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The Most Powerful Thing You'd Say Is Nothing at All: The Power of Silence in Conversation

Bashir Ibrahim and Usman Ambu Muhammad

Abstract

After a long period of neglect, silence is currently receiving an increased amount of attention in the literature of sociolinguistics and pragmatics. Since the publication of Tannen and Saville-Troike and Jaworski, many international conferences, books, monographs, articles, PhD theses and book chapters continue to emerge. Many of those publications recognized silence as a powerful tool of communication; and that it is not peripheral to speech because any form of analysis that is applied to speech could also be applied to the analysis of silence. Silence has been broadly classified as communicative and non-communicative, and it serves both positive and negative functions. As silence performs two opposite functions, its interpretation depends on some factors such as the socio-cultural background of the actors involved in the use and the interpretation of the silence act, and the context of its use. This chapter starts with an introduction which covers review of related literature, and then proceeds with the classification of silence. It continues with discussing some functions of silence, and then talks about interpretation of silence in social contexts. Finally, the chapter examines some instances of the power of silence in conversation.

Keywords: Silence, conversation, communication, sociolinguistics, pragmatics

1. Introduction

Conversation is, of course, not a mere disorderly chunk of speech. There are protocols that guide exchange of talk as well as when not to say anything. The exchange protocols and the time of silence rely heavily on culture and context. Culture here refers to the norms of the society that guide how the talk or silence is used, and the context refers to the setting in which the conversation holds. Trudgill [1] reported that '[in] some Caribbean communities, as among certain groups of Black American adolescents, it is perfectly normal, at least in some situations, for everyone to talk at once. Schegloff [2], however, argues that the tendency of two speakers talking at the same time appeared to be a departure from what is basically known in conversation as one-speaker-at-a-time.

Various studies have looked at silence from communicative perspective such as some studies of some tribes in Africa as among the Akan people of Ghana [3], the Igbo people of Nigeria [4]; religious silence such as among British Quakerism and British Buddhism [5]; or silence in the lawyering process [6]. Others have looked at

silence in social interaction. Trudgil [7], for example, stated silence of longer than four seconds is not allowed especially among native speakers of English who are not close friends because such silence is considered as embarrassment. Similarly, Tannen [8] reported that silence was averted during conversation among some New Yorkers of East European Jewish background. These reports indicated that silence is perceived as a negative trait particularly among Europeans.

In addition, Jaworski [9] reported that one of the passengers in a 5-hour journey by train in Poland expressed disgust over their silence throughout the journey, describing the situation as if they were going to a funeral. It is of little surprise then that Scollon [10], who uses the theory of metaphor to study silence, describes silence as malfunction – ‘If one assumes the engine should be running, the silences will indicate failures. Smooth talk is taken as a natural state of the smoothly running cognitive and interactional machine’. It has to be noted, however, in the situations cited above, silence is portrayed as part of the participants’ preference for talk or avoidance of relationship. In all those cases, silence is non-communicative because the silence of the passengers in a train, for example, cannot be interpreted. Also, in the case of the conversation between New Yorkers and non-New Yorkers, silence was described as a boundary marking the beginning or end of speech, and the desire of the New Yorkers to continue talking. Such desire might be a tendency acquired since childhood or a personality trait of the conversational partners involved.

There is, however, another type of silence which occurs during conversation when the current speaker stops talking or when the next speaker takes the floor from the current speaker. The former is referred to as ‘switching pause’ while the latter as ‘inturn pause’ [10]. The turn exchanges is referred to as turn-taking. Some pioneering works on turn-taking in cross-cultural encounters include Basso [11] and Scollon and Scollon [12] who conducted studies on Western Apache and the Athabaskan Indians respectively. Their studies indicated variations in turn-taking habits of the Western Apache cultures and the Athabaskans with that of the ‘West’. Reporting Scollon and Scollon’s [12] research, Trudgill [7] stated that:

The Athabaskans go away from the conversation thinking that English speakers are rude, dominating, superior, garrulous, smug and self-centered. The English speakers, on the other hand, find the Athabaskans rude, superior, surly, taciturn and withdrawn.

Such perception culminated from what one of conversation partners believed to be usurping his right to the floor while the other thought his partner has relinquished such a right. Turn-taking, therefore, is not just exchange of speakership from one person to the other but how such transfer is made without violating exchange etiquette. Members of speech community know how to participate in turn-taking exchanges and how to adhere to rules that are appropriate in their community, by allowing overlap (if acceptable) to occur between utterances, and by using pause lengths that are compatible with their particular socio-cultural norms.

2. Role of culture in the use and interpretation of silence

As various cultures differ in their use of silence, the interpretation of someone’s silence can also be culture-dependent. Fast rate of speech, for example, is valued in European communities while in some communities such as the Navajo and Indians Athabaskans, longer silences are tolerated. Such silences have,

therefore, become the feature of the speech of those communities, and therefore, not a problem. Also among the Japanese, Nakane [13] reported that 'Japanese silence stands out not only in comparison with Southern Europeans or New Yorkers but also with East Asian neighbors such as the Koreans and Chinese as well'. Silence is used more often by the Japanese in highly emotional situations such as courtship. 'Young spouses who are deeply in love, for example, often express their affection for each other by nonverbal means and silence' [9]. There was no consensus among researchers on Japanese silence. Some of the researchers – Anderson [14] and Miller [15] criticized the view that Japanese are more reserved compared to other Asians because the claim, according to Anderson, was purely intuitive, lacking any empirical backing. Anderson added that Japanese do talk, and sometimes they talk a lot, but the context of the talk is culturally sanctioned. The above arguments indicate the need to explain further the power of silence in conversation.

To some other communities, however, particularly in the west, past rate of speech is the expected trait during conversation [8]. For this reason, 'the debate over whether silence or talk should take more priority will never be settled with reconciliation across all contexts' [16]. This is obvious because silent cultures might not discard their silent practice for the voluble ones or vice versa. The Japanese, for example, might not dispose of its 'quietness' because another culture somewhere is garrulous. This is because 'cross-cultural uses of silence are rooted in the observation of different types of taboo, practical magic, and in varying beliefs as to how much talk is necessary in a given situation' [9].

3. Classification of silence

Earlier, since 1771, Dinouart, cited in Perniola [17] classified silence into ten types:

- i. Prudent silence: Silence use to avoid jeopardizing oneself.
- ii. Artificial silence: Deliberate use of silence in order to benefit from what others may say.
- iii. Courteous silence: The use of silence to show approval of something usually accompanied by nodding or gesture.
- iv. Teasing silence: Using silence as a means of deception to show approval while the performer of the silence act is actually deceiving the perceiver of the silence act.
- v. Spiritual silence: Silence used by those who believe that it (silence) is a means of spiritual connection between themselves and the divine being.
- vi. Stupid silence: In this type of silence the performer remains mute because he has nothing to express, particularly when he was alone.
- vii. Applauding silence is used to show approval in front of the person being heard, mostly accompanied by nodding one's head.
- viii. Contempt silence is used to show disregard towards what is said.

- ix. Capricious silence: This type of silence is used by those who want show their liking or disliking of what they hear, mostly accompanied by opening their mouths.
- x. Political silence: This type of silence is used by those who use circumspection, not saying all that they think, not entirely explaining their conduct or purposes.

The above proposal broadly explains the types of silence that may likely occur in various situations. A close look at the classification would reveal the need for reclassification. The first one (prudent silence) for example can be merged with the second (artificial silence) and the last one (political silence) because the intent of using the silence in these three situations is similar – to avoid jeopardizing oneself. Thus, both can be classified under prudent silence. Also, as courteous silence and applauding silence are used to show approval, they can be merged under applauding or courteous silence.

Later, other researchers classified silence by considering some factors such as genre and the context in which the silence is practiced. Saville-Troike [18], for example, proposed *etic* categories: Institutionally-determined silence, Group-determined silence, and Individually-determined/negotiated silence. As for Kurzon [19], there is a *typology* of silence comprising conversational, thematic, textual and situational silences. In his classification of silence, Jaworski [9] proposed ‘fuzzy categories’. He approached silence from a socio-pragmatic perspective where he discussed silence ‘as a component of various communicative situations and a tool of communicative expression’ [9]. He categorizes silence into two broad categories: Communicative and Non-communicative. Jaworski believes that not all types of silence are communicative. As such, ‘the actual interpretation of someone’s silence takes place only when the communication process is expected or perceived to be taking place’. It is of no use, for example, trying to infer meaning from some silent person who was found alone ‘day-dreaming’ in the classroom. In this situation, his silence can be termed as ‘stupid silence’ [17]. But if communication was triggered by two strangers, for example, and silence occurred during conversation, then the silence is perceived to be meaningful and, therefore, subject to interpretation. This latter case of the use of silence is communicative while the former is non-communicative.

As communicative silence is perceived to be meaningful and interpretable, Jaworski [9] expands it to include the following types:

- i. Silence as State: This is the type of silence where communicative event is structured or framed. The information transmitted through this type of silence is mostly in the form of visual arts, music, literary works, kinesics or proxemics behaviors. Jaworski argues that in the aforementioned genres, silence is a substance presented by the communicator in nonverbal form.
- ii. Silence as Formulaic: This is ‘a customary act of saying nothing in reaction to specific stimuli’ sometimes ‘accompanied by other nonverbal behavior such as bowing, smiling, waving and so on’. Interpretation of such type of silence depends largely on cultural practices, and contexts. Such formulaic silences include instances where loss of face is perceived such as someone passing gas, belching or spitting in public. This type of silence is also practiced during funerals or some rituals.

iii. Silence as Activity: This type of silence includes refraining from speaking, and acts of failing to mention something. Two examples provided by Jaworski may suffice here:

a. Mother gave her approval in silence.

b. They moved to the next point of the agenda in silence

In examples 'a' and 'b' above, silence is conceptualized as part of an activity following certain speech acts. According to Jaworski [9] the three categories he proposed 'are the most prototypical ones and seem to provide a good starting point for studying silence in interpersonal communication'. He believes that the categories 'cover a wide range of forms and situations in which the concept of silence can be used to explain and account for problems of miscommunication and misunderstanding, indirectness, ritualized behavior, and cross-cultural communication'.

As Jaworski [9] approached silence from social and pragmatic perspectives, his classification centred mainly on the use of silence in social encounters, and the meaning that can be derived from using silence in the social context being talked about. His recognition of silence as communicative and non-communicative is, certainly, commendable because he acknowledges that not all silences are interpretable and meaningful. Silence of someone who is found alone, for example, is non-interpretable and meaningless unless preceded by talk or act which requires the silent person to talk but he chooses to remain silent. Silence is non-communicative when it serves linguistic function as where interlocutor pauses, interrupts or overlaps during conversation. Turn exchanges can occur in both local and foreign language use. In both the local and foreign language use interlocutors are expected to follow certain conventions depending on the situation.

4. The power of silence in conversation

In this section, an attempt has been made to show the power of silence in conversation from pragmatic perspective. The examples did not include the use of silence from conversation analysis perspective i.e. turn-taking. During conversation, it is pertinent for conversation partners to understand when to say something and when to remain silent. Also, in situations where silence is used instead of talk, conversation partners must try to infer meaning to the silence act in order to avoid misunderstanding and confrontation. The interpretation of the silence act, however, might not always be accurate due to its various nuances. The use of silence in similar situations, for example, may evoke different interpretations depending on culture, situation or setting. Saville-Troike [18] cited two examples as they occurred among the Japanese and the Igbo of Nigeria:

A: Please marry me

B: [Silence; head and eyes lowered] (Acceptance)

In Japanese culture, silence in the above context signifies acceptance because, according to Jaworski [9], young spouses who are deeply in love often express their affection for each other by nonverbal means and in silence. In the Igbo culture of Southern Nigeria, however, similar scenario can mean either rejection or acceptance as in the following example:

A: Are you still mad at me?

B: [Silence] (Affirmative)

In the preceding example, if the girl continues to stand there saying nothing it means denial, but acceptance if she ran away Nwoye [4] cited in Tannen [8]. The interpretation of silence in the two cultures cited above is rather convoluted because the scenarios are similar but the act of staying or running away interprets the silence act. This is parallel with what Davidson [20] cited in Jaworski [9] who states that '[s]ilences that occur immediately after the speech act of invitation, offer, request, or proposal are typically interpreted as rejections'. The silences in the above scenarios evoke different interpretations – acceptance in the case of the Japanese girl, and rejection and/or acceptance in the case of the Igbo girl. Apart from portraying the ambiguity of silence, the above examples show that silence is not an empty 'locution', but "a potent communicative weapon" [21] which is used in formal and social situations. Hence, silence often sends the most powerful message in a more safer and apt way than verbal communication.

In situations where communication is involved or is perceived to be taking place, there should be the sender and the receiver of the message. Such message can either in verbal or non-verbal forms. Silence, therefore, is a non-verbal communication which carries symbolic significance, and it is interpretable based on the intent, situation and context of its use. Consider again the following situation by Jaworski [9]:

Speaker A: How do you see this shirt?

Speaker B: [looks at the shirt, silence (0.1)]. Yeah, it's good.

Speaker A: No. You didn't like it.

The slight silence of speaker B sends a powerful message to speaker A who concluded that the intention of speaker B has been hidden, and therefore interpreted the silence of 0.1 seconds as dislike despite an utterance which likely conceals the real intent of B. Nakane [22], citing Crown and Feldstein [23] believes that lengths of pauses and tempo of speech can be associated with personal traits and can contribute to listener's impression of the speaker. The use of silence and the act of looking at the shirt in the above example created an impression in the mind of speaker A that his shirt was not liked despite the response of B in the affirmative.

Looking at silence as a stimulus, it can often be less demanding particularly on the part of the addresser and the addressee, and particularly when the context is clear to both of them. Consider this example provided by Jaworski [9]:

Peter: How much do you earn at this new place?

Mary: [Silence]

Peter: Well, you don't have to tell me.

In the above example, Peter presumably asked a question which he should not have asked because one's wages is confidential and personal. Though the relationship of Peter to Mary is not stated, it can be said that the relationship was very strong to the extent that Peter feels that asking such a question might not lead to a confrontation. Peter, however, received a big surprise with silence which indicated the unwillingness of Mary to reveal her salary status to him. The communicators achieved both their communicative and informative intentions in a more optimal way. Peter inferred meaning from the silence of Mary; and on her part, Mary has passed information to Peter in a more solid and concise way possible. Peter immediately infers Mary's silence as unwillingness to expose her salary information to him, therefore the information [silence] is worth Peter's effort to process and interpret

it. On her part, it was Mary's choice and preference to express her intention with silence, which might be safer for her than to give a verbal response.

In another situation below, A wants to use B's umbrella but the silence of the latter sends a powerful message to B which compels the former to withdraw his earlier request. This situation confirms what Davidson [20] says about silences that come after requests, proposals and offers as rejections. Although B did not say anything, her silence is obvious – a resounding 'no'. Had it been B uses the word 'no', A might feel more offended as the answer might sound offensive and defiant:

A: *Can I use your umbrella?*

B: *[silence]*

A: *Well, I can use Ben's.*

In the above example, A interprets B's silence as a warning or order which implies 'no don't take it' (a warning), or simply 'I ordered you not use it'. As B did not use verbal response, the tendency of hot feeling is reduced, and A quickly changes his decision of using B's umbrella to Ben's.

However, not all similar situations like the above can end smoothly. Sometimes the silence act might end up embarrassing the conversational partner. For example, Jaworski [9] narrated that his neighbor's daughter was married out, and after the wedding the neighbor visited him and his wife. As their discussion unfolds, the neighbor asked him how much she owed him. This is what he said after the woman asked him that question:

*I was genuinely appalled at that question
so I did not say anything and just looked
peevish at the woman. After a moment she said
"Do you want me to jump out of the window".
I said "Yes". [italics mine]*

The above incidence shows how the author felt after the question, and therefore remained silent, but disgustingly, continued to look at the woman. The woman, on her side felt embarrassed and ashamed of the question she asked due the silence act that followed her question, and asked if she could jump out of the window. The reply of the author in the affirmative indicates how dismayed he was. He stated that:

*"I knew she did not intend to be rude to me,
but I felt insulted. If I had decided to tell her
that I thought she was being rude to me at that moment,
I may have hurt her in turn" [9]*

In the above example, silence serves as a repair mechanism of a seeming confrontation. On the side of the author, his silence serves a referential function which might be interpreted as "You shouldn't have asked this question"; or "Why do you asked me this question?" or "I didn't like what you asked". On her side, the woman felt very much embarrassed by the question she asked, and quickly changed the matter to a joke by asking whether she could jump out of the window. The author instantly accepted the change of the topic, thereby repairing the conversation. Any verbal response to that type of request which appears to be disgusting might mess up the whole situation and brings confrontation and dissonance. The most powerful thing that might repair the interaction is silence. From the foregoing examples, it can be suggested that most uses of conversational silence are negative. The interpretation of the silence act can either be rejection, order, warning or defiance.

5. Conclusion

This chapter discussed the power of silence in conversation by bringing an overview of the classification of silence, its function in communication, and how it is (mis)interpreted in various contexts. The result of this discussion shows that silence is ambiguous and its interpretation varies even within similar contexts. In many of the situations cited above silence was used as rejection, order, warning or defiance which are apparently unpleasant in human interactions. Use of verbal means to express such negative acts might increase the unpleasantness in the social interaction. The most suitable alternative could be the use of silence in order to reduce the pain of using verbal communication. Silence could, of course, be a 'reliever' of social tension that might occur in many human interactions, and an effective tool of sending a powerful message. Future studies may consider how silence accompanied with other non-verbal acts such as a grin or a smirk contributes to the interpretation of the silence act.

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