

UNITED WISDOM

Choosing silence and being unable to speak

The Person and the Inner World

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Epigraph

“I am afraid”

Audre Lorde, “The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action,” Sinister Wisdom 6, Summer 1978, p. 13; a short fragment of the author's own statement. The Russian version uses our own translation.

What this article is about

Two people are silent at the same meeting. The first has decided not to discuss a personal subject and calmly waits for the next question. The second wanted to object but could not find a moment: they were interrupted, the conversation accelerated, and disagreement might affect their work. Outwardly their behaviour looks similar. Yet “just speak up” applies differently to each. It may violate the first person's chosen boundary and do nothing to change the second person's conditions.

Choosing silence means preferring not to speak now. Being unable to speak means that the desired statement did not become available under the circumstances. These are working definitions, not medical ones. This article examines questions that help distinguish refusal, a pause, a lack of words, and constraints imposed by the environment. It preserves the right to privacy while examining the listener's responsibility: openness is not measured by the number of details disclosed, and an invitation to speak becomes credible when there is actual room for a response.

I. Outward silence contains too little information

The mere absence of words does not tell us what someone wants. We can notice that they did not answer a question or take part in a discussion. Their motive remains unknown until additional information appears. A listener's certainty often fills the gap: the silent person agrees, does not care, is offended, or does not know the answer. Any of these accounts might fit a particular case, but none follows automatically from silence.

Consider a hypothetical example. At a family dinner, Pavel does not answer a question about work. One relative considers him arrogant; another sees a sign of trouble. Pavel might be tired, unwilling to discuss colleagues in front of children, or waiting for a nearby conversation to end.

If these explanations are offered as established, he faces a new task: defending himself against other people's stories instead of answering the original question. A more accurate invitation leaves room to clarify the format itself.

For example, we can say that declining the question is permitted and move to another subject. Later we can ask whether a private discussion would be convenient. Listing ten possible reasons is unnecessary. The meaningful distinction is simple: the person did not answer, and we do not yet know whether they wanted to. If they say they do not want to, that is already a sufficiently clear boundary. It need not be treated as a mystery that intimacy grants permission to solve.

The time scale matters too. Not saying anything for one minute, postponing a conversation until evening, and having no opportunity to raise an issue for months are different events. In the first case, a pause is useful; in the second, clarity about timing; in the third, consideration of recurring conditions. The general word “silence” can conceal these distinctions and suggest one permanent personality trait.

Beginning with an observable scene is therefore better: who asked the question, how much time was available, what happened after an attempt to answer, and whether another way was offered. Such specificity does not guarantee understanding, but it limits arbitrary interpretation. It allows us to ask whether a statement was accessible without assigning an internal defect or a compulsory duty to be open.

II. Choosing silence needs the right to decline

Deliberate silence can protect private space, preserve time for thought, or express refusal to take part in a particular conversation. It need not be a sign of depth, wisdom, or maturity. Respecting the choice requires only that the person has communicated it in an available form. They do not first have to prove a worthy reason to earn the right not to disclose details.

In a hypothetical scene, an employee is asked in front of the entire team why she declined an additional trip. She answers that her circumstances are personal. Speaking is possible here, but she chose a limited answer. Continuing with questions about family and health would turn an invitation into a demand. A respectful conversation can move toward what the shared work requires: available dates, who can substitute, and when a final decision is needed.

Declining to give a reason and declining an action are different. A person can refrain from explaining why they do not want to travel while clearly stating the refusal itself. If others must make plans, uncertainty about the decision affects their choices too. Preserving privacy does not require leaving a shared question unanswered. This boundary combines withholding details with responsibility for an agreement.

Sometimes directly stating a refusal is difficult. A short phrase, a gesture, or a way of stopping the subject can then be agreed beforehand. The point is not to teach everyone a universal signal but to ensure that participants know the meaning of their particular signal. Silence without a known context stays ambiguous; an agreed way can make the choice more understandable.

The right to decline does not mean every subject disappears forever. Sometimes people still need to resolve a shared question involving obligations or consequences. We can distinguish the necessary minimum of information from personal explanations that are optional. For example, confirming participation or stating when an answer will be given need not describe the entire internal process. This is a practical boundary of communication, rather than a demand that every silent person justify themselves.

Chosen silence becomes freer when leaving is not punished. If “you do not have to answer” is followed by resentment, pressure, or an implicit accusation, formal permission changes little. Trust in an invitation depends on what happens after refusal. This can be checked through a specific reaction rather than a beautiful formula about the safety of a conversation.

III. Sometimes words exist, but speaking is too costly

In “Sounds of Silence,” Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison and Frances J. Milliken consider expectations of consequences and futility when speaking at work. This is an authorial explanation of organisational silence, not a diagnosis of an individual employee.

In such a situation, “why didn't you say so earlier?” can conceal an important circumstance: what happened to people who did speak. If a remark met ridicule, was ignored, or was used against someone, the words may have been entirely ready. What was missing was an available route through which they could be said with acceptable consequences. Silence then cannot be explained only through insufficient courage.

Consider a hypothetical example. A specialist notices an error in the schedule, but at the previous meeting the manager described a similar objection as disloyalty. Now the specialist stays silent, although a correction would help the project. Suggesting that they practise a confident voice does not change the discussion's rules. Asking the manager how information contradicting the original plan is received, and what will happen to whoever supplies it, may be more useful.

This does not mean every concern accurately predicts a future response. A person might overestimate risk, carry over experience from another organisation, or be unaware of a new procedure. But these possibilities should be tested against available evidence. Past cases can be examined, a feedback channel clarified, or the audience for a message identified. “Nothing will happen” without grounds does not make the consequences known.

There are also different degrees of inability. Someone might lack a safe opportunity to speak publicly yet retain the possibility of writing to one responsible participant. A reporting channel may exist without being trusted yet. Sometimes the available options are indeed too costly. An alternative cannot be declared sufficient simply because it formally exists. The conditions of use and the person's own choice matter.

Responsibility is distributed here. A speaker decides what risk they are willing to take. A listener and an organisation are responsible for understandable procedures and responses. This article does not prescribe public speaking or silence in every difficult case. It proposes including the cost of speaking in our consideration, so that personal bravery does not substitute for changing the environment.

IV. A call to speak has a historical addressee

In the original publication of her essay, Audre Lorde speaks as a Black lesbian poet about visibility and fear. Her call retains that context. It does not become a rule obliging every person to disclose private matters under any conditions.

A striking phrase is easily detached from circumstances and turned into a universal slogan. A listener can then use it against someone who is silent: if words liberate, you must say everything now. This substitution removes the addressee's right to assess their own conditions. The voice of an author who chose to speak gives no third party authority to choose speaking for someone else.

In our hypothetical scene, a group participant is invited to describe a personal subject in order to become free of shame. She is unsure who will have access to the meeting's recording and what will happen after her account. The call to courage may be sincere, but her question concerns more than a feeling. It concerns how information is handled. Before demanding openness, the facilitator should make those conditions understandable and preserve a real refusal.

Distinguishing contexts does not devalue the call itself. In a particular situation, someone may need to stop treating their wish to speak as inappropriate. They may seek words, a recipient, and allies. But the meaning of this work changes if they must prove readiness through immediate disclosure. Speaking in one's own name and complying with someone else's demand to speak are different actions, even when the same words are heard.

Considering purpose separately is therefore useful. Does the person want to state a fact, express disagreement, ask for support, protect a boundary, or tell a story? Different purposes need different degrees of disclosure. Declining an unpleasant question requires only the refusal. Changing shared conditions may need a specific statement. A complete biography is not compulsory currency for any of these actions.

A historical text can expand the vocabulary of reflection without cancelling a present choice. We can hear an important question in it and still acknowledge that our answer will differ. Such reading protects both author and reader: the former is not turned into a convenient source of pressure, while the latter retains the right to relate what they heard to their actual situation.

V. A lack of words does not always mean refusal

A person can want to answer and not yet know how. They may need time, a clarified question, or a more suitable language. This is an ordinary possibility in conversation, rather than grounds to conclude that they conceal the truth. Not every difficulty needs explanation through fear; sometimes a question is too broad or joins incompatible subjects.

In a hypothetical example, a friend is asked: “What do you think about everything happening between us?” She stays silent because yesterday's argument, plans to move, and an old disappointment are mixed together in that sentence. Clarifying one episode might make an answer more accessible. But if the other person immediately declares silence a lack of care for the relationship, space narrows before it is clear what needs discussing.

A useful question has a manageable subject. We can ask which decision is needed now, what is already known, and which part is convenient to discuss first. Clarification should not become ten questions surrounding a silent person on all sides. Sometimes one choice is enough: return to the subject later, or consider a specific moment now. The absence of a quick answer does not prove that the offer was rejected.

Different languages of communication also affect access to speech. In a hypothetical workplace scene, a person follows the overall discussion in a language that is not their first, but takes longer to formulate an accurate objection. A rapid change of subject leaves no opportunity to finish the sentence. This does not allow a judgment about their interest. Written clarification or a question sent beforehand may change the conditions if they consider those options useful.

Sometimes a person needs a draft they are not yet ready to show. They can write down a thought, reread it, and decide that part of the wording is too harsh or inaccurate. Revising words before sending them does not mean abandoning honesty. It can help distinguish a significant objection from an incidental accusation. But the result of such a pause cannot be promised in advance.

If the lack of words continues, we can clarify whether speaking remains the aim. The person may now prefer not to discuss the subject, or may still need another format. The answer changes the next step. They need not be held to an initial promise of openness merely because they once wanted to respond. Their choice can change, while a shared agreement about timing needs a separate update.

VI. A format can quietly exclude someone

Speaking depends on the structure of a conversation as well as on intention. A discussion convenient for most can leave no room for a particular participant. They are interrupted, answered for, required to decide too quickly, or given the floor only after the subject has effectively closed. Sometimes an absent response results from an opportunity that existed only on paper.

Consider a hypothetical meeting in which the facilitator asks for objections and immediately continues the presentation. A second later, they announce that nobody spoke, so everyone agrees. Formally a question was asked. In practice there was no time to understand and respond. The situation can be changed through a specific pause and a procedure for returning to the proposal, rather than by increasing listeners' motivation.

Another example concerns a conversation with only one permitted way to participate: give a long answer in front of everyone. A short written comment, a private message, or help conveying a prepared sentence might suit a participant. These alternatives need not become a compulsory set for every meeting. Asking about the format needed, and checking that it is actually available, matters.

Helping differs from substituting. If someone offers to voice another person's thought, agreeing on the text and the right to stop or correct its delivery is useful first. Otherwise help can quietly appropriate a voice. “They wanted to say” is not confirmed by a helper's wish to make conversation smooth. It should be based on what the participant actually authorised them to convey.

Access to speech and the influence of speech can also be distinguished. A participant received time to speak, but the remark did not enter discussion or the decision. That is another problem. Not every disagreement must change the outcome, but showing what was considered and why another option was chosen is useful. Otherwise the ritual opportunity to speak gradually loses meaning.

Such changes do not guarantee that everyone will participate. Some will still choose silence, some will have no useful thought, and others will disagree with the proposed procedure. An accessible format aims at real choice rather than complete talkativeness. Refusal after an opportunity appears does not mean the opportunity itself failed.

VII. A listener also participates in the emergence of words

An invitation to speak becomes credible through the response to first words. If someone receives a clarification, correction, or refusal without using it as grounds for attack, room for an answer may expand. If every answer prompts an argument about what the participant really feels, their words become material for someone else's account. Silence cannot then be considered apart from the previous conversation.

In a hypothetical scene, Pavel finally says that he does not want to discuss work at dinner. A relative replies that he is too sensitive. The question no longer concerns the existence of words: they were spoken clearly enough. Their boundary was not accepted. Repeating the original invitation more warmly may be insufficient. Changing the response to the answer already received is more useful.

A listener is entitled to feelings and interests of their own. They may be disappointed by a refusal or need information for a decision. These circumstances do not grant the right to declare another person's privacy proven lack of love. Their own request can be stated separately: I need to know whether the trip will happen; you may keep the reasons private. This separation makes discussing a shared question possible without requiring disclosure of an entire inner world.

How a correction is received matters especially. A person says that they were understood inaccurately, and the listener begins defending their guess. An offer to explain oneself then becomes a defence before a finished conclusion. A more open route is to clarify which part needs changing and actually update understanding. Immediately agreeing with every evaluation is unnecessary to convey what was heard correctly.

Sometimes a considerate response means asking no new question. A participant has stated a sufficient boundary, and continuing would clarify nothing else necessary. Moving to another subject or agreeing to return later is possible. This stopping differs from demonstrative punishment through silence: its conditions are understandable, and its purpose is not to make the other person feel guilty.

Listening cannot be measured solely by the time someone refrained from interrupting. What they did with the answer matters. Did they retain uncertainty, accept the right to decline, and stop using a guess that had been corrected? These small, observable actions show openness more accurately than a promise to understand every experience immediately.

VIII. A pause and avoiding a shared decision need distinction

The right to silence does not remove the need to notice consequences for others. If people must make a shared decision, an indefinitely absent answer can leave them uncertain. This does not imply a demand to reveal personal reasons. Identifying the minimum answer actually needed, and when the absence of a decision itself becomes a circumstance to take into account, is useful.

Consider a hypothetical shared trip. One participant does not yet know whether they are ready to go, while another must book accommodation. They can agree on a deadline and what happens if there is no decision. This agreement does not force an explanation of feelings. It lets each retain a choice: one may decline to go, and the other may make plans without waiting indefinitely.

A similar boundary is possible in discussing conflict. Someone asks for a pause to avoid responding in irritation. If returning was agreed and actually happened, the pause helped preserve conversation. If the subject is postponed every time without new conditions, examining the sequence itself is useful. Perhaps the discussion has not become more accessible; perhaps participants no longer agree about its purpose. Automatically calling this manipulation is as premature as treating every pause as a wise choice.

Demanding a necessary answer should not be confused with demanding an intimate account. Fulfilling an agreement may require only confirmation, refusal, or a stated limit. Understanding someone's experience needs other information that they may not want to disclose. The first request gives no unconditional entitlement to the second. Separating them helps avoid a false choice between complete disclosure and complete absence of responsibility.

If a definite answer is not yet possible, that can be stated along with the known part. For example, I cannot confirm participation today; plan without me, and I will let you know if that changes. This sentence does not resolve every internal question, but it makes external conditions clearer. A person keeps the right not to know while ceasing to pass their uncertainty entirely to someone else.

In some situations, a shared agreement will not be reached. Choosing actions on the basis of the existing uncertainty remains possible. This is not necessarily punishment of a silent person. The distinction lies in purpose and form: establish one's own available conditions, or pressure another person into disclosure. The same deadline can be used differently, so the specific context matters.

IX. Freedom does not mean constant openness

Freer speech does not mean a person must talk more under every circumstance. It means that different ways become available: answer, clarify, decline, postpone, or choose another format. Silence becomes one option instead of the only exit. No observer can definitively establish freedom from the outward appearance of a pause.

Return to the two participants at the initial meeting. The first retains the decision not to discuss personal matters. The second receives materials beforehand and an opportunity to submit a written comment. Outwardly both may remain silent during the shared discussion. But the difference in conditions is significant. The check concerns whether a real opportunity to express the chosen content exists, rather than how many words were spoken.

A person can also revise the intention to speak itself. Having prepared an answer, they discover that they do not want to publish it or that the original aim was imposed by someone else's judgment. They may keep the text private. This does not make the preceding work meaningless. It helped clarify a choice, even if the result was sufficiently definite silence.

Another participant may realise, conversely, that they no longer want to maintain a habitual pause. The question of a first word should then be joined with questions about recipient and consequences. Who needs this message? Which part is necessary? What is known about the response? These questions guarantee no successful statement, but make the intention more specific and help distinguish courage from the absence of caution.

Openness matters when it belongs to the person themselves and takes actual conditions into account. In this understanding, respect for silence and support for a voice can coexist. A listener need not guess what is hidden; a speaker need not disclose everything. A sufficiently clear agreement can emerge between them about what is needed now and what remains private.

What this means in practice

Take one specific episode in which an expected answer was not heard. Separate observation from your account of the motive. If you were the silent participant, clarify for yourself whether you wanted to speak, whether the content was clear, whether time and format suited you, and what cost you expected. A working answer may be mixed. You do not have to choose one permanent cause.

If you are the listener, offer a limited invitation with a real exit. You can ask whether a short answer now, returning later, or declining the subject would be more convenient. After receiving an answer, check your own reaction. Do not turn refusal into another interrogation, or a correction into an argument about who knows another person's experience better.

For a shared decision, separately state the necessary minimum and the deadline. A person can keep their reasons private, and you can make a decision with the available information. When the desired statement is unavailable, consider one change in conditions: more time, a narrower question, a written format, or an understandable procedure for considering objections. It need not produce words. Its purpose is to make choice more real. At the end, assess a small result: a boundary became clearer, a question was separated, an agreement emerged, or the necessary conditions were found to be absent for now.

Key quotation

> *“speaking up would not make a difference”*

Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison and Frances J. Milliken, “Sounds of Silence,” STERNbusiness, Spring/Summer 2004, p. 31; a fragment describing employees' expectations rather than advice to stay silent. The Russian version uses our own translation.

Connections between traditions

Comparison	Shared question	Significant boundary
Lorde ↔ right to personal refusal	Who owns the voice?	A historical call does not cancel a present choice
Morrison/Milliken ↔ personal pause	Is speaking accessible?	An organisational framework does not explain every conversation
Freedom of expression ↔ responsibility for agreement	What needs saying now?	Reasons may remain private

This is a limited comparison of Black feminist speech, organisational analysis, and the article's own practical distinction. It does not declare a single doctrine shared by every tradition.

Primary sources

• Audre Lorde, The Transformation of Silence into Language and Action, Sinister Wisdom 6, Summer 1978, pp. 11–15. The address on pages11–15, including its conclusion before the next speaker on page15, was read; not the entire issue. Original author reading covered11–14; independent review also checked the conclusion.

• Elizabeth Wolfe Morrison, Frances J. Milliken, Sounds of Silence, STERNbusiness, Spring/Summer 2004. Selected pages 31, 32, and 34 were read: a primary authorial explanation rather than a full reading of every study it cites.

Tags

silence, voice, choice, refusal, pause, words, accessibility, speaking, Audre Lorde, feminism, Morrison, Milliken, organisational silence, listening, format, time, language, boundaries, private space, consequences, risk, consent, agreement, responsibility, clarification, uncertainty, openness, context

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