dimensions' of the act of silence acting like the 'unspoken word'. Cross-linguistic differences are obvious at the structural level of prototypical lexical units (to be silent – a tăcea), at the level of 'symbols of silence' and of phrases referring to 'inactivating of the articulatory organs' (**mouth - gură, tongue - limbă, lips - buze**), which concern metaphors built around 'conduit' and 'container'.*