

A Socio-Pragmatic Analysis of Silence in Communication: An Ethnographic Review

Anthony Ayodele Olaoye
Veritas University Abuja

Abstract

Silence as a sociolinguistic and pragmatic concept is not a weather-bitten topic in linguistic literature. However, its ramifications in intra- and inter-cultural communication have not been well explored, especially in the ethnography of speaking. The term itself looks illusory; it is epistemologically ontogenetic and hence confusing. The author therefore tries to unravel the seeming mystery around the term and its role in communication. The paper presents a review of literature from socio-pragmatic perspective, with ethnography as its theoretical framework. The author employs descriptive survey method, using interview and participant observation for data elicitation. The data were collected from randomly selected students and lecturers from the Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja. Qualitative analysis of data was used. It was found that silence is a veritable communication tool, and that it has its meaning and functions. There is nothing really mysterious about silence, except, perhaps God's own divine silence which is beyond human understanding. Silence, from a pragmatic view point, is a socio-cultural and religious communication tool, with perlocutory effect.

keywords: Epistemology, Ontogenetic, Pragmatics, Ethnography, Perlocutory

Introduction

The motivation for this paper is the seemingly controversial term silence, a pragmatic term in Linguistics. The paper therefore tries to elucidate the word from sociolinguistic and ontogenetic perspectives. The author presents the meaning, role and types of silence as a veritable communication tool, in the ethnography of speaking of mankind. The study is relevant as it tries to remove the mystery surrounding the term. Pragmatics, according to Richard (2015), is the study of the relationships between linguistic forms and the users of those forms. It is a branch of Sociolinguistics concerned with the use of language in social contexts. The term was coined in the 1930s by Charles W. Morris, and was developed as a sub-field of linguistics in the 1970s (Mey, 1993). Socio-pragmatics encompasses speech act theory, conversational implicature, and other approaches to language behaviour (Olaoye, 2008). Silence is used in inter-ethnic, inter-religious and inter-cultural interactions, in people's ethnography of speaking. It is a non-verbal type of communication. The paper tries to

find out the meaning and interpretation of silence in different contexts, like in rhetorical questions, in sermons, in legal inquiries and in responses to investigative enquiries. The role of silence in speech is also investigated. The paper also tries to clear people's misconception about silence.

Theoretical Framework

Our theoretical framework is on the ethnography of speaking. The speech events in this milieu include students' interaction with each other, with lecturers, non-academic staff, administrative staff, the university management, visitors, stake-holders from the community, religious associations, health personnel, security agents, religious leaders and unionists. Silence as a non-verbal communication strategy can be used to disseminate information which spoken words cannot do. Silence can mean different things to different people. According to cultural norms, silence can be positive or negative.

World View of Silence

Silence is the lack of audible sound. Within the field of linguistics, the vital role of silence has long

been ignored. It was believed that silence only had a boundary marking and prosodic functions. It was thus defined as an absence of speech or as “periods of non-speech or non-vocalization in conversation” (Saville –Troike, 1985; Zuo, 2002). Whereas words were normally considered as the prototypical communicators, silence was believed to be a prototypical non-communicator (Saville –Troike, 1985). The author agrees that silence is not a void, but a linguistic category with its own structures, meanings and functions, which contribute to the organization and operation of conversation (Zuo, 2002).

In Discourse Analysis, interlocutors or participants in conversations use brief absences of speech (silence) to mark the boundaries of prosodic (stress and intonation) units. Silence can be due to linguistic, sociolinguistic, psycholinguistic reasons, such as hesitation, stuttering, self-correction, caution, uncertainty, or even circumspection. It may occur in reactive tokens or in turn-taking (Adegbola, 2016).

Silence was studied by linguists from two different approaches, the first was through philosophy, which looks at “eloquent silence” from a functional point of view (Jensen, 1973 and Bruneau, 1973). The second was through acoustics; it was through this route that silence was introduced as a subject of study. In this acoustics route, the constant ratio between vocalization and silence in spontaneous speech was studied (Crown and Feldstein, 1985, 1991). The concept of silence that crept to speech studies and linguistics in the 1970s was closely associated with negativity, passiveness, impotence and death. It was treated as absence of speech, absence of meaning and intention (Saville-Troike, 1994; Poyatos, 2002; and Zerubavel, 2006).

Ephratt (2007) categorizes silence into four classes:

- a. Stillness: found in sleep and meditation
- b. Pauses: occurring during planning of a conversation and during decision-making time
- c. Silencing: there could be temporary mutism or chronic mutism i.e. being mute. There could be prohibition that is people could be forbidden to speak, or there is censorship.
- d. Eloquent silence: this happens in religious ceremonies, funerals and in such situations as in turn-taking and when rhetorical questions are asked. Observance of a minute silence for the departed is also an aspect of eloquent silence.

Context of Silence

Silence is found in the following contexts:

In music: Music depends on silence to distinguish other periods of sound, and to allow dynamics, melodies and rhythms to have greater impact. Silence in music can be seen as a time for contemplation. It can enhance the sounds of instruments.

In debate: In debates there is argumentative silence. This occurs when a speaker says nothing when an opponent expects him to say something. The assumption is that someone's silence means ignorance of the matter or topic in question.

In danger: In social animals, including human beings, silence can be a sign of danger, according to Jordanian (2009). Some social animals communicate the signal of potential danger by stopping contact calls, without the use of alarm calls, through silence. Early humans used humming as a contact method in order to avoid silence, because prolonged silence is distressing and hence dangerous.

In spiritual realm: Silence is often a metaphor for inner stillness (Palmquist, 2000). According to him a silent mind, freed from thoughts, is both a

goal and an important step in spiritual development. Such inner silence brings one in contact with one's divine nature, or God. Some religious practices manifest the importance of quietness and still mind for spiritual growth. There is the silence of contemplative prayer, such as meditation in Christianity, while in Islam the Sufis insist on the importance of silence within. In Buddhism and Hinduism, silence is encouraged during worship. Silence is a safety fence for wisdom (Quaker, 2005). Communal silence, in some traditions of Quakerism, is the usual context of worship meetings where congregations expect divine encounter with God.

In legal matters: Silence in a legal disputation signifies acceptance of guilt. There is a legal angle to the practice and observance of silence. The right to silence is a legal protection of people undergoing police or law enforcement interrogation. A suspected criminal who is afraid of brutal treatment sometimes remains silent to avoid incriminating statement. In Yoruba culture, silence signals acquiescence or acceptance of guilt or even ignorance

In Cultural Matters: It is sometimes a sign of respect for the elderly. A common way of remembering tragic incidents, such as death, and to remember the victims is a commemorative silence. People observe a minute silence for prayers for the dead. This is an age-old tradition observed in many nations. It is noticed that all scholars of silence – linguists, psycholinguists, pragmaticians and discourse analysts seem to agree that silence has emotive and “perlocutory force” (Olaoye, 2014). Silence is however not restricted to the expression of pain. Shakespeare said in *Much Ado About Nothing* that “silence is the perfect herald of joy”. Silence is a precondition for happiness.

Methodology

Interview, questionnaire and observation were used for data elicitation. Questionnaires used are divided into two sections: section A contains

biodata of the respondents, while section B contains questions that deal with the role of silence in communication. Participant observation was employed in data collection. The author himself observed many speech events in the classroom. Interview and observation formed the primary data, while the secondary data are from the Bible, textbooks and internet documents. The data collected were analyzed descriptively.

Sample/sampling procedure

Forty (40) students (20 male and 20 female) and ten (10) lecturers from the Department of Linguistics and African Languages in the Faculty of Arts, University of Abuja, Nigeria, were interviewed. From the 40 students sampled, ten (10) students came from each of the four class-levels. There were twenty (20) male and twenty (20) female students representing five ethnic groups – Hausa, Igbo, Yoruba, Tiv and Fulani.

Data collection procedure

Twenty interview questions were designed and used for data elicitation. This was the main primary source of data. The secondary source was the participant observation. The author went into the lecture halls during class lectures, and observed what went on during lectures.

Results

The results of the interview are presented in the following descriptive terms and are interpreted under discussion.

a. Causes of silence:

- Tiredness
- Anger
- Cognition/thinking
- Fear
- Embarrassment
- Risk of being implicated
- Patience

b. Types of silence:

- Stillness
- Pauses
- Mutism
- Eloquent silence

- Judicial
- Commemorative
- Spiritual/religious
- Grave yard
- Divine silence
- If you have already said it more than one time. Prov 19:13 and 21
- When you are tempted to flatter a wicked person. Prov. 24:24

Biblical Findings

From the secondary source of information used in this study, the Holy Bible, the following are the occasions when one should be silent:

- In the heat of anger: Prov: 14:17
- When you don't have all the facts. Prov 18:13
- When you haven't verified the story. Deut 17:6
- If your words will offend a weaker person. 1Cor 8:11
- When it is time to listen. Prov 13:1
- When you are tempted to make light of holy things. Eccl 5:2
- When you are tempted to joke about sin. Prov 14:9
- If you would be ashamed of your words. Prov. 8:8
- If your words would convey the wrong impression. Prov. 17:27
- If the issue is none of your business. Prov 14:10
- When you are tempted to tell an outright lie. Prov 4:24
- If your words will damage someone else's reputation. Prov 16:27
- If your words will damage a friendship. Pro 16:28
- When you are feeling critical. James 3:9
- When you can't say it without screaming. Prov 25:28
- If your words will be a poor reflection of the lord or your friends and family. 1Pt2:21-23
- If you may have to eat your words later. Prov 18:21

Discussion

The study has shown that tiredness creates silence. Tired people are prone to aggressiveness when they talk or respond to people. Thus, silence is the best solution for the avoidance of rashness or offensive response. On the other hand, angry people have the tendency for giving provocative response or speech. Silence thus prevents unethical conduct or behaviour. Cogitation or thinking requires silence in conversation. An interlocutor who thinks well needs to be silent in order to understand what the other person is saying.

Other natural phenomena which engender silence are also discussed below. The fear of being criticized, abused or even insulted causes people to be silent. One who opposes unethical behaviour in the public is vulnerable to attack, and sometimes to threat and life-threatening risk. Fear of reprisal or retaliation causes silence in interactional situations. Embarrassment, that is, the fear of being embarrassed makes people to be silent participants. Many people are afraid of talking about sensitive topics such as sex, personal health matters or even religious issues. Silence becomes a face-saving strategy. The risk of being implicated also generates silence. The Yoruba saying "Oppose the sin but not the sinner" is wise. Total silence is even wiser.

Patience in conversation is a virtue, and patience engenders silence. The analysis of the data reveals that silence is very important in cultural practices. All the interviewees agreed that silence plays a fundamental role in communication in their culture. They all agreed that silence is a culture of respect, humility and maturity. The younger ones keep silent when the elderly ones are speaking. Silence also means acquiescence in a dispute. It

may symbolize acceptance of guilt. It is relevant to peace-making, for conflict resolution and management.

In the study, respondents also mentioned types of silence and their role in communication. Supporting Ephratt's (2007) categories of silence, the interviewees identified the following types:

- a. Stillness. There is silence or stillness in sleep and meditation. People who pray or commune with God observe silence.
- b. Pauses: pauses occur in speech. Speech paragraphs (paratones) are observed in conversations. Pauses are moments of silence used for mental word-gathering, speech planning, re-thinking and speech re-direction and strategizing.
- c. Mutism: There is the temporary mutism, also called silence, which people are forced to observe. This involves prohibition order which forces people to be mute or silent in some situations.
- d. Eloquent silence: This is in funeral rites, rite of passage and in rhetorical questions.
- e. Judicial/Legal silence: Students said they maintain silence when being interrogated on crimes committed, such as examination malpractice, immoral behaviour, cultism and indecency. Their silence means remorse for wrong doing, or acceptance of guilt, and hence a request for pardon.
- f. Commemorative silence: This was observed in a lecture hall, where students observed one minute's silence for a departed classmate.

Conclusion

The author asserts that silence is not merely the absence of sound, but a pragmatic and functional communicative tool in the ethnography of speaking of the students of the University of Abuja, Nigeria. Silence plays a fundamental role in interactional speech events, though it is a non-verbal type of communication. Silence symbolizes

fear, anger, self-control, respect for elders, tiredness, meditation, thinking, avoidance of risk and embarrassment. There are different categories of silence. We have stillness, pauses, mutism, eloquent silence, legal silence, commemorative silence, grave-yard silence and divine silence.

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- **Anthony Ayodele Olaoye** is a Professor in the Department of English and Literary Studies, Faculty of Humanities, Veritas University, Abuja. He can be reached via: tonyolaoye2002@yahoo.com