SPEECH AND GENDER: INDIAN VERSIONS OF THE SILENCE WAGER (AT 1351)

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Speech and Gender in Folktales

Speech is, and always has been, at the heart of folkloristic research, from the traditional focus on 'oral' tradition to more recent sociological studies of speaking, which attempt to understand how the social locations and social conditions of speech affect what is said. As Pierre Bourdieu put it, the perspective has shifted from an emphasis on speech as a realisation of linguistic competence to the 'socially conditioned way of realizing this natural capacity' (1994:54). Not everyone, Bourdieu observed in his critique of Austin's performative theory of speech, can utter the words 'I name this ship the Royal Brittania' or open Parliament. There is no such thing as 'pure' speech, he remarked, no linguistic free market. The power to speak, like speech itself, is socially conditioned, and among the most influential social determinants of who is allowed to speak is gender. Although Bourdieu has curiously little to say on gendered speech, and even less on gendered silence, folklorists have shown a keen interest in these topics and viewed silence not simply as the absence of speech but as a form of social subordination.

Folklore research on gendered speech and silence is often motivated by a desire to give voice to the 'voiceless,' to let silent voices be heard, to correct the imbalance between dominant speech and subordinate speech, often between men's voices and women's voices. This democratisation of speech has inspired many folklorists since the early decades of the twentieth century, and for some the silencing of women is the grand historical narrative of folklore. Jack Zipes (1973:6-11, passim), for instance, has argued that the social history of the European folktale over the past three hundred years is a transformation from an oral, female-centered, peasant tradition for adults to a written, male-dominated, bourgeois tradition for children. In his view, a series of male collectors, writers and editors have tamed an earlier unruly tradition, turning it into a tool for the socialization of naughty middle class children (cf. B. Bettelheim).

Marina Warner, in a very different kind of book, has also documented the history of misogyny toward tale-tellers, prophets and other wise women; one striking image is a medieval woodblock print of a woman with her lips padlocked, a paragon of feminine obedience and fidelity (Warner 1994:34). Although

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Warner ranges over a wide variety of materials and historical periods, her focus is the French literary tale of the late 17th century, where women writers such as D'Aulnoy lost out in the commercial print world to Charles Perrault, whose 'dryer worldliness' apparently pleased parents and publishers more than the Rabelaisian humour and grotesquery of female writers (166).

Currently Zipes and Warner are perhaps the most influential writers on this topic of the suppression of the female voice in folktales. Despite their widely divergent approaches, they share a focus on the external voice of the narrator, the female tale-tellers who are appropriated or otherwise sidelined by male collectors, writers and editors.[1] Less grand in its historical sweep but more comprehensive in its analysis of gendered silence in folktales is Ruth Bottigheimer's 1987 study of the Grimms, in which she investigates not only external female voices but internal ones, as well. In fact, Bottigheimer isolates five levels of silence in the tales (1987:52):

1. historical (external voice or pen)
2. narrative (silence as a narrative motif)
3. textual (internal speech of the story characters)
4. lexical (words for 'speak' that either validate or question what is said)
5. editorial (authorial or editorial comment on what is said by the story characters).

Summing up her analysis of narrative silence (level 2) in particular, Bottigheimer concludes that '[i]n *Grimms' Tales* silence is almost exclusively female' (74). Later she explains that in the Grimms' both heroes and heroines do suffer silence, sometimes from a curse, often to redeem a loved one, but that male silence is almost always brief and voluntary, whereas female silence is usually long-term and punitive.

Bottigheimer's most revealing data and convincing arguments, however, concern the silencing of the female voice within the tales, or what she calls 'textual silence' (level 3). Tabulating the use of direct and indirect speech in 'Cinderella' in the three early editions of Grimms (1812, 1819, 1857), she found that Cinderella's direct speeches were reduced from fourteen to six, and stepsisters' from fourteen to five. Meanwhile, the number of times the prince was allowed to speak for himself doubled from four to double (59). She also traced another kind of silence, 'lexical silence' (level 4), evident in the degree of authority conferred by different German verbs for 'speaking' which introduce female and male story character's words: female speech tended to be introduced by 'asked' or 'said', whereas male speech was normally introduced by 'spoke', which carries more authority (56). This gendered pattern, she noted, holds true even for female and male animal characters.

[1] See, for instance, Stone (1986) who traces the tradition of silencing women back to ovid's tale of king Tereus who cuts out Philomela's tongue and then rapes her.

These historical studies by Zipes, Warner, Bottigheimer and others, have demonstrated beyond a doubt that male collectors, editors and publishers can and have silenced both the external and the internal female voices in the folktale. Turning to studies of living, or recently deceased, oral traditions, the sexual politics of tale-telling appears more complicated. Recent research, for instance, has considered the gender of individual tales – not the sex of its teller, but the gendered nature of its content. Such designations as 'male' and 'female' tales are, we must admit, hardly scientific, yet most scholars of the folktale would accept that the gender of the main characters and the trajectory of the plot allow for a fairly convincing gender identification of tales. The gendered tale is important because even if the female voices of tellers and tale characters have been suppressed, it is still possible to reclaim the feminine nature of the tale itself. And once the gender of a tale is identified, one can identify correlations or discrepancies between its external voice and its internal content.

One major work to take up these questions is Bengt Holbek's study of nearly one thousand Danish fairy tales collected in nineteenth century Jutland. After designating each tale by gender and comparing that with the teller's sex, Holbek concluded that 'masculine tales are mainly told by men whereas feminine tales are mainly told by women' (1987:168). To be specific, his figures show that 87% of the tales told by men are masculine, whereas only 46% of the tales told by women are feminine. This discrepancy is partially explained, the author points out, by the fact that masculine tales outnumber feminine tales three to one; thus all tellers are statistically more likely to tell the more numerous masculine tales. However, the figures also suggest that men are more single-minded in the selection of gendered tales, perhaps because of their mixed audience. Holbek's detailed discussion of the transmission of the tales supplies yet another reason for the greater correlation between male tellers and masculine tales: women learned more tales from men than vice versa. Changes in social life during the ninteenth century brought the decline of situations in which men told tales (public places, traveling coaches); as a result, by the turn of the century tale-telling became confined almost entirely to the home, where women told tales, many of which were borrowed from the repertoire of the now-silent men tellers (168-174).[2]

Holbek's argument, however, has been questioned recently by Köhler-Zülch, who situates it in the long tradition of male collectors and scholars erasing women tellers or (as here) relegating them to secondary status, as a remnant of a prior male tradition (Kölher-Zülch 1997).[3] Whether or not we accept Dégh's observation that scholars throughout history have maintained that 'storytelling is a preeminently feminine occupation' (1995:62), contemporary research on living

[2] See, however, Köhler-Zülch's critique of Holbek's conclusion (Köhler-Zülch 1997). See also Mivvls 1993 for a survey of feminist theory in folklore study.
[3] See also Cardigos 1996.

traditions from around the world supports the conclusion that women are in the forefront of tale tellers, especially the fairy tale.

One example, and one which adds a valuable refinement to this unresolved debate on gender and speech in the folktale, is James Taggart's study of a living tale-telling tradition in rural Spain (1991). Besides reminding us that tales are not confined, even in Europe, to printed books and bedtimes, his book suggests an altogether new approach to the sexual politics of folktales. Rather than focusing on the gender of individual tales, he studied male and female tellers' versions of the same tales. His conclusion is that these versions, told within a small community, represent a public conversation between men and women on the vital questions of courtship and marriage. Significantly, at least in this living oral tradition in rural Spain, female voices are no less authorised to speak than male voices.

For India, we have no thorough study of gender and tales, but current research on living traditions of tale and song confirms that women's voices are more than audible.[4] Nevertheless, the consensus seems to be that these popular women's oral traditions are compensatory, that women's tales and songs are an outlet for voices that are otherwise suppressed or censored in ordinary life. Women's tales as female self-expression was a theme well developed by A.K. Ramanujan in a series of essays on what he called 'women-centered' tales (1989, 1991, 1997). Text-bound as it was, Ramanujan's work is important to a study of gendered silence and speech for yet another reason: its emphasis on the aesthetic dimension. Such an approach echoes the writing of Max Lüthi (1987:119-21), who was also interested in the affect of silence: the eerie quiet of a dark night, an empty castle, speechless sisters and brothers. Silence, wrote Lüthi, is evocative of death, an association central to the argument developed in this essay.

Together Ramanujan and Lüthi take us back inside the tales themselves and remind us that, in addition to studies of gendered speech in folklore, we also need studies of the folklore of gendered speech. We have already observed that several influential writers have concluded that women's voices are suppressed in folktales. In this essay, I ask a different kind of question: What do folktales themselves have to say about speech and silence, about gendered speech and silence? In partial answer to this question, I present an analysis of a widespread tale, 'The Silence Wager' (AT 1351).

The Silence Wager: The Tale

The Silence Wager (AT 1351, also AT 1332) is a well-travelled and often-studied tale, with an abundance of oral and textual versions. This story, about a foolish couple who wager about who shall stay silent longest and thereby win a reward

[4] See Wadley 1978; Egnor 1896; Narayana Rao 1986; Raheja and Gold 1994; Balckburn 1995; Narayan 1997.

or avoid a penalty, boasts more than eighty versions in the 1964 tale-type index; these tellings are spread across the Old World and the New World, with a majority of examples in Indo-European languages, to which we can add some three dozen more versions reported in recently published tale-type indexes (Marzolph 1984; Jason 1989; Haboucha 1992; Ting 1978; Hodne 1984; Roth 1995).[5] The country with the largest number of versions in Aarne-Thompson is India with fifteen, plus another four from Jason's 1989 index.[6] To this total we can also add three oral tellings which I recently collected from Tamil, as well as two more oral versions in print (one Tamil, one Kannada). Due to repetitions and misidentifications, the total number of oral versions recorded from India is actually twenty, of which seventeen are available to me. On the basis of this new data, we can, at the very least, update Stith Thompson's inaccurate comment that *The Silence Wager* is primarily a literary tale and that '[a]s an oral tale it is nowhere very popular' (1977 [1946]:195).

Before attempting to interpret the tale, it would be useful to read one full version. Below is my translation of a Tamil version which I collected in 1996 from a 38 year-old woman, from a middle level caste, with a high school education:

> There was a poor Brahmin who loved to eat hot dosais. He really loved them, but there was nothing in the house to eat. He said to his wife, "I'll go and get some rice and dhal." "How?" she asked. "You don't have any money." "Well, just give me a tiny drop of oil." "We don't even have that," she said. So he went to a shop and said to the owner, "Please give me a drop of oil." Taking pity on the poor Brahmin, the man poured out a little oil, which the Brahmin rubbed all over his body. Then he went to the street with all the rice shops; he rolled on the ground in front of the first shop, got up and brushed off the rice kernels into a pot; then he went to the next shop, rolled in front of it, and so on in front of all the rice shops. Then he did the same with the dhal: got some oil, rolled on the ground and collected it all in a pot.
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> Taking the rice and dahl home, he told his wife to cook some dosais. She took the stuff, prepared the batter and fried three dosais – that's all there was, three dosais. Then the fight began. The wife said, "I get two." "Oh, no," the man said. "I worked really hard, rolled around to get the rice and dhal – I should get two dosais." "But who prepared the rice and dhal, huh? I did; so I get two." They battled and battled and finally came to an agreement: they would both lie down and the person to get up first would get only one dosai; the other one, who got up last, would get two.
>
> They made this pact and lay down – they slept and slept and slept. Morning came and went, afternoon, evening, and then it was night again. The house was completely locked up and the neighbors wondered, "What's going on in there? Haven't seen a soul all day long." They knocked softly on the door; no sound at all inside. Then they broke down the door, and saw the two of them lying there, like logs. They called to them, then slapped

[5] I would like to thank the staff of the *Enzyklopädie des Märchens* in Göttingen for sending me references to various sources for AT 1351.

[6] The Thompson and Roberts 1960 tale-type lists two versions (Clouston, Dubois) which are actually the same text; vof the six versions listed in Jason's update of this index (1989), #5 is a reprint of Elwin's Gond version (listed in Thompson and Roberts) and #6 is not, in fact, a version of 1351

> them, but no response [laughter]. They thought they were dead, so they washed the bodies and prepared the funeral bier. They had no children, so the neighbors had to carry the bodies and light the cremation fire. They put the bodies on the wood and lit the fire. "Oh, it's too hot!" screamed the woman and sat up. Everyone was scared because a corpse had come back to life, but she tried to reassure them, "No! No! I'm alive; let me tell you what happened!" Then the husband stood up and said, "Right! You got up first, so I get two of them." Everyone was confused until they explained their pact about the dosais. "I see," said the villagers. "So this is the type of people you are. Don't ever show your face in this town again," and they ran them out of town.[7]

Interpreting the Tale

Published in 1922, William Norman Brown's essay still stands as the most complete statement on the *The Silence Wager*, which he used as a vehicle for presenting a new, more precise method for determining the origins and diffusion of folktales. In his usual skilful orchestration of known sources, Brown, a Sanskritist at the University of Pennsylvania, surveyed some fifty-eight versions, from the earliest datable text, a Buddhist Sanskrit story, to a Child ballad in Scotland. After breaking down the tale into four major episodes (frame-tale; penalty; crisis; first speaker), and comparing their sequence in all versions, Brown concluded that an early Indic story of the wagering couple had been incorporated into a frame story of the 'Greatest Fool' (AT 1332) and thereby diffused to western Asia and eventually to Europe, through the usual gateway of Italy. He also surmised that the story acquired a west Asian oicotype and moved back to India through Persian, Arabic, and Turkish traditions.

Brown also comments, somewhat tentatively, on what the tale might say in cultural terms about gender and speech. In particular, his analysis highlighted the gender of the first speaker, the one who pays the penalty (lose the extra cake, shut the door, e.g.). At one point, he writes: 'In all versions except those that are clearly secondary the woman speaks first, thereby vindicating the tradition of female loquacity' (1922:292). Later Brown argues that the proverbial inability of women to remain silent is not the moral of the story. Rather, he says, the point seems to be that 'golden though silence may be, too much silence is the mark of an utter fool' (294). From this, he remarks on the value of silence in Indic religious traditions, pointing out that the common word for a sage *(muni)* in Indian language derives from a Sanskrit word for 'silence' *(mauna)*. From this linguistic evidence, he concludes that the early Indian story was 'not merely a satire, but a very moral or religious satire' (294). Later versions within India and elsewhere, he observes, tell the tale to illustrate foolishness, either a woman's garrulity or her stubborness in trying to defeat her husband in a quarrel.

[7] Although the pact made in this version concerns who 'gets up first' and not who speaks first, this is clearly a version of AT 1351.

In brief, Brown's interpretation is that the original form of the story was a moral satire on silence and that later versions made fun of talkative wives; the 'original tale' spread to west Asia and to Europe, while a west Asian oicotype returned to the Indic area. Although accepting the broad outline of his well-documented and cautious observations, especially his emphasis on the cultural significance of silence in the Indian context, I would suggest several revisions. The primary problem lies in Brown's content analysis of the tale, which in turn affects his historical-geographical conclusions and, ultimately, his interpretation of the tale's cultural meanings.

Brown's content analysis of *The Silence Wager* identified two variants: the 'indigenous' and the 'Western Oriental.' The first variant was defined by 1) frame-story (AT 1332) 2) loss of a cake, 3) the climatic incident: sexual or other attack on the woman. As examples of this first variant, Brown cites three textual versions in Sanskrit, one oral version from south India (Dubois) and one Vietnamese text, whose Buddhist connection convinced Brown that it belonged to the 'indigenous' group (297, fn. 11). The second variant of the tale, the 'Western Oriental', which Brown believed developed later in historical time, was distinguished from the first by substituting the penalty of having to shut a door (or having to water animals) for the loss of the cake and by introducing variations in the attack on the woman. This variant has several textual versions in Arabic and Persian, and one each in Balochi, Panjabi and Bihari. Several textual versions from Sanskrit story literature, cited by Hertel (1912), also fall into this second variant.[8]

With the help of oral and written versions not available to Brown in 1922, we can now suggest a different content analysis of *The Silence Wager*. The fundamental problem is that Brown confused the 'earliest datable' version with the 'earliest' version.[9] Having decided that this Buddhist Sanskrit text is the urtext, its contents became the criterion for determining historical relations and assigning legitimacy to versions. Since in this Buddhist Sanskrit text the woman speaks first, Brown argued that all versions in which the man speaks first must be secondary or derivative; he applied the same logic to the frame-story: since it was present in the early Buddhist Sanskrit text it must be part of the original tale. On this basis, he dismissed three oral versions from India as 'inferior because they lack the frame-story and they make the man the first speaker'(298). Oral tales, of course, need not have a frame-story and, more important, the three oral versions dismissed by Brown turn out to belong to significant group, with many more versions.

Once we reinstate these dismissed oral versions, and add other more recently reported, a different content analysis is possible. First, it is significant that these oral versions differ from the others in the 'climatic incident': rather than a

[8] Other textual versions in Sanskrit are noted by hertel 1912 (my thanks to S. Ebeling for his help in reading the German sources cited in this article).
[9] A similarly flawed logic mars Brown's early essay on the Pancatranta tales and oral tales (Brown 1919).

threatening intruder, it is the cremation pyre which prompts someone to speak, to save his life and lose a cake. Excluding the Sanskrit texts, fully fourteen of the seventeen Indian oral versions (available to me) include this cremation ground incident. Recalling Lüthi's comment about silence and death, I will argue that this element of the cremation ground belongs to the earliest versions of the tale and is central to its meaning.[10] Second, all these oral tellings also include the loss of the cake, which separates the first variant from the second variant, in which the penalty is to shut a door. Finally, this pair of motifs – loss of cake + cremation ground – is present in all ten oral tellings from Dravidian languages (5 Tamil, 2 Telugu, 1 Kannada, 1 Gond, 1 Kol) and in both oral tellings in neighboring languages (Oriya and Sinhala). The two other oral tellings with this pair of elements are from Bengali (in which a fish replaces the cake) and from an unidentified language in north India (in which milk replaces the cake).

This content analysis suggests a new division of variants of *The Silence Wager*. The pairing of cake + cremation ground motifs define a variant which I will call 'Indian'. All other versions of the tale in India and further west, are distinguished by a different pairing: shut the door + sexual threat/humiliation.[11] These tellings may be divided into two further groups: north India (Panjabi, Bihari)/west Asian (Balochi, Persian)/Middle East (Arabic) and European. We then have three variants, or oicotypes:

Variants of the Silence Wager

variant	reason for wager	reason for speech
1) Indian/south Indian	cake	fire at cremation
2) north Indian/ west Asian/ Middle East	shut door/ water animals	(sexual) threat to woman
3) European	shut door/ return pan	(sexual) threat to woman sexual farce/license

Looking at the geographical distribution of these sub-types, I would argue that the Indian variant is actually a south Indian variant, that it spread to other languages in the subcontinent and that it developed the second variant in north

[10] One Italian version (Brown 1922:305), in which the husband speaks first because he fears burial, may be connected to the Indian variant.

[11] The early Buddhist Sanskrit text also includes the loss of a cake as the object of the wager, which may explain why some versions reported from east Asia (where Buddhism was transmitted by Sanskrit texts) retain this motif (Ting 1978). In a curious French-Canadian text (Lanctot 1931), pancakes are cooked in the pan which must be returned by whoever loses the silence wager.

and northwest India, whence it spread to west Asia and the Middle East, and ultimately to Europe via Italy. Except for south India as a possible source for the tale, this diffusion route follows Brown's outline.[12]

What can explain this oicotypification of different variants of *The Silent Wager*? Essentially, we must account for two narrative shifts along the route of diffusion. The first is a shift in the object of the wager from the extra cake (or other food) in the Indian stories to a domestic chore in the other stories (shut the door/water animals in the second variant; return a baking pan in the third variant). The second shift occurs in the reason for breaking the silence: the heat of the cremation pyre in the Indian versions is replaced by a humiliation/intrusion/sexual threat, especially to the wife, in all other versions. In these later stories, stretching from Baluchistan to Scotland, a male intruder (barber, thief, or passer-by) enters the unlocked door and threatens the wagering couple: in the north Indian/west Asia tales, he usually steals from them or humiliates the man by blackening his face or shaving off his beard; occasionally he makes sexual advances to the wife. This sexual threat is even more explicit in many European versions, beginning with Straparola's 16th century Italian story in which the intruder actually enjoys sexual favours with the wife while the stubborn husband silently watches. A final twist to the tale is found in the English/Scots versions, including the Child Ballad (#275) 'Johnie Blunt', whose eponymous character can no longer endure the intruder's audacity.

> The husband says:
> "Ye've eaten my bread, ye hae drunk my ale,
> And ye'll mak my auld wife a whore!"
> And his wife replies:
> "A ha, Johnie Blunt! ye hae spoke the first word,
> Get up and bar the door." (Brown 1922: fn. 4)

The stranger can also pose a homosexual threat. In an English version taken down in Cumbria 1932, the intruder is described as 'a girt big roadster – a bad lookin' sort of a chap' who ate his fill, took some money, kissed the wife and then the daughter and proceeded to take liberties with the husband, who screamed, "Nay, damn it. I'll tek t'pan back."[13]

The sexual nature of the threat posed to the silent couple by the male intruder is usually absent in the second variant, but some Indian tales hint at it. In a Bihari tale the thief 'put his hand on the neck' of the wife to snatch away her 'marriage pendant', when she shouted: "Please speak, we have lost everything, now I'll have to lose my honour" (Pakrasi 1985:83). Once we realise the implicit sexual threat

[12] Clouston also believed that Dubois' French translation of a south Indian [Kannada?] version represented 'the original form' (Clouston 1888:171).
[13] Briggs 1970, vol. 2, part A: 137-38.

in the second variant, we can understand other actions of the intruder – shaving off a beard (of a Muslim), taking his turban or blackening his face – as similar euphemistic disgraces of the husband. The narrative and cultural logic is clear: if the door is left open, the family, especially the woman, is left vulnerable to sexual advances and dishonour.

In brief, as the tale spread beyond south India into north India and western Asia, the wager for an extra cake and a trip to the cremation pyre were replaced by the open door and threatening intruder. I believe that these narrative changes are explicable in cultural terms. First, the cremation ground motif, the reason for speech in the Indian variant, is an obvious element of Hindu culture: Hindus (as a rule) burn their dead, whereas Muslims and Christians (as a rule) do not. Second, food, the object of the wager in the Indian variant, occupies a prominent place in south Indian culture.

Food, cooking and eating are common vehicles for the revelation of hidden identities in south Indian tales. For example, in south Indian versions of 'Cinderella', the persecuted heroine is finally revealed as beautiful and marriagable through her cooking; Untouchable men who surreptiously marry Brahmin women are also often unmasked by their meat-eating habits. The importance of food in Indian versions of *The Silence Wager* is further emphasised by another tale ('The Forgotten Word', AT 1687), which is frequently joined to it in south India. In Europe, AT 1687 usually involves a fool who falls into a hole, forgets a word, and remembers it only when a passer-by helps him out; in south India, however, the forgotten word is a tasty kind of cake. Combining these two tales is logical since both turn on the desire for delicious food. Finally, the specific food at the centre of the silent couple's wager in the Indian variant is emblematic of south Indian culture. The disputed 'cake' is (usually) the much-loved dosai, made from rice flour, cooked pancake style and eaten with as much coconut chutney as one's budget will sustain; rice (as opposed to wheat) is the staple diet in south India, where coconuts trees are also abundant.

As *The Silence Wager* spread from south to north and northwest India, where Islamic influence is relatively greater, the cremation ground appears to have droppped out. We can similarly assume that the dosai dropped out as the tale migrated from south India, to be replaced by fish in Bengal and milk in north India; eventually food was lost altogether as the object of the wager, and was replaced by the shutting of the door. As already suggested, shutting the door is logically linked to the other narrative shift, the sexual threat posed by the intruder. I would argue that these localisations along the diffusion route are adaptations to the high value placed on protecting women and public family honour in north/northwest India, west Asia and the Middle East. When the tale entered Europe, these themes show yet another cultural inscription; beginning with Straparola's story, the European tellings often turn to sexual farce and

grant greater sexual freedom to the wife, who is not always displeased with the advances of the intruder.

Even if we accept this explanation of these narrative shifts, what about the narrative content of the Indian variant in the first place? We have seen that the dosai and cremation reflect Hindu (south) Indian culture, but this does not explain why these specific motifs should be so prominent in south Indian tales about a silence wager. In order to answer this question we must consider the significance of speech and silence in Indian culture generally. As the essays in the volume edited by Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985) reveal, speech and silence are not accorded the same meanings across cultures. Silence to the Japanese, Athabaskans and Quakers, for instance, is very different to what it means to Nigerians and Italians. In India, it is my argument that speech is associated with sex and life, and that silence is associated with death.

The association of speech with creative and procreative powers in India is well-known, especially the goddess of speech *(Vāc)* in the Vedas. Although Vāc is no longer worshipped, Sarasvati, goddess of arts and learning, is today invoked by singers and tale-tellers throughout India before a performance. Also widespread in India is a cultural belief in the power of speech, as manifest in mantras and other ritual verbalisations. Indeed, sound generally is thought to possess creative powers, as shown by the extraordinary power ascribed to the syllable 'Om' and by the drum in Siva's form as Nataraja.

For me, however, the clincher in the link between speech and life is the fact that in many South Asian languages 'speaking' is a euphemism for sexual relations. Taking the Tamil case, in ordinary conversation as well as in folklore, one often says 'they are speaking' or 'she isn't speaking with him,' to mean that the couple are not having sex. When a man asks a friend whom he first had sex with, he asks, literally, 'With whom did you speak first?' The tabus behind such circumlocutions are often studied, but the specific expressions themselves are also revealing since they are symbolic equivalences of those tabus. On this basis, I would argue that in Indian culture speech is associated with sex and life.

If speech in Indian tradition is associated with sexuality and life, then its cessation is redolent of death. The link in India between silence and death was pointed out by Brown and has been generalised to the international folktale by Lüthi. In Indian tradition, the central cultural opposition between life and death is articulated in normative texts as a contrast between the householder and the ascetic: between he who continues life through procreation and he who withdraws from life through self-mortification and celibacy (Brown 1922:294). Associations between the Hindu ascetic and death are everywhere present in Indian tradition, in mythology, iconography, folk speech, where again and again we meet with the idea that the ascetic stands for the cessation of life; in the latter stages of withdrawal, the Hindu ascetic is even said to perform his own symbolic death.

In nearly all South Asian languages this practictioner of abstinence is known as a *muni*. Brown was perceptive to note (294) that *muni* is the root of the equally widespread word for 'silence' *(mauna)*, and that 'silence' is defined as 'the chief quality of an ascetic.' Ascetics, in Tamil, are sometimes simply known as the 'Silent One' or the 'Silent Swami'. In cultural terms, then, speaking is expressive of exchange, of interaction, even of intercourse, we might say, whereas not speaking is to withdraw, to remain aloof. To be silent is to be celibate.

By this cultural logic, the couple who refuse to speak are destined to end up at the cremation ground. That logic also explains why the extra dosai is such an apt object for the silence wager: one pleasure which an ascetic denies himself is food. The *muni*'s asceticism is thus a double denial of orality, a withdrawal from speaking and from eating. The foolish couple's vow of silence for the extra dosai is a comic perversion of the venerated ascetic's vow, but it also imitates his self-denial since their silence precludes sexual relations.

Here we see that the Indian versions of the tale presents a paradox: oral denial (silence) is the means to oral satisfaction (food). Speech is parallel to the other forms of oral behaviour that the ascetic fights against, such as sex and eating; however, abstinence from speaking is a withdrawal from the continuity of life and, in the end, no one remains speechless forever. The bickering couple may be capable of silence, but they also desperately want that extra dosai. This paradox, I believe, arises from a wider cultural ambivalence toward silence and speech, which is the key to interpreting The Silence Wager in India.

Ambivalence

Conflicting attitudes toward speech and silence are found in many Indian folktales. I have already mentioned the widespread perception in Indian tradition that speech is efficacious, and this is evident in folktales as well: words, spells and mantras can both revive and kill. Paradoxically, although magical words may be spoken by any character in a tale, very often it is a *muni*, the 'silent one', who speaks them. More revealing than these isolated instances of powerful speech, however, are tales in which silence or speech appear as plot elements (Bottigheimer's 'narrative silence'). Below I discuss three aspects of speech and silence in Indian oral tales: 1) speech as dangerous, even lethal to the speaker; 2) silence imposed as a curse; 3) silence as symptomatic of social isolation.

The first of these, dangerous speech, is most evident in Indian tales of *Faithful John* (AT 516). As in European versions of the tale, speech by the loyal companion is taboo, upon penalty of death. In most Indian versions, the faithful servant/minister overhears parrots prophesy the death of his master by a falling

tree, a collapsing building and a deadly snake. When he is given this alarming information, he is also forbidden to reveal it to anyone; if he does, he will be turned to stone. In the end, the companion slays the snake in the prince's bed, but when he wipes a drop of blood from the queen's breast, she awakes. Since he dare not explain himself, he is condemned to death; later he reasons that since he will die either way, he might as well explain his actions by revealing what the parrots foretold. When he does, he is turned to stone but is later revived by the sacrifice of the prince's only son. In a wonderful Gondi version (Ramanujan 1994:4), the predictions of death are conceived as stories which lie untold in the master; they slip out and tell themselves, as it were, to the man's servant, who is enjoined to silence, and the usual sequence of events follows. The same motif of lethal speech is also found in *The Brothers Guarding the King's Bedchamber and the Snake* (AT 916), which is virtually an exclusively Indian tale.

In these tales, a dilemma is posed between speech as dangerous to oneself and silence as dangerous to one's friend/master. The tales focus on the dramatic struggle of the companion, who must find the courage to speak out. By contrast, in other tales, including some variants of AT 516, silence is actually imposed on the hero; he is cursed and unable to speak rather than simply warned not to speak.[14] Unlike the silent female discussed in Bottigheimer's study of Grimm's tales, in Indian tales this curse usually falls on men, although women are also sometimes silenced as a form of disfigurement. Often the silenced man is the loyal companion in AT 916 (cf. its European variant, 'The Seven Sages of Rome'); since he literally cannot speak to exonerate himself, there is no inner struggle as in *Faithful John*. Instead the dramatic tension is located within the king, who must decide the silent man's fate. In these tales, then, the silence spells death, whereas in the first group of tales speech is lethal.

In a third type of tale, silence is neither a tabu nor a curse but a symptom of social isolation. If, in India, speech is associated with life and sexual relations, it is easy to understand that silence in these tales marks a person who has 'no one to talk to.' In one Tamil literary collection of tales (Vikkiram / tittaā Katai), the hero desires an aloof, silent princess, named 'Miss Silence'; he eventually conquers her by telling her tragic romances which so move her that she cannot help but comment on them. In several other tales, including the Gondi version of AT 516 mentioned above, opening up and 'getting something off one's chest' proves salutory. In one case a silently suffering mother-in-law grows fatter and fatter because she can't tell her worries to anyone; eventually she tells them to the four walls and regains her health and happiness (Ramanujan 1994:3). A similarly beneficial effect of speaking out, of exposing truths, and relieving psychological

[14] Motif C401.2 Tabu.speech.

burdens characterises the numerous Indian versions of *The Singing Bone* (AT 780).

In short, Indian folktales offer a paradoxical picture about silence: speech both kills and heals; silence is both lethal and venerated. *The Silence Wager* presents a similar ambivalence, yet the silence in this tale is very different from those in other tales. The crucial difference is that the wagered silence is not a consequence of an external warning or a curse; rather, the speechlessness adopted by the couple is an internal and voluntary form of discipline. Silence is not the force to be controlled – speaking is.

Conclusions

In attempting to broaden the debate on gendered speech and silence in folktales, the foregoing discussion of *The Silence Wager* suggests that silence is not always subordination. The multiple and sometimes contradictory cultural values ascribed to speaking and silence cannot be adequately explained by a model of gender domination. We have seen that in India speech is symbolic of life and sex, and silence of death; but silence is also valorised as a technique of self-control, while speech may be lethal. One reason why *The Silence Wager* is popular in India, I would suggest, is precisely because in cultural terms the stakes are high and silence represents an extreme choice. In the European tales, by contrast, silence is not in itself dramatic – it merely leaves the couple unprotected – and the drama and humour are only created when the 'guest' wanders in and satisfies his appetite. In the Indian variant, on the other hand, the contrary valuations toward speech and silence underlie the paradoxical plot, in which an ascetic vow of silence is undertaken in order to satisfy one's desire for food. Like most folklore, this tale thus provides a commentary on local culture by revealing ambivalence toward an ideal. Self-discipline is valued but also suspect: too much of a good thing is not a good thing.

The Silence Wager exploits this cultural ambivalence to comic effect. The self-discipline of the wagering couple parodies the self-mortification of the Hindu holy man, whose asceticism is so often lampooned in Indian folklore as a facade for a greedy appetite. Although not always present as a character in the tale, the ascetic and his silence are the background against which the silence wager is projected; in virtually every telling, the wagering couple are revealed as foolish, as a grotesque exaggeration of the valorised ideal, who are often hounded out of town by the villagers aghast at the depth of their pettiness.

When the wagering couple are themselves Brahmins, as they are in most tellings of the Indian variant, the satire bites more deeply. In most of these

versions, the Brahmin couple are poor; in the Tamil telling given above, the man is forced to borrow a drop of oil from a shopkeeper in order to put in motion the events which will bring him his beloved dosais. In the end, this fanatical husband wins the extra cake, but his success is undercut by his extreme behaviour. He may be capable of dizzying feats of asceticism, but his small-mindedness, his desire to get the third cake, renders his asceticism ridiculous. The spectacle of a Brahmin rubbing his body with oil and then rolling on the ground in order to pick up a few leftover grains of rice with which to cook his precious cakes is truly hilarious, and evoked much laughter from listeners to the Tamil tales.

In the Tamil verstions of the 'Silent Wager', this satire on Brahmins also operates on a linguistic level. Language is a primary marker of identity in Tamil Nadu, and the difference between Brahmin and non-Brahmin speech is a contentious issue at every level of society, from local elections to temple liturgy. Given this politicisation of language in Tamil Nadu, the use of Brahmin speech by non-Brahmin tellers to non-Brahmin audiences is an effective technique for stereotyping characters in *The Silence Wager*. When I was collecting these tales, the audience (exclusively low and middle caste) laughed most when the teller imitated a Brahmin dialect. The biggest laugh came during the quarrel between Brahmin husband and wife, about who will get the third dosai. His stubborn statement, 'I get two; you get one' is not delivered in local Tamil, like the rest of the tale; instead the tellers shift to an imitation of a Brahmin dialect.[15]

Aside from its homophonic effect, this dialogue is funny because it is highlights the differences between Brahmin and non-Brahmin speech. Sociolinguistic studies have shown that Tamil (and Kannada) Brahmins tend to standardise their speech over large geographical areas, contrary to the tendency toward localisation characteristic of lower-caste speech patterns; thus Brahmin speakers in two widely separated areas show less variation than do non-Brahmin speakers across the same areas (Trudgill 1995:24; Ramanujan 1968). The use of Brahmin dialect thus satires not just the Brahmins' inability to deny themselves food, a commonplace in Indian folklore, but also their speech habits, perceived as a desire to maintain a separate dialect and an isolated social status. The Brahmin's gustatory greed, an unwillingness to share a third dosai, is matched by his linguistic miserliness, an unwillingness to speak the common dialect.

Lastly, I return to the debate on the gender and speech with which this essay began. From the available international versions, it is clear that, in the great majority of versions reported from across the world, from medieval India to nineteenth century Norway to twentieth century Bulgaria (though not in England or Scotland), the woman is the one who is unable to maintain silence. Is this tale,

[15] *Enakku eraṇṭu, unakku onru* ('Two for me, one for you') becomes *nēkku eraṇṭu, nōkku onru*, a kind of metathesis that is possibly unique in Tamil.

as Brown first suggested, a humorous portrayal of the garrulous woman? Does it confirm the long history of the folktale's silencing of women, as documented by Zipes, Warner, Bottigheimer and others?

Confining myself to the Indian context, where the tale may have originated and where the tale is still widely told, the answer seems to be that the female gossip is indeed the butt of the joke. The statistical situation is that the woman speaks first in ten of the seventeen versions in the Indian variant and in all three Indian language versions in the second variant. Restricting myself even further to the tales which I personally collected, there is little doubt that they are also, at least partially, a satiresof a woman's proverbial lack of oral restraint. Nor is this female stereotype restricted to AT 1351 in India; many tales turn on the unlimited appetite of the wife, or daughter-in-law or mother-in-law. In one Tamil tale closely related to *The Silence Wager*, the famished husband rolls on the ground and collects the ingredients for dosais; his wife cooks one hundred and one cakes but consumes a full hundred before he returns from his bath. When he sees only one left and asks in astonishment how she ate the others, she says, 'Like this', picks up the remaining dosai and calmly tosses it into her mouth.

The humour in these Indian tales, however, depends on more than a gender stereotype. The wife may speak first and the husband may triumph, but in the end who is the more sympathetic character? In most Indian versions of *The Silence Wager* the husband gains the extra food, but the very demonstration of his superior powers of self-restraint supplies the satire. The wife 'loses' the wager, but she is shown to be more human, more 'like us' and thus has more sympathy than the victorious but ultimately unlikable husband. She speaks first because the heat of the burning funeral pyre is too great (or because she wants to save her husband) which only shows that she is not stone-cold. The stupidity of the man's refusal to 'give in' is even more central in other Indian tales about silence and death (not AT 1351). In a Tamil tale, found also in the literary *Kathāsaritsāgara*, for instance, a husband stubbornly maintains silence and is mistaken for dead, not as part of a wager with his wife but in order to prevent anyone from sharing his food; refusing to speak, he is taken to the cremation ground and dies.[16]

Perhaps the most dramatic exposure of the silent husband's pyrric victory is found outside India, in Straparola's version of *The Silence Wager*, in which the wife speaks first but arguably gains more than she loses. The husband remains silent while a servant wanders in through the open door and sleeps with his wife, who then curses her husband's stupidity and thus loses the bet. 'But at the same time,' the tale says, 'she enjoyed a merry night, shut the door forthwith and went to bed with her cuckoldy knave of a husband.'[17] A cuckolded husband or a fanatical asectic, it seems, is more foolish than a talkative wife. The woman may be unable

[16] *Kathāsaritsāgara*, chapter 65 (Hertel 1912: 37-38); the Tamil oral tale was collected by me in 1996.
[17] Strapatola 1906, vol. 2, p. 105 (8th night, 1st tale)

to hold her tongue, but the real loser, the 'greatest fool of all', is he who is capable of winning the miserly wager. If this is a tale about talkative women, it is also a tale about silent men, those charlatan sadhus with phenomenal self-control and a voracious appetite.

When we keep these points in mind, the gender of the first speaker, the one who loses, is less important than the tale's point of view toward speech and silence as a whole. Even then, the tale does not speak with one voice about the wager for the extra dosai. Usually the wagering couple are 'run out of town,' although in one version they are feted as 'dosais martyrs', while in another they end up occupying the palace because the raja, like everyone else, has fled from these revenants. In the end, 'The Silence Wager' in India is not primarily about talkative women or greedy Brahmins; rather, it expresses a cultural ambivalence toward speech and silence.

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ABSTRACT

This paper contribute to the folkloristic debate on silence and gender by presenting a new analysis of *The Silence Wager* (AT 1351), based on Tamil versions recently collected by the author (and on recently published collections from other parts of India). This tale, about a married couple who make a pact to remain silent in order to determine who will win a reward or avoid a penalty, is chosen because it expresses folk attitudes towards speech and silence. After proposing a new classification of variants and a south Indian origin for the tale, the essay discusses those attitudes in the context of Indian and south Indian culture, nothing other tales in which speaking or silence is prominent. The main argument is that in India speaking is associated with sex and life, and silence is associated with asceticism and death. Finally, rather than view the tale as an example of silencing women's voices, it is argued that the Indian versions of the tale express a cultural ambivalence toward speech and silence.

ZUSAMMENFASSUNG

Dieser Aufsatz ist ein Beitrag zur Debatte der Folkoristen über Schweigen und Geschlecht. Er bietet eine neue Analyse der "Schweigewette" (AaTh 1351), die auf unlängst vom Autor gesammelten tamilischen Varianten (und auf kürzlich publizierten Varianten aus anderen Teilen Indiens) basiert, Die Erzählung handelt von einem Ehepaar, das eine Schweigewette abschlie(t, bei der es um eine Belohnung bzw. die Vermeidung einer Strafe geht. Sie wurde ausgewählt da sie volkstümliche einstellungen zu Sprechen und Schweigen zum Ausdruck bringt. Nachdem eine neue Klassifizierung der Varianten vorgenommen und ein südindischer Ursprung der Erzählung vorgeschlagen wird, werden solche Einstellungen im Kontext der indischen und südindischen Kultur diskutiert. Einbezogen werden auch andere Erzählungen, in denen sprechen und Schweigen eine herausagendende Rolle spielen. In Indien, so das Hauptargument, wird Sprechen mit Sexualität und Leben assoziiert, Schweigen hingegen mit Askese und Tod. Letzlich wird die Erzählung weniger als ein Beispiel dafür betrachtet, wie man Stimmen von Frauen zum Schweigen bringt, sondern es wird ausgeführt, daß die indischen Varianten der Erzählung Ausdruck einer kulturellen Ambivalenz gegenüber Sprechen und Schweigen sind.

RESUMO

Este artigo contribui para o debate sobre o silêncio e a identidade sexual nas ciências do folclore, apresentando uma nova análise de *The Silence Wager* (AT 1351, 'A Aposta do Silêncio'), baseada em versões tamiles recentemente recolhidas pelo autor e em versões de outras partes da Índia recentemente publicadas). Trata-se de um conto sobre um casal que faz o pacto de permanecer silencioso para obter uma recompensa ou evitar uma penalidade. Este conto foi escolhido porque exprime atitudes tradicionais em relação à fala e ao silêncio. Após propor uma nova classificação de versões e uma origem indiana meridional para o conto, este ensaio discute as referidas atitudes no contexto da cultura indiana e indiana meridional, indicando outros contos em que a fala ou o silêncio são proeminentes. O argumento principal é que, na Índia, a fala está associada ao sexo e à vida, enquanto o silêncio está associado ao asceticismo e à morte. Finalmente propõe-se que, em vez de implicarem um silenciamento da voz feminina, as versões indianas do conto exprimem uma ambivalência cultural em relação à fala e ao silêncio.