

# A MAN OF WORDS AND SILENCE: A SIBERIAN INTELLECTUAL'S MIXED PATTERNS OF COMMUNICATION

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## ABSTRACT

Yuri Vella (1948–2013) was a well-known personality in Western Siberia's indigenous world.

Unlike most Western Siberia indigenous inhabitants, Yuri Vella was exceptionally skilled with words. He used words in everyday life in order to achieve his goals, among which the main one was to protect his kin and neighbours in the forest from the destructions induced by the oil industry. He was able to hold his own in discussion with the oil industry representatives and to have the last word with them.

But how did Yuri Vella use words in private life? That is what months of field-work sharing the hut he lived in with his wife allowed me to ascertain. I shall concentrate on patterns of speaking – how? with whom? – and silence in everyday life, outside the attention of an audience. Or was my presence in the hut enough of an audience to change his patterns? These reflections are what this article is about.\*

**KEYWORDS:** Siberia • Forest Nenets • silence • speech • gender • intercultural communication • dialogue • monologue

The intellectual who will be at the centre of this research is a well-known personality, about whom much has been written and published in the last decades. Yuri Vella (1948–2013) was a prominent Forest Nenets writer who started his life path as an ordinary Western Siberian native but acquired exceptional skills and thinking potency, and chose to spend the last decades of his life in the forest as a reindeer herder. I was acquainted with him from 1998 and had diverse opportunities to observe his behaviour and interact with him. I first got acquainted with him at a public event in 1998. Then I endeavoured to discover his poetry and translated some of his poems into French. He was interested and invited me to work on more translations at his camp in the forest.

\* This research has been supported by the Estonian Research Council grant PUT590 and the Estonian Kindred Peoples Programme's project No 782.

I spent all in all six months there (both sharing a log hut with him and his wife and living in other houses at the camp with other members of his household). Moreover, we met several times at public events in Russia, Estonia and France, and on two occasions he stayed at my place in Tartu and in Paris. I will add that we have been interacting for more than one decade with my fellow researcher and filmmaker Liivo Niglas. Niglas met Yuri in Tartu in 2000 and showed him his film about the Tundra Nenets, *The Brigade* (1999). Yuri asked him whether he would not like to make a film about them, and my colleague accepted. It was the beginning of a cooperation and friendship that lasted until Vella's demise. Niglas' method of filming is to be as unobtrusive as possible, and Vella was interested himself in the process of filming. Thus I had many opportunities to follow his way of interacting with his direct environment, both on the basis of my fieldwork and of Niglas' filmed material, and have been impressed by the diversity of the tools he mobilised in order to get his messages through or simply to live his life in harmony. In this study, I will concentrate on these patterns as they are revealed by my observation. But first of all I shall introduce my reflections by summing up some significant features of Vella's character.

#### YURI VELLA, A PRESENTATION

Certainly the most fascinating aspect in Yuri Vella was the multiple dimensions of his identity. As I mentioned, he started as an ordinary native young man: dropping out of high school, marrying at 19 a local native girl, working in different jobs – the postal service, fish collecting, “Red Chum” worker, etc. As a father of four girls, he would certainly have identified himself as a local cooperative hunter. But his peculiarities started to emerge: he wrote poetry (in Russian); he quit drinking a couple of years after the army; later, in his village he founded a museum using the forest log huts that sedentarised inhabitants of the village had left in the wild, and initiated a native discourse around that endeavour. At the same time, he decided to finish high school and attend the literary institute in Moscow. University education definitely opened his world: he understood that Russian civilisation was but one form of civilisation among others and that the native world also had its own civilisation; finally he learned not to accept blindly authoritative discourse, and to rely mainly on his own thinking (see Toulouze and Niglas 2012).

In the last decades of his life, after this discovery, which changed his whole attitude towards the world, his personality presented three aspects.

#### *Reindeer Herder*

Yuri had always dreamt of reindeer. His father was a reindeer herder, but he died when Yuri was a small child. At the end of the 1980s he left the village, bought ten reindeer and went to the places where his grandmother came from and started building a life for himself and his wife there. He built it metaphorically and literally: they built two camps, a winter camp and a summer camp, with several log houses for their daughters and visitors, and learned to become reindeer herders. Ten reindeer constituted a very

small herd, and Yuri suffered in the first years trying to keep them together. He benefitted from the advice of his Nenets neighbours, who were experienced herders, and gradually the herd grew, until, at the time of his demise it had around 100 animals. He was very active with the herd and had close personal contact with the animals: he fed them dried bread and salted fish soup by hand; he knew all the reindeer individually and fetched the herd every morning in winter. They became the centre of his life, the motivator of his most important decisions. Yuri felt comfortable in the forest, although compared with more experienced forest dwellers, he kept some aspects that revealed his village origins, for example he did not eat things like reindeer brains raw, as other natives do. But he learned many new skills in the 27 years he lived in his camp.

### Poet

While Yuri wrote poetry from a young age, he became a recognised poet after his University studies. There, he attended in the poetry section of the literary institute and concluded his graduation with a collection of poems. After that he went on writing, although relatively rarely at first. He used some of the same poems in different collections, and the meaning changed according to the context in which they were presented. In the last decade of his life, Yuri became more and more active in the literary field. He fought his 'battles' with words. He wrote several books and both his prose and his poetry became impressively documental: he abandoned fiction and even the creation of synthetic characters, to concentrate on the description of real episodes of his real life. He abandoned so-called poetic descriptions to impress in his readers' awareness the messages he considered fundamental.

He also started writing in Nenets and even Khanty: he had firstly used Russian, explaining that the Nenets artistic and metaphoric language had disappeared, and that it was not proper to write poetry in everyday language, in the language used for ordinary conversation with his mother or his neighbours. But then he understood that writing in Nenets was also a political tool, and he started to publish some short texts in this language.

### Activist

To become an activist was not an ideological choice *a priori*. It was not even a choice: it was life itself that did not leave the natives any alternative. They had been dispossessed of the lands of their ancestors: they had been relocated in villages, thus leaving the taiga uninhabited (at least legally) and the lands were entrusted to the oil companies, who knew that they could do whatever they wished with them.

But in 1992 the legal system changed and gave the natives new opportunities: on the initiative of the local intelligentsia, a regional law created the concept of 'kinship territory': these were portions of land, which could be entrusted to the natives who would like to live in the taiga in order to follow the traditional subsistence crafts of their culture – hunting, fishing, gathering and reindeer herding. The natives willing to move back from the village to the forest had to prove that the land they would like to take

responsibility for had been used by their kin during the 20th century. The land was certainly not given to the natives in legal property: the resources of the subsoil remained State property, but the natives were supposed to give the oil companies permission to exploit them. This was a huge change. The oil companies had been extracting oil without the need for any special permission in an uninhabited land, and that had already provoked tensions and conflicts with the natives. Now, the land had keepers who could deny them access to the natural resources they needed, creating obvious tensions. The oil drillers attempted to obtain by any possible means the natives' permissions. Some were satisfied to receive 'compensation' in money and goods – some families were already using their camps in the forest, even before the law gave them new rights; many actually never had the intention to move seriously to the 'bush'; others attempted to resist. Yuri was among the latter. He helped some of his kin and friends resist and he himself was one of the most resilient of LUKoil's opponents. In his poetry he continuously denounced the nuisance of the oil industry towards nature, towards the reindeer and towards the natives themselves. He opposed several plans of both the local government and the company, and was able to achieve some victories. The tensions between them culminated in 2000, when the company attempted to and ultimately succeeded in destroying a bridge that was vital for the movement of the natives in general and Yuri's family in particular. He happened upon LUKoil employees while they were working and he brutally stopped their attempts by breaking the main bulldozer's tyres with his axe. He lost the court case against LUKoil and had to deliver the oil company several reindeer as a fine. The company obstinately refused to pay him the compensations he was due on the basis of the 'economic agreements' established with all the natives living on the territory where LUKoil was working. He fought against the oil giant with all the means at his disposal, even with incredible fantasy, always emphasising his native identity.

This was just one level of action in Yuri's manifold activities: his ultimate goal was to ensure sustainable vitality to the local aborigine cultures and way of life. The conflict with LUKoil was a negative part of this endeavour, the fight against. There were also positive forms of activity, such as the 'import' of 1,000 reindeer from the Yar-Sale reindeer-herding sovkhose in 1996, the organisation of an expedition along the river Agan, the creation of a camp school, the writing of a toponymical dictionary for the Agan basin... All his endeavours were long-term: the toponymical dictionary was meant to be used in several generations to prove land occupation.

As I said, I first met Yuri Vella in June 1998, for the 50th birthday of his fellow writer from the same village, the Khanty Eremey Aipin. Yuri joined the international group following Aipin and was very open and communicative with all the members of that small party. He was a marvellous storyteller and we were fascinated listening to him. We conversed for hours and I was particularly impressed, because I was not accustomed, with northern aborigines, to meet such skill with oral expression. Still, Yuri Vella told me from the very beginning that in ordinary life, he was very different. I had many opportunities, at his place, to witness his silent behaviour. This article is built up on my reflections in connection with these two facets of his public and private behaviour.

Before continuing on our reflections about Yuri Vella, let us concentrate on more general reflections about the cultural peculiarities of northern Russian indigenous peoples in regard to speech and silence. 19th century travellers have pointed out as a characteristic of the northern aborigines their restraint in the use of words; they observe that they are “silent, reserved, even close; stingy with words; there is no ‘small talk’ neither ‘verbal ceremonies’, nor greeting, good-bye or thanking formulas” (Khristoforova 2006: 1). According to the same author, small genres in folklore teach both the value of silence and the weight of words (Khristoforova 1998: 224). Indeed, cautiousness concerning words does not mean neglect or underestimation; on the contrary, words are powerful tools, not to be used lightly. Several researchers comment upon the power of words in native understanding, for example Elena Liarskaya and Stephan Dudeck (2012: 68) insisting on their transformative power (see also Pushkareva 2004). Ol’ga Khristoforova, commenting in her two articles (1998; 2006) on the relationship to words seen as “sacral object or even subject”, observes that this attitude towards verbal code is “characteristic of non-written societies”. This assertion can be challenged, at least as a categorical statement, by arguing that this dimension is not unknown in Russian society. Caroline Humphrey (2010: 317–318, 320, 323, 335) emphasises on the contrary that verbal functioning in the Soviet Union was very much based on assumption of the magical power of words: how words could bring people to the GULAG, how people became afraid of taboo words (both political notions or swearing). So this magic of words is a much wider phenomenon, although it is clearly manifested in northern aboriginal culture. The magic peril hidden in words has another consequence, which is well known in different cultures: the taboo on particularly mighty words leads to the use of euphemisms – as with the names of the bear in Estonian (Rätsep 2006: 17–18) or the sacred number 7 in the Ugric languages (Bereczki 1998: 69).

It was important not to use direct expressions, and that would lead to the value of the aptitude of using metaphoric language: “there exists a complicated taboo language to avoid direct speech. Khanty and Nenets folklore knows; especially when it comes to sacred themes, a plethora of parallelisms and metaphors” (Liarskaya and Dudeck 2012: 68). A “beautiful language” is a metaphoric one (Khristoforova 1998: 225), such as the one used in the Nganasan *kejngersja*, a genre which is no longer alive (Dobzhanskaja 2015: §12–27), although we shall find this understanding very much alive in Yuri Vella’s thought and practice (see below). This is confirmed by Piers Vitebsky and Sally Wolfe (2001: 91), who comment upon Even culture: “The indigenous languages are extremely expressive – for old-fashioned kinds of communication, in which a veiled, allusive style of expression was fundamental”. Vitebsky and Wolfe also emphasise a dimension of silence, which I have not found mentioned in the reflections of Russian colleagues and which I find enlightening in regard to Yuri’s practice. They bring out how silence enhances sensitivity.

Relations with other persons require a similar kind of non-verbal sensitivity. People develop sensitivity to each other’s moods, which could go unnoticed in a more fully verbalized environment. It is clear that people always know exactly what is going on, everywhere in the camp, even when nothing is said. (Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001: 89–90)

We may relate this dimension of silence to the Western Apache custom of being silent in situations in which the status or the state of mind of the interlocutors is ambiguous or unpredictable (Basso 1970: 227).

Silence in the aboriginal world has often in recent research been connected with political issues: silence drawn upon atrocities, silence as a form of testimony – “Silence that cannot speak” or “silence that will not speak”, to quote Japanese-Canadian poet Jay Kogawa (Tagore 2009: 3). It is often seen as a weapon, as Jerome Meyer Levi (2003: 263) emphasises reflecting on Mexico’s Rarámuri: “Silence is a particularly noteworthy aspect of the Rarámuri’s response to the encroaching ‘outside world’. It is not just the meaningless absence of sound, but a transmissive modality of resistance guided by cultural insiders.” This is also how Natal’ya Novikova (2015: §2) chooses to broach this subject: “I deal with anthropology of silence, in the context of State politics, in relation to court practice”. She argues that the “native worldview (and in particular verbal taboos) has been an obstacle to achieving a just decision” (ibid.: §4). She observes that when she started asking about silence, her informants said to her “You are starting to understand something...” and she concludes: “Silence is a code” (ibid.: §21). But she also sees silence to be a form of protest (ibid.: §26–27). This is one of the forms silence takes that did not appear in Yuri Vella’s practice, in contrast to other uses of silence – an interesting remark we shall have to dwell upon later.

Northern cultures are characterised by balance: it is not surprising to see that what is appreciated as intelligence is the capacity of having always the proper behaviour, i.e. to be able to speak metaphorically, “beautifully”, when speaking is needed, and to be able to keep quiet when words are not needed (Khristoforova 2006: 9). Did Yuri correspond to this ideal?

I argue that he did, but only partially, which is easily explained. He certainly used more words than Nenets usually use. How did he use them? Did he use metaphoric speech?

#### A WAY WITH WORDS

Yuri would have agreed with Khristoforova, that metaphoric speech is the ideal way of expressing oneself. He recalled how his grandmother Nengi told him stories when he was a child: she told some part of the story in ordinary language, for the child to understand it, and then repeated it in “artistic language” (FM 2011). So Yuri was in some ways familiar with this language. However, he must recognise that he has no proficient command of this indirect speech, although he sometimes attempts to introduce it in his texts written in Russian, and he is aware, probably more than younger generations, who live, as in all Siberian regions, in an environment where

village television and videos are largely in Russian, a European language laden with modern expressions and forms of expression. This is also the language of colonialism, of passionate novels, high drama, popular magazines, cinema, and pornography. Even the discussion of Nature in Russian magazines is cast largely in the alienated global idiom of the ‘environment’. (Vitebsky and Wolfe 2001: 91)



In Yuri's monologues and storytelling we can identify some traces of this practice. I would take as an example an excerpt from Liivo Niglas' film *Yuri Vella's world* (2003), when, walking in the forest, Yuri says that everybody has his own measure of how much he may hunt: his father and another friend had exceptional success at hunting sable, but they did not pay attention to the signal telling them that they had filled the measure allocated to them, and they died prematurely. He concludes: "I have hunted around 200 sables and I stopped". Was he talking about family history and explaining his choice to quit the profession of hunter, or was he actually talking about oil drilling in the taiga? Probably both. But we might assume that it would not have been prudent to say directly that the oil drillers or oil drilling are doomed by greed...

Probably his ability to come in at the right moment with indirect, illustrative speech explains that his speeches were always thought-provoking and kept the audience listening. His exceptional verbal skills appeared when he discussed matters with oil drillers, when he spoke on television or to an audience – in congresses and conferences. I would like to focus here on verbal communication and of the ways he organised his discourse according to his goals.

I distinguish three patterns of oral communication: dialogic, didactic and solo.

### *Dialogue*

When we think of communication with words, the first category to come to mind is certainly dialogue. Dialogue is a concept which is very much present in Yuri's literary work. For him, dialogue is first of all a literary fiction. He has written several works he has called "Dialogues". The first is certainly "Swan hunt", which is presented as a dialogue between himself and another Siberian poet, Tatiana Yurgenson, who visits his camp. She discovers the life of the natives and she expresses her deeper feelings and asks questions, which Yuri answers, as the older indigenous sage, explaining the natives' worldview. At the same time, it is a political pamphlet against war and more precisely against the wars the Russian government had launched in the previous years in Chechnya. In "This Perfect World" Yuri presents an improbable, but real poetic dialogue between the reindeer-herder-poet and an Orthodox nun, who lived in a monastery on the Volga. Despite their physical and mental distance they meet in the human field, sharing their concerns and their joys. Still Yuri does not give up on his role as a teacher, as the older, wise grandfather. The third dialogue is different from the two previous because of its basic position: it is a correspondence dialogue between two companions, both wise old men, each one a moral authority for his people. In 1998, at Eremey Aipin's birthday where we first met, Yuri also met Kiowa poet Scott Momaday, who was impressed by the meeting. They met again some years later at a Congress of Finno-Ugric writers held in Yuri's regional capital, Khanty-Mansiysk. After this second meeting, Momaday sent a poetic letter to Yuri, which he was not really in a hurry to answer, doing so after ten years. This does not mean that there were no contact between the poets meanwhile, they happened to meet several times. The two poets had no common language, so they communicated through the mediation of Russian scholar Aleksandr Vashchenko. Their correspondence lasted almost until Yuri's death: both of the poets wrote the other four letters. Yuri published them some months before his demise. Here, it is a real dialogue, from a position of difference, but moral equality.

In real life, dialogue was not a genre Yuri used abundantly. At least not in his everyday life in his camp. Outside his universe, he was indeed able to dialogue. But in his ordinary life his conversations were limited to very circumscribed circumstances. When it happened sometimes that he had to discuss something with his wife, these were usually practical conversations. We have some samples in Liivo Niglas' films where he says: "Now we'll have tea" and his wife replies: "But before, we must make the beds". – "Right, and after that we'll have tea". Most of his 'conversations' with his wife were 'non-verbal', at least according to what Yuri himself said. Of course, when guests arrived at his place, he was the one who would enter into dialogue with them. Some of these conversations were important for him: with neighbours, he would discuss the reindeer and their movements. We also have some samples in Liivo Niglas' films, when Yuri speaks with his neighbour Dmitri Ruskin. Sometimes he asked advice on some technical point and was interested in hearing the response: such as when he asked his grandchildren about some computer difficulty. I could also mention as dialogue his communication with gods and spirits. He addressed them and in his understanding, they were having a conversation. But of course nobody else was aware of the dialogic dimension of this peculiar communication.

Often, in situations of dialogue, we have the impression that he did not listen to his partner, in order to follow his own thoughts. For example, in Liivo Niglas' film *The Land of Love* (2016), he sits in Paris with Dominique Samson Normand de Chambourg and he tells the French researcher about Russia and colonialism. The latter attempted to comment on Russian history, but Yuri just ignores his words and pursues his thoughts, interrupting him. I shall discuss monologue later on, but here I want to observe that, although in a situation when he is confident and knows his partner, he may seem to be inattentive, in less informal contexts, he always kept in mind with whom he was speaking and he implemented ad hoc tactics in order to keep his discourse acceptable to the other. Let me give an example. As I had spent only a couple of weeks in his camp in 1999, he asked a Nenets visitor to "make him a god". When the visitor had complied and carved an anthropomorphic piece of wood, Yuri made a small ceremony in his log cabin. At the end, he said to me: "That's how we entertain ourselves". The aim of this sentence was to provide an acceptable interpretation of what had happened, in case I would have been sceptical or disapproving of this kind of 'superstition', as probably some local non-native would. It was probably also a test, to watch my reaction and assess what was possible to do in my presence.

I suppose I should include in the category 'dialogue' the polemical debates he had for example with oil companies. He was a formidable speech opponent. Unlike what the native culture suggests (see Novikova 2015), which are answers to aggression through silence, Yuri was able to answer with words, and he did not hesitate to do so. The rhetorical skills of the Russians, as opposed to the stubborn silence of the aborigines, often doomed the latter to pull back. Yuri was able to nullify the other side's arguments and to obtain through rhetoric the results he was looking for. Not long before his demise, he was called by his fellow villagers, the Khanty Aipins, who asked him for help in negotiating with the administration and the oil company. He was himself quite proud of this performance, for he obtained victory only on arguing on the basis of the main legal document, the constitution. He fought the Russians, wielding the latter's weapons better than they did. From this point of view, Yuri was an exceptional native.



## *Teaching*

The didactic aspect is a very central one in Yuri's understanding of his own function. In *The Land of Love*, Yuri explains to Dominique Samson in Paris that the Russian language is his main weapon: "I endeavour to explain to them so that they would live here harming us as little as possible". His poetry is his main means of expression – and it is often didactic.

From the artistic point of view, this could even be the weakest aspect of his poetry. Often I have had the impression that the poem would have been stronger without the last explanatory verses, without the explication of what has been the point during the text. I even said this once to Yuri, when he asked for my reaction about a poem written in connection to the war in Georgia. Yuri just laughed and commented: "Well, that means that the French are like the Nenets, they understand. You might not translate these parts, but I have to keep them: I write for Russians, and they won't understand unless we explain everything in detail".

So teaching is the main aim of all his work. He feels he is in the position of the one who knows. It is this position that dominates his conversations with his kin and close acquaintance, with his grandchildren, with visiting ethnographers. He was not really interested in answering their questions, but in promoting his own ideas, his own teaching.

This was also the aim of the different speeches he was asked to deliver. Then, he would tune his speech to the audience and try to achieve concrete goals in convincing the audience, relying on its peculiarities, whether they were private reindeer herders, administration employees, writers, etc.

## *The Monologue*

In all these different sorts of communication, what is the most characteristic is the monologue. It seems to be the genre in which Yuri was the most comfortable. It is even probably difficult to distinguish the monologue from the teaching... Teaching is also a monologue, in which the listener is particularly important, because he or she is the aim of this verbal act. In pure monologue, actually, the presence or the absence of a listener may be of lesser importance.

Yuri was very good at delivering monologues in front of the camera. The camera was a comfortable partner, and Yuri knew Liivo well enough to trust him not to interrupt the flow of his thoughts with idle questions.

Did Yuri need a listener, a stimulus, to start a monologue? The camera was undoubtedly stimulus enough. He knew his ideas would meet an anonymous audience, far away in space and time. But probably our presence was also a necessary stimulus. His wife and his daughters were not interested in his monologues. We were. He would not attempt to convince us or to teach us, for he knew we shared his goals and many of his understandings. But I think the main goal of these monologues, even when the camera was not recording, was to order his own ideas and to test them with a well-disposed audience. Yuri did not need anybody who would answer. But I suppose he

would have listened if any of us would have been violently opposed to his point. It was probably more of a dialogue with himself. This was what happened in the scene mentioned above with Dominique Samson. Yuri felt that he must pursue his topic: he was not ready to integrate a new complication into his thoughts. He must be in a very particular mental disposition to be ready to listen to his partners and to include their thoughts in his own. It happens usually when he expects something from them – and then we fall into the previous model.

While Yuri did not use silence as a weapon, in private he did not waste words. I do not think we can be mistaken if we argue that words were for the outside world. In private, in his camp, in the world he had created, he was a man of silence, in contrast to the verbal active practice his grandchildren were educated into, because of their Russian teachers.

### A GENDERED SILENCE

Often silence, even if it is a tactic, is viewed as the constrained absence of something necessary, for example of transmitting memories, and able to produce deep fright and trauma (Humphrey 2010: 332–336). But this silence, as well as the silence viewed as a self-defence tactic, has nothing in common with the creative silence of the northern aborigines. Some researchers link this silence with the northern peoples' life conditions (Burkova et al. 2015), although this seems a facile explanation.

In his ordinary life, Yuri preferred silence. That does not mean that he wanted to be surrounded by silence – the radio, the TV set regularly filled the soundscape of the cabin. I refer to the silence that is the absence of speech by the humans living in that space. In the morning, at breakfast, Yuri talked about his dreams, and went out. When he came back, he slept or ate. There could be comments about the food or about the reindeer, but they were not aimed at anybody in particular. When he held one of his monologues, for instance when Liivo and/or I were there, the women of his household almost automatically disconnected their attention from the abstract issues in which their husband and father was interested, and followed among themselves a path of communication of their own, about everyday topics. Usually, Yuri addressed his monologues to Liivo, calling him by name, apparently excluding me from the conversation. By the way, he never had any conversation, except on menial themes, with his daughters, neither did he ever talk to them directly. I must consider it as a sign of acceptance to be treated like them, when I was in the camp. Yuri never addressed me directly when I lived in his camp, or even in his log house.

Thus, I could identify a gendered pattern of communication which excluded women from direct exchange at least when Yuri was on his own territory. In any other context, Yuri would speak to me without hesitation. We discussed all kinds of issues when we met in Moscow – two or three times I travelled in order to meet him there – or at a writers' meeting. We would work on his texts, or discuss his homepage. Nevertheless, in his household, even in the absence of his wife, the pattern of communication changed totally. I no longer existed, except that I was present.

The main reason that the women in his household were not included in Yuri's conversations was probably that the women of his household did not show any inter-

est in the topics he spoke about. In addition, as Stephen Dudeck pointed out, it was a structural aborigine behaviour not to discuss questions related to the male sphere with females (and probably the other way round), especially with females of fertile age. This separation of the spheres and lack of interest are probably very intimately connected. While I was undoubtedly, unlike them, interested, I must suppose that he just applied the gender ethics he followed in the forest and did not choose to make an exception. So he adopted a different strategy, the strategy of indirect communication. Yuri could mention me indirectly, such as when we had offered me white fabric for offerings. We decided together that he would bring it to a sacred place and make an offering without blood, for we had no time to slaughter a reindeer and go to the sacred place afterwards. But when Yuri decided to make the offering, he called along only Liivo. When Liivo understood that they were to go by car without much physical exertion, he told Yuri that I would certainly be interested in going with them, and got no answer. But when Yuri's three years old grandchild Ramiz started crying because he wanted to go to, Yuri told him: "All right, get dressed and tell Aunt Eva to come along". This is a convincing example of the kind of indirect communication pattern Yuri used to include me in the verbal field. Other examples were daily routine: Yuri would explicitly address Liivo, and then tell him some story, which made sense to me, but not to him – as I had spent more time with them, I knew kin and neighbours, etc.

In this first set of examples, silence was a form of avoidance – could we call it almost ritual avoidance between genders, akin to what Liarskaya and Dudeck (2012: 67) mention – avoidance between generation groups, etc.?

Anyhow Vella was clearly concerned in scrupulously respecting these points in behaviour ethics, not wishing to anger the spirits or put himself, his family and his reindeer at risk.

#### SILENCE AS TELEPATHY

In a more general way, the absence of chatting in his territory, far from creating a void, left the space open for a different kind of communication. Let's give the floor to Yuri, who, in a short poetic text, recalls the memory of his grandmother Nengi:

In general my grandmother was chatty. But sometimes, while walking along the riverbank, she lowers her hand, wrinkled and light and dried by time, on my head, and we stand and we are silent in front of the quiet waters of the Agan. But our hearts are not silent. They continue to chat. Invisibly and inaudibly, she transmits her feelings, her perception of the world. No, not her thoughts. And I start to see through her eyes our fresh river flooded with sun, I start to hear through her ears the voice of the cranes on the marsh, I start to perceive through her heart our camp and every sound, every rustling, every breath in it. (Vella 2001: 28)

This text is meaningful because it explicates the sensorial aspect included in silence. Silence is not absence of communication, it is just a different form of co-being.

This interesting form of telepathy is one of the points Yuri always emphasised himself. So here I rely on his discourse. From the very first time we met in 1998, he always emphasised that communication did not imply words and that he used to use telepathy

on a daily basis. He mentioned two fields where he used telepathy, and they were the closest relations he had in his life – his wife and his reindeer. According to his discourse, he was in permanent communication with this wife, wherever he was. He pretended that his wife always knew exactly what he was doing. Usually, when he told these stories, she was silent and did not react either way.

He also mentioned another telepathy issue, relating to reindeer. According to his discourse, a good reindeer herder always knew where his reindeer were and he could, even from far away, remotely pasture his herd. He argued that a good reindeer herder was always with his reindeer.

So the ability to communicate through non-verbal means was for Yuri an important aspect of how he wanted outsiders to view the natives.

How must we treat these assertions? Certainly seriously, for Yuri did not speak randomly, he always had an aim. Were they to be taken literally? Probably not, but I argue that Yuri wanted to impress upon his conversation partners the importance of silence as a means of communication. I quoted above a sentence by Vitebsky and Wolfe (2001: 89), who said that in silence, people develop a sensitivity to each other's moods. This sensitivity, this empathy, can be translated into information and, through a different path, people may come to know concrete things "even when nothing is said".

Another example Yuri liked to convey concerns the practice the natives have of not greeting: actually, as Khristoforova (2006) remarks, there are in their languages no formulas for greeting or saying goodbye, except those that have been loaned from Russian (*An' torovo* in Nenets, coming from Russian *zdorovo*). However, the Khanty have developed some forms of greeting which are not loans from Russian, such as *pecha-pecha*. The absence of formulas for saying goodbye may have to do with the wish not to end communication too finally. And instead of greeting one another, Nenets just continue a conversation as if no interruption had ever happened at all. So absence, as well as silence, is just the prolonging of on-going communication.

## THE SHOCK OF THE ABSENCE OF SILENCE

The correctness and the importance of silence are particularly well felt in the absence of it. I recall a situation in my very first stint of fieldwork at Yuri's camp in winter 1999, and I will report it as I felt it on the spot. A Russian ethnographer arrived to bring Yuri a short film she had shot at his place. I was living in the family's log house so I was there, as a silent insider. I was impressed by the negative impact of what was meant as politeness. There were five newcomers in the room, while only the ethnographer, who was previously acquainted with Vella, spoke. But she talked permanently, filling the space in the small log cabin and leaving no breathing room. She asked questions. I then felt how improper this attitude was. I was not surprised that, when Yuri got the possibility to answer, what followed was not dialogue, but monologue. Yuri chose to deliver the messages he was interested in, not giving a thought to the questions that were asked in the midst of the word flow that had preceded. I felt, probably under the influence of the sensitivity that Vitebsky and Wolfe (2001) mention, that the proper behaviour would have been to keep silent, drink tea with the head of the household and leave the initiative to him. It would have created from the very beginning a shared space,

instead of monopolising it on one side. Silence would have not only been the respectful behaviour, but also the most efficient for the ethnographer to achieve her goals. It was the shock of two etiquettes, as Khristoforova (2006: 7) puts it, when “the Russian’s communicative behaviour is characterised by developed phatic functions of speech, weakly expressed role of action code, categorical statements...”.

I was later surprised and interested when I discovered that other researchers had the same experience. In 1837, Alexander Schrenk was shocked to receive no sign of welcome in a Nenets tent; in a Komi tent, the first contact was friendlier, but the Komi kept a silence that was “boring” to him. Other travellers discovered that one could enter a tent without any particular words, but would always be offered tea. (Khristoforova 2006)

I consciously used silence abundantly during my long stay with Yuri’s family. I always had the feeling that for them the right moment to ask my questions and get answers had not come. But usually I got the answers without even asking the questions. At some moment Yuri started talking, and his discourse explicated the points about which I had been wondering. I am sure the answers I got in this way were more precise and appropriate than those I could have elicited by insisting. Was this an issue of the ‘telepathy’ mentioned above?

At the same time, my silence was puzzling for Yuri’s wife, as she sometimes expressed it. I do not refer to silence in discussions concerning male problems, which was natural, but even silence when she abused me. Lena was sort of nervous and often expressed her irritation in words. I did not answer. I was there as a guest and could not allow myself to thoughtless spontaneous protest. Thus, my behaviour did not fit in with my status as an alien, i.e. seen as a Russian, who would have certainly responded to abuse. While the visitors in her camp are far from all being Russian, still the closer model she had of non-native was Russian. From her point of view, I did not behave understandably, because I did not correspond to her stereotypes.

But silence is not always the correct option. In some situations, according to Yuri’s practice, talking would have been the only right behaviour. In discussing the issues related to this article, Dudeck remembered that once his silence had been considered impolite, when the hosts were expecting stories from the Germans then present. I recall another case, which was more complicated: it was evening when we came back from a day in Kogalym, the local oil company’s ‘capital’. On the way back, we stopped at an oil workers’ canteen, where we bought baked chicken and biscuits, to bring home as a treat. But when we stepped at the log house, all was silent and dark. The private tent was set up. Yuri’s son-in-law was sleeping. Nobody prepared tea for the head of the family, as was expected. Yuri stood in the centre of the house, waiting, and then exploded, throwing on the floor the food we had bought. His wife answered from within the private tent that he could have asked how she was. She did not feel well and had gone to sleep. He answered that she should have told him immediately what the matter was. His wife then, as I understand it, had violated an actional code, which is to welcome her husband by immediately preparing tea. In the absence of this deed, Yuri was expecting words, to have at least a verbal explanation. Vella’s expectation, from a Western point of view, would be considered improper sexist behaviour (Briggs 1970), but he is a Forest Nenets, and I am not interested here in judging his expectations, which are ordinary in the Siberian native’s understanding. I am interested in assessing his relation to words, which

is ambiguous. This situation is not easy to decipher: I do not know what explained the absence of immediate explanation – perhaps Lena was sleeping. Yuri Vella had been in a good mood during the day, and expected the meal, with all the household, to be a pleasant one. Perhaps there was a background of irritation – something we did not know about between the husband and the wife? Perhaps Yuri felt authorised by external presence not to refrain from the usually tabooed expression of anger? I have been witness some other times to violent exchanges between husband and wife, but in this case I am interested in the fact that at least seemingly, it was triggered by absence of speech in a situation when it was expected.

## CONCLUSION

Yuri Vella's ambiguity with words is very well understandable if we take into account the duality of the world in which he was living. Yuri Vella was a man between two worlds – the Russian dominant mainstream world and the indigenous world of a forest camp – and felt comfortable in the ways of both. This comfort was also a way to warrant efficiency in both contexts. I suggest that he was most naturally acculturated into the Russian world: it was the environment into which he had been raised. As all the natives had, he had attended school, fulfilled military service, and been exposed to all the pressures of what is widely called in Russia 'civilisation'. He took advantage of this at the highest level, discovering, unlike his kin, thanks to university, all the richness of the Russian mental world. He was able to write and to speak as proficiently as any Russian and he widely used all his skills in his confrontation with the oil company and the administration. I did not notice any particular effort when he had to battle with words and arguments, for he had developed a skilled rhetoric. The native aspect of his personality, which he was undoubtedly born with and developed with his grandmother and in the native environment, was not fully empowered until he understood the significance of it and decided to adopt it as his life's main trajectory. Therefore, some dimensions in it may have been particularly emphasised and even exaggerated, such as the gender pattern I identified above, but it was clearly meaningful for Yuri's identity as a male, and as traditional head of his family and of his household.

In attempting to analyse Yuri's communication patterns, I do not endeavour to generalise my conclusions to native behaviours or to draw any general pattern. Yuri's behaviour was very much his own, integrating the different layers of his personal culture. It is one example of the duality colonisation has brought to the indigenous world. This duality exists for all the indigenous people who are torn between the worldview imposed on them by society and their own ethnic worldview, which is particularly relevant when dwelling in the forest. All have to cope with it in their own way. This example is particularly interesting, because in its native features, it was driven by awareness and intention.

I said above that in some ways I was caught in this particular gendered communication, or, as I uncomfortably felt, absence of communication. But what did it actually mean? Perhaps Yuri's silence towards me in his camp was but one natural form of communication I was unable, for cultural reasons, to cope with?



On the bank of the lake  
With unhurried steps  
We go...

Beyond the lake, also unhurried  
The reindeer their small calves  
Lead forth...

Beyond the far away forest  
The swan with an inviting scream her baby  
Will call...

We shall remain silent.

## NOTES

1 The Red Chum or Red tent was a mobile structure of the Party's propaganda service by the peoples of the North.

2 LUKoil is one of the most important oil companies in Russia. It was founded in 1993, though the merger of three oil-producing enterprises – Langepasneftegaz, Uraineftegaz and Kogalymneftegaz (hence the name LUKoil), and three processing enterprises – Permorgsintez, the Volgograd and Novoufimsk Refineries.

3 For more details see Vella, Yuri home page.

4 About the relations of these two writers see Toulouze 2002.

5 His charm would deserve deeper study and analysis.

6 The oldest known name of the bear, seen as a totemic animal, in Estonian is 'ott', which is supposed to be a euphemism of Finnic or Baltic origin.

7 Unlike the other simple numerals, which are part of the common Finno-Ugric vocabulary, in the Ugric languages the sacred number is a loan from Indo-Arian languages.

8 I am not arguing that native cultural behaviour corresponds to Yuri's. All behaviours are idiosyncratic, but they are encompassed within a range of possibilities, and that is the interesting feature.

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FM = fieldwork materials of the author, July 2011.

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