

**Project Work Written Report**

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Title: Communication as Struggle: An Analysis of *A Silent Voice*

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# **1 Introduction**

## **1.1 Rationale**

The Internet is on its way to becoming a more diverse multilingual web, with a wider variety of languages being used among which is the prominent appearance of electronic communications, with internet slang becoming a core component, one important peculiarity of slang is that it is a constantly changing open system. (Liana, n.d.) This therefore urges us to think, with so many forms of communication, which are effective enough to be categorised as a language?

The Japanese Movie, A Silent Voice, first aired in 2017, is suitable for our research as it features the ineffectiveness of language from a new perspective, more specifically a teenage girl (the female lead) with speech and hearing impairments, as well as a main male lead which has a hard time in trying to redeem himself. The interaction between the two characters lead to a series of awkward interactions where neither side is capable of fully expressing themselves, as well as reciprocating the expressed emotions. Shouko Nishimiya, is presented as a meek girl (perhaps due to bullying), she is internally frustrated by her inability to speak but has tendencies to act for the sake of pleasing others, for example, smiling and saying sorry when she is not the root cause of a problem. This further impedes her ability to genuinely express her thoughts, making her form of language ineffective. Shoya Ishida is impeded by a mental roadblock, due to his position as her ex-bully, he feels immense guilt and trauma. Furthermore, his self-image which has been damaged after becoming the victim of bullying synergises rather badly to form a clumsy, timid person who, likewise to Shouko, cannot get his idea across.

Hence, both sides exacerbate the ineffectiveness of language, making *A Silent Voice*, suitable for our research and analysis.

## **1.2 Research Questions**

1. How does the lack of connection between the signified and signifier (Saussure 1983) exacerbate the loss of communication between Shoya and Shouko?
2. How does the film show that language can no longer be thought of only in terms of speech (Evans 2014), with sign systems being an effective mode of communication?
3. How does Shouko's private language (Wittgenstein 1953), something that cannot be understood by others, affect their perceived view on her and hence their attitude towards her?

## **1.3 Thesis Statement**

Language, unrestricted to verbal media, is ineffective, as seen in how Shouko's classmates' inability to comprehend her due to the , unless there is a mutual willingness to understand, for language is only communicated when the sign has both a signifier and a signified, which only happens with both Shoya and Shouko being willing to understand each other and communicate.

## **1.4 Significance of Research**

This research will analyse the issues present in language and its structural system, exploring why language can be ineffective at getting an individual's ideas across through the application of theories from Wittgenstein and Saussure. Through our analysis, we will be able to address some key components which are required in communication in order to get ideas across. *A Silent Voice* materialises the consequences of an ineffective language, as the miscommunication between Shouko and Shoya leads to Shouko's bullying and Shoya's trauma. Therefore, in a modern time where there is a large variety of languages, it becomes increasingly relevant for our research to uncover the bread and butter of an effective language.

## **1.5 Limitations**

There are, albeit insignificant in the discussion of communication, differences between how side characters are fleshed out in the manga and anime version of the film. Hence, we will only be focusing on the anime as it is more widespread and popular, even in western countries, in comparison to the manga.

## **2 Literature Review**

### **2.1 Private Language Argument**

To understand Wittgenstein's theory, it is necessary to define what a "private language is." A "private language" can only be understood by the person who uses it (Kenny 1973). One asserts that there is a private language in cases where a person is claimed to have direct access, denied to others, to their own mental states (Ayer 1968). The private language argument, first posited by Wittgenstein in 1953, suggests that a language in principle unintelligible to anyone but its originating user is impossible. The reason for this is that such a so-called language would, necessarily, be unintelligible to its supposed originator too, for he would be unable to establish meanings for its putative signs (Candlish et Al. 2019).

This suggests the existence of the rules governing the use of language and making communication possible depends on agreement in human behaviour. It shows that language and its conception in and of itself depends on the possibility of such agreement.

Shouko's sign language may be described as a "private language", what she may understand cannot get across to everyone else, with her own way of communication. Yet, Wittgenstein argues that a private language cannot exist, making us reconsider what Shouko actually is using to communicate. If a private language does not exist, it may be possible that Shouko is not unable to communicate because of what she is speaking but rather the message her words

convey. Hence, this framework can be used to see how her private language is portrayed in the film, and how Shoya is unable to understand her

## **2.2 Sign Theory**

Next, we will be using sign theory to highlight the fallibility of language in *A Silent Voice*.

Through analysis of the sign theory, we will be able to see why and how communication breaks down between Shoya and Shouko.

### Saussure's theory of sign

According to Ferdinand Saussure, a sign is our perception, and it creates a two part mental linguistic unit. To put it simply, a sign contains the signifier, which is what is said, and the signified, what it means, or the concept behind what is said. Hence, forming a sign. For Saussure, the signifier and signified are inseparable—one does not exist without the other, and conversely, one always implicates the other. They are therefore each other's condition of possibility. Should either of them not be present, communication as a whole would not be possible. Saussure's theory of sign gives more emphasis to internal structure devoted to cognitive thought process or activity of human minds in structuring the physical (material) or intangible (abstract) signs of their environments or surroundings, and among them is the structure of linguistic signs in the language system that allows them to function as human beings and communicate with each other (Yakin 2014). Saussure's theory is considered as the proponent to the thought that "language

does not reflect reality but rather constructs it" because we do not only use language or give meaning to anything that exists in the world of reality, but also to anything that does not exist in it" (Chandler 2002).

## **2.3 Contemporary Japanese Culture**

In order to gain further insight into the film, it is crucial to take into account the existing Japanese culture. The following ideologies and concepts will help to explore these qualities of Japanese culture on a more extensive level, and also help us relate to the characters of a Silent Voice.

### **2.3.1 "Aimai"**

"Aimai" or, ambiguity, is defined as a state in which there is more than one intended meaning, resulting in obscurity, indistinctness, and uncertainty. To be ambiguous in Japanese is generally translated as aimaina, but people use this term with a wide range of meanings, including "vague, obscure, equivocal, dubious, doubtful, questionable, shady, noncommittal, indefinite, hazy, double, two-edged," and so on. (Oe K, 1995) The Japanese are generally tolerant of ambiguity, so much so that it is considered by many to be characteristic of Japanese culture. Although the Japanese may not be conscious of aimai, its use is regarded as a virtue in Japan, and the Japanese

language puts more emphasis on ambiguity than most, for to express oneself ambiguously and indirectly is expected in Japanese society. (Davies & Osamu, 2002)

### **2.3.2 “Chinmoku”**

“Chinmoku” is directly translated to “Silence”, the interpretation of silence in Japanese is largely different from its western counterparts. Communication takes place in more forms than words, and in the case of silence, no words also send a message. The Japanese commonly attempt to catch non-verbal signals; adopting “sontaku” (reading between the lines) (Barton, 2021). Silence can be viewed as a communicative skill, not just a form of emptiness between spoken words. Quite obviously, people remain silent when they have nothing to say, however, this does not directly mean that they have no opinions or thoughts. Conversely, silence is commonly thought to indicate thoughtfulness or hesitation in trying to find a good way to communicate smoothly; therefore, even though people have something to say, they may not express everything that they have in mind and may leave their true intentions unspoken. This kind of silence is known as enryo-sasshi, or “restraint” and is viewed as a virtue in Japanese culture. (Davies & Osamu, 2002) This can cause others to misunderstand the Japanese as “plain-speaking” or “shy”, when in actuality, they are simply trying to remain polite and understanding. (Barton, 2021)

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### **2.3.3 “Ishin Denshin”**

Ishin-denshin denotes the traditional concept of interpersonal communication through unspoken mutual understanding. It loosely translates to "what the mind thinks, the heart transmits."

Although silent understanding is generally recognized as a universal human phenomenon, Ishin

Denshin refers to the exclusive characteristic of Japanese society, where there is a passive form of shared understanding. Ishin Denshin serves as a mechanism for norm regulation that does not rely on explicit information exchange or costly reinforcement, but rather on the sensitivity of group members to social cues in their environment which can signal a threat to one's inclusionary status in the group and motivate people to shift their attitudes to be in line with group social norms (Atlantic International University N.D.).

### **3 Methodology**

This research paper analyses *A Silent Voice* through the use of Saussure's sign theory, as well as Wittgenstein's private language argument to apply a structuralist and philosophical lens to our research. Since both theories depend on context, we will then look at the scenery and symbolism. We would also take into account Japanese culture and its unique characteristics in relation to communication to better understand and analyse the film. From there, we would then be able to analyse the film and understand the actions and relations of the characters, as well as investigate the key linguistic factors that lead to bullying.

### **4 Discussion and Analysis**

In this section, with the help of our theories, we will be analysing how miscommunication happens through the film and how language cannot be confined to just verbal communication. Through analysis of the scenery, dialogue and symbolism, we will also discuss the possibility of universal linguistic factors that lead to bullying.

4.1 Communication is lost when there is a lack of connection between the sign and the signified, which may escalate to bullying

*A Silent Voice* portrays the importance of communication, for without it, it would be seemingly impossible for there to be mutual understanding and empathy, which may result in more dire consequences, like bullying. In this subsection, we will be analysing specific scenes in the film to see how communication is broken down.

First, one key scene showing the miscommunication between Shoya and Shouko was when Shouko was trying to become friends with him.

The scene starts off by giving a wide shot of the two in the playground.



The shot composition here serves to symbolise the barriers between Shoya and Shouko.

Physically, Shouko and Shoya are far apart from each other, although one would expect two people conversing to stand close together, showing how there is a physical disconnect between the two. The yellow structure symbolises communication barriers, commenting on how Shouko's

inability to communicate efficiently via verbal speech and Shoya's unwillingness to understand her creates a metaphorical distance between them, straining their relationship.



Shouko attempts to reconcile with Shoya through her action of putting her hands together and trying to sound out the word “friends”. According to Saussure’s sign theory, her action of gripping her hands together can be described as the “signifier”, with the intended “signified” therefore being becoming friends with Shoya. However, this scene shows how there lacks a link between the “signified” and the “signifier” due to the misunderstanding created. In relation to Wittgenstein’s private language argument, we can also see that language is not metaphysical, but rather social, as language cannot exist independent of human relations, unlike what a “private language” is. Therefore, the scene also shows how language really focuses on the “sign” created, rather than what actually is being said or done, commenting on how a “private language” cannot exist. The scene is from the point of view of Shoya, who was crouching on the ground at this point of time. This serves to depict Shouko as someone who towered over him and shows her as

someone foreign and unfamiliar. Furthermore, the view of Shouko also is not clear, instead it seems hazy, perhaps further emphasizing and symbolising the unfamiliarity of Shouko.

Furthermore, the scene being shown from the perspective of Shoya seems to represent the “signified” for the “signified” can only be interpreted by the receiving user of the “signifier”.

Although Shouko’s action of gripping her hands together was meant to signify friendship, this meaning gets lost due to the lack of link between the “signifier” and the “signified”, making

Shoya unable to understand her true intentions. The way the voice actor of Shouko says

“tomodachi”(friends) is robotic and forced, not that she does not want to make friends, but that she must make an effort in every word she says. This is more apparent as she pauses between the

syllabus “tomo” and “dachi”, which indicates her effort and the difficulty of communication via

words for her. This is what Shoya sees Shouko as, someone who was different from her, and

therefore is unable to understand her. The consequences of the lack of “signifier” and “signified”

is materialised right after this, with Shoya proceeding to throw sand in Shouko’s face.



Shoya was neither capable nor willing to try to understand Shouko, hence making her attempt at being friends with him seem futile. Because this link between the “signifier” and “signified” is missing, the “sign” cannot exist, for the “sign” has to be made up of these two units. According to Saussure, since language and communication itself relies on the formation of “signs”, when one of the two parts required to make “sign” is missing, language fails and communication does not occur. Again, this is materialised in the above scene, with Shoya throwing sand at Shouko. Shoya describes Shouko’s action as “creep[ing]” him out with the word “creep” connoting that Shouko was acting differently from what he was used to, so much so that he felt uncomfortable around her. The music is gentle and heartfelt, adding an overwhelming ambience into the situation, it portrays Shouko’s hidden emotions and exacerbates the extent of feelings which Shouko is unable to express. Shouko’s genuine feelings are only made known to the audience, like how only we are able to hear the music, something Shoya is unknown of. This is symbolic of how Shoya is unaware of Shouko’s intentions due to the lack of a “sign”.

Second, a fight occurs between the two protagonists in their classrooms later on, we gain further insight into Shoya and Shouko’s miscommunication.

Shoya finds Shouko in the classroom cleaning up his table from marker stains after presumably another bullying incident on Shoya. Shoya’s immediate reaction is one of aggression. He is angry that someone whom he bullied is pitying him all of a sudden, although Shouko cleaned his table for him out of kindness. This is a miscommunication error, the “signifier” is Shouko’s act of cleaning up the table, which is strengthened by the context of it being after school, indicating that

she intended to help him without his knowledge. However, to Shoya, the link is lost, and instead of viewing it as an act of kindness, he takes to it with rage.



He walks over and grabs her wrist, pulling her away from the table forcefully, exclaiming “What were you doing, you creep”. He is stubborn and refuses to understand Shouko’s effort in communicating with Shoya. This effect is mutual, Shouko also cannot read the subtleties of Shoyo’s actions through “shutoku”, she simply believes that what she is doing is right and also cannot understand Shoya. The misunderstanding between the two of them is caused by the broken link between “signifier” and “signified”. All the while, she remains silent, before sending an awkward smile towards Shoya.



There is an extensive use of silence(chinmoku) within this smile, as Shouko expects that Shoya is able to pick up on her hints. However in this case, her smile is obligatory and hence is also ambiguous. Her silence and unintentional use of “aimai” confuses Shoya who is unable and unwilling(at this moment) to comprehend. Shoya who is already agitated at this point views the “signified” incorrectly through her smile and chooses to insult her. He scornfully stares at her and says “There’s that face again”. Conversely to Shouko, Shoya’s actions lack “aimai”, he lacks the patience necessary to hold back his words and brutally assaults Shouko with insults. He does not know how to express himself with means other than insults, as to him, that is the natural thing to fall back on when confused; it is a clumsy way of communication.

Shoya’s lines include “What is it, if you have something to say, say it!”. “You always make a weird face,” “You’re angry right? Say it!”. We are able to pick up on Shoya’s frustration, as he is

annoyed that he can never understand Shouko, or why she never speaks up for herself. His confusion is caused by Shouko's misleading actions, leading to further misunderstandings. Shouko's actions are miscommunicated to Shoya, showing us a loss of link between signifier and signified due to Shouko's "aimai" and Shoya's inability to practice "shutoku". Eventually, the two escalate into a brawl.



Shouko, aggravated by Shoya's taunts, also begins to vent her bottled up opinions. She says in the same robotic and broken speech, except this time with an obvious tinge of pain "I'm doing the best I can!" to which Shoya shouts back, "What is it? I don't understand what you're saying!". This scene is central in showing the effects of miscommunication, and Shoya blatantly states his troubles. It is pitiful for Shouko, as even though she gives her all and tries to remain as polite and likeable as possible, she is still bullied as others cannot communicate with her.

Throughout the confrontation, the music is sombre and serene, using high-pitched piano keys, it is one of the highlights of the scene as all we hear is the sound effects of their brawl and their pained confessions. In a sense, the music reflects their true conversation, where both ends seek to communicate, this is further strengthened by the fact that we are able to hear the noise inside the piano, as the music intentionally leaves in the noise of the hammers in a piano. The music bright but not happy and gentle whilst not being kind. According to the musician(Kensuke Ushio), he disassembled an upright piano to include a mic inside. The closeness we feel towards the piano and sound allows us to hear everything within a piano, amplifying the rawness of emotions in the exchange between the two protagonists. Hence, using the piano to symbolise the real voice of Shouko allows us to see how much she is unable to express, and more importantly, how much Shoya is missing out from, exacerbating the loss of communication.

#### 4.2 Bullying as a result of linguistic factors and miscommunication

Bullying is a central theme in *A Silent Voice*, with both main characters, Shoya and Shouko being ostracised and bullied. However, the film also highlights how bullying actually occurs.

Throughout the film, both communication and bullying are interlinked, with the former seeming as the main reason for bullying in the first place.

##### 4.2.1 Inability to understand and empathise

Bullying has often been thought of as a result of psychological factors like insecurity or arrogance, but the film seems to comment otherwise.

In the film, bullying is caused by the inability to understand and communicate with one another. Shouko's actions and words were not able to get through to the rest of the class, including Shoya. This led to them bullying and ostracising her, for they were unable to communicate with her.



In this scene, Ueno explains to Shouko why they bullied her in the past. She explained that they “did not understand her well enough” but neither did Shouko. Both parties failed to understand each other and were not able to communicate. Ueno claims that instead of trying to understand them, Shouko instead gave them a “weird” notebook. The irony here is that Shouko was trying her best to understand her classmates, with her notebook being the medium for such understanding to take place. Yet, the meaning of the action of passing the notebook to the class gets lost, for Ueno and the rest of the class interprets it as Shouko's unwillingness to try and understand them. The notebook was meant to signify Shouko's attempt to understand her classmates yet it only did the opposite. Throughout the scene, Shouko remains silent and does

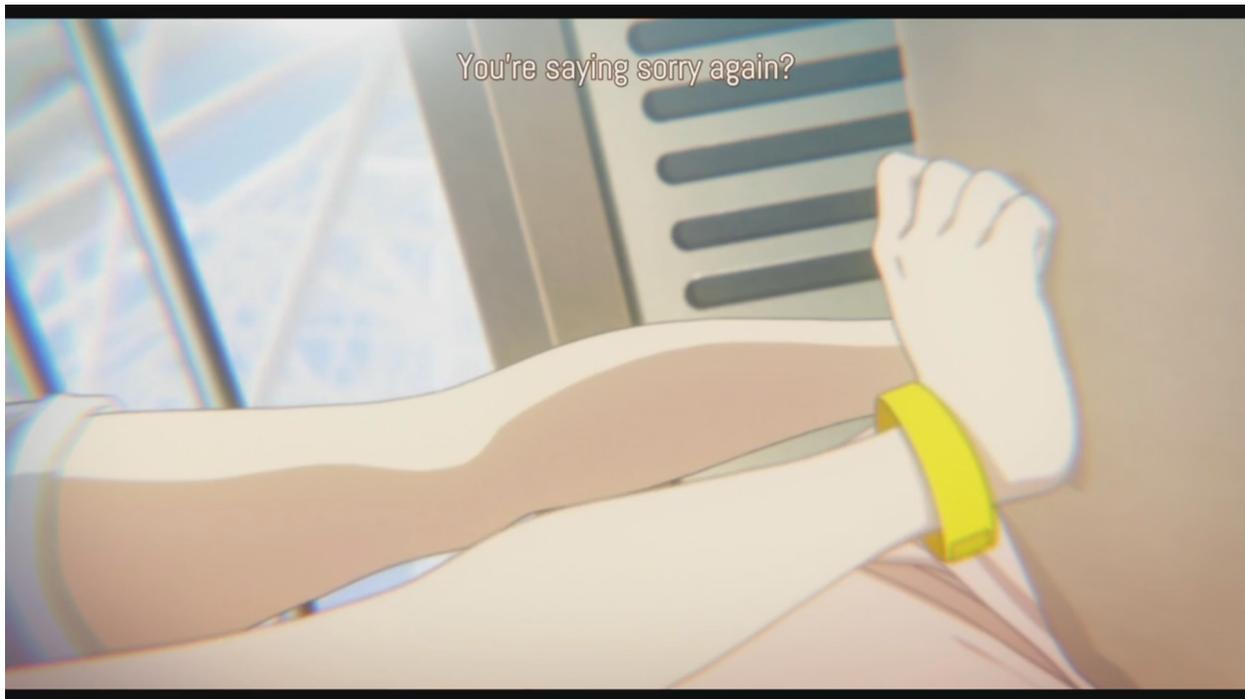
not try to refute nor explain the situation in her eyes, yet she sits quietly, listening to Ueno.

“Chinmoku” is practiced, she shows her guilt and internalised feelings of regret and self-blame.



Towards the end of the scene, Ueno wants to resolve this by shaking hands with Shouko, as people “who hate each other”. The act of shaking is symbolic of resolution and of cooperating.

Ueno is unable to stop the feeling of hate and animosity towards Shouko yet she believes Shouko feels the same towards her, and hence wants to “coexist” with her. However, Shouko responds by saying “I don’t hate you. I hate myself”. Again, her internalised feelings of self-hatred and guilt can be seen, as even though she was the one being bullied, she still believes that she was the root of the problem and she should be the one getting blamed.



Ueno believed that there was mutual hatred between the both of them, even if Shouko did not explicitly state it (Ishin Denshin). Her basis for trying to shake hands with Shouko was on the premise that there was a “tacit understanding” that they hated each other. However, Shouko instead claimed that she “hated” herself. Ueno is unable to understand why Shouko hated herself. This inability to comprehend and understand Shouko caused Ueno to lash out, rhetorically asking her if she was “apologising again”. This is paradoxical, as one would expect to be soothed or placated by an apology but Ueno instead gets more angry. The reason for this was because her “apology” seemed foreign; Ueno did not understand what the apology signified or why she was even apologising in the first place. This break between the “signifier” and “signified” caused the lack of shared, mutual understanding between the two, causing Ueno to lash out against Shouko in the past and even now. Hence, the message Shouko was trying to convey, the message of her apology was lost, and the “signified” missing, leading to there being a lack of understanding between her and the rest of the classmates, causing Shouko to get bullied and ostracised by them.

### 4.3 Communication can only occur when there is an active effort and willingness to try and understand one another

The film portrays this through Shoya's redemption arc, where Shoya, after having grown up, decided to learn sign language in an attempt to reconcile with Shouko and make up for his mistakes. In the end, he does indeed overcome his trauma and reconcile with Shouko, but this was due to the fact that he was willing to understand and learn sign language.

#### 4.3.1 The reconciliation of the "signifier" and the "signified"

When Shoya meets Shouko for the first time, he tries to interact and communicate with her. Instead of using speech and verbal words to try and communicate with her, he uses sign language. Due to the guilt and remorse he felt, Shoya had picked up sign language in order to try and understand Shouko's perspective.



The shot here shows Shoya trying to make up for his mistakes, as he did the very same hand sign Shouko did when she wanted to be friends with him in the past. The camera zooms into a close shot of Shoya's hands, to what is a parallel of an earlier scene. There is significant impact within the three words, with the camera slightly shaking in order to emphasise on Shoya's hesitance and no music in order to enhance the rawness of his emotions, he points at Shouko, before himself, and whilst cupping his hands he says aloud, "Can me and you, Nishimiya.. Can we be friends?". Furthermore, it is a scene where the only sounds made is Shoya's voice, the sound of the fabric against his hands, and the clasping of his hands, with some unnoticeable ambience that forces us to focus on Shoya's sign language. It is an honest confession between the two, and for once, they mutually understand each other. What was once thought to be something Shouko could only understand, her "private language", was now able to be used and communicated by Shoya. Throughout the scene, Shouko is completely silent. However, instead of lashing out at Shouko's silence this time round, Shoya is able to see it as meaningful silence and use it to connect with

Shouko even further. Through the lens of the “Private Language Argument”, it can be seen that what Shouko was trying to communicate when she was younger, was finally understood by Shoya, and that it was because of his willingness to learn that he was able to communicate with Shouko.



After hearing this, Shouko hides behind her book, and starts tearing up. The act of covering her face with her book was an attempt to try and hide herself crying. She started crying as Shoya finally understood what she meant in the past, and he was trying to do the same. According to Saussure, language is merely made up of the “sign” and its two units: the “signifier” and the “signified”. Once he does this action, he realises what Shouko was trying to convey in the past, in which she wanted to be friends with him, symbolised by him saying “I finally got what she meant”. This sudden realisation of what the “signified” was supposed to be shows how the “sign” was rediscovered. It comments on how sign language was able to effectively

communicate the “signified” to both parties, showing how communication could only occur when there is mutual willingness.

#### 4.3.2 The summit of trauma

*A Silent Voice* emphasises on the effects of trauma. The film deals with one’s life after a traumatic experience, how it alters their psyche and how it impacts their day to day relations. Shoya is a prime example of someone who suffered from trauma, as after the bullying incident, he became socially inept and awkward and developed anxiety and depression. However, we can see him slowly overcoming his trauma after he had started communicating with Shouko and reconciling with her, whilst at the same time facing the traumatic past he had been avoiding all this while.



It can be seen that everyone around him has a ‘X’ on their face. This ‘X’ symbolises and materialises the fear of rejection Shoya has. Shoya automatically puts up a barrier towards others with an ‘X’, deeming everyone as dangerous or potentially harmful.

The music genre is in techno, with an electronic melody which is fast and plays in a loop. It helps to present Shoya's anxiety and unfeelingness towards the others in his vicinity, and this type of music only plays when Shoya shuts out other people. This is juxtaposed with Shouko, whose music is based around a lone piano and bells which play at high pitches, associating Shouko with the willingness to understand; and conversely, Shoya with the fear to comprehend. Shoya's deliberate shutting out causes him to become an outcast, as he does not have the concept of "Ishin Denshin" to fit in with others.



He symbolically cups his hands around his ear, as to literally show the act of him being unwilling to listen, the 'X' which appears on another's face is his survival mechanism, as he feels safer knowing when he categorises the people who may possess an 'X'. The background ambience is that of a muffled and loud conversation which overwhelms Shoya, it is hazy and blurry, but it helps to enhance the fear which Shoya feels.



Now, his willingness undergoes a metamorphosis in the final scene.

The 'X's all fall on the floor, being triggered by a soothing yet piercing high pitched sound, the music explodes into a loud and orchestral melody which overwhelms our ears and simultaneously, the cameras pan towards a wide shot of everyone's 'X's falling off at the school festival. This is a reference to Shoya's earlier statements, where he says "Starting tomorrow... I'll listen to everyone's voice properly". The falling of the 'X's symbolise an overcoming and self-resolution, where Shoya realises internally that in truth, he has been the one shutting everyone out, not the others. And this is the turning point where he learns that willingness is key towards viewing the link between signifier and signified, as without willingness, the context behind the signified changes and hence miscommunication occurs; without willingness, Shoya cannot understand Shouko's "private language" as he would never have made the effort to learn it. Shoya begins crying, succumbing to his emotions and realising the impact behind making an active effort to communicate.

## **5 Conclusion**

The film portrays language as something that only works when there is effort from both parties to try and understand each other. In the beginning, Shouko's inability to convey what she was trying to say highlights the fallibility of language, and how this miscommunication can lead to misunderstandings and bullying. However, the film also sheds light on communication in general, that mutual willingness to understand each other is a key tenet for communication to occur and for misunderstandings to clear up. In the end, *A Silent Voice* showcases the fragile nature of communication and the importance of empathy.

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