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Silence as a Communicative Discourse Act in Nigeria

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Abstract

Silence projects extra meanings that are culturally and socially significant. In discourse, it belongs to a larger category of non-verbal modes of communication whose sincerity conditions include a particular psychological state of mind of the sender. This paper seeks to examine silence as a complete language with its own systems of encoding and decoding of messages from a sender to a receiver in an immediate context of situation. It then looks at the functional analysis of the various types of silences as illocutionary acts and perlocutionary effects. A more accurate interpretation of silence therefore, involves an understanding of the sender's intention as well as the context in which silence is used.

Introduction

A considerable amount of non-verbal communication in terms of silence abounds in discourse. As a mode of communication, silence has its source as well as its target or rather, its transmitter as well as its receiver. It also has an organized system of encoding and decoding.

If we take silence to mean a forbearance of speech utterance, then we can see silence as a negative action, which is “the forbearance from performing a (positive) productive act, especially where it is expected” (Elam 122). Action, therefore, includes not only what we do, but also what we fail to do. Therefore, not doing anything with words is itself an act to which significance can be assigned. Imagine walking into an office where the secretary and the receptionist are conversing. You say “Hello” to them and they ignore you. Their refusal to respond to your greeting can be assigned some meanings. Outside the fact that it is embarrassing to the visitor, it can signify a negligence of duty.

Silence in discourse is interactive because it transmits images of meaning to the receiver. The receiver and the observer perceive something beyond the absence of speech. Again, it is interactive because it communicates a wide range of messages such as warning, insulting, denying, and so on. Silence establishes the mood, and status of the sender. It can also signal positive or negative interaction depending on the context of situation. It is positive, when it strengthens the bond of friendship and negative when it pushes the bond apart.

In the speech act theory, silence is regarded as the performative act of unspoken speech or (re)action in the course of a discourse transaction. In Grice’s maxims of conversation, silence may be seen as giving less or no information, which is a deliberate flouting of the maxim of Quantity. Silences therefore, are of two kinds: the generic de-contextualized absence of noise and the contextualized performative act of unspoken action or reaction.

The significance of silence has been variously explained by many linguists. G.L. Trager in his paper entitled, “Paralanguage: A First Approximation”, highlights six major non-verbal message systems; the environmental, appearance, facial, tactile, vocal segregates, and motile message systems. He locates silence under vocal segregates; a group he strongly believes affects the interpretation of the speech act.

Since an accurate interpretation of silence involves the knowledge of the sender's psyche, Knapp L.M. suggests that:

The self-image is the root system from which all of our overt communicative behaviour grows and blossoms. Our overt behaviour is only an extension of the accumulated experiences that have gone into making up our understanding of self. In short, what you are or think you are organizes what you say and do (74).

Other critics like J.L Morgan and M. Saville-Troike acknowledge silence as a non-linguistic act used in creating meanings in conversation. According to Saville-Troike, "silence can signal deference, status, attitudes, and so on" (16-17). Such silence, which the sender intends to carry meaning, is what Joan Cutting calls 'attributable silence' (29-30). Cultures have some institutionally located places for silence as in libraries, churches and funeral ceremonies. Institutionalized silences are mandatory for participants in such discourse situations. Groups also have membership silence in which a community excommunicates a culprit who violates the norm in the society.

Amechi Ihenacho, in his paper entitled, "Silence as an Act of Communication: Remark on the Final Chapters of Chinua Achebe's **Things Fall Apart**", explores an aspect of silence. He studies the group silence used by the Umuofia community as a reaction to the detention of Okonkwo and other five kinsmen by the Whiteman. This silence serves to bear an ominous foreboding tension in the whole community.

Esther Ugwu analyses silence in Zulu Sofola's plays. According to her, silence is eloquent in Sofola's plays particularly in *Lost Dreams*. To her, Silence is "Communicative in interaction because it has a number of illocutionary forces that can determine the direction of interaction" (109).

In view of these reviews, our motivation, therefore, stems from the need to stretch further the study of silence as a discourse strategy with a view to providing an in-depth discourse interpretation of its communicative functions in our environment.

This paper explores silence not merely as the negation or absence of speech, but as a communicative and meaningful element of interaction. It analyses silences that occur in speech act sequels in dialogues and concludes that such silences are charged with propositional meanings. After reading this paper,

we can begin to consider silence as a describable utterance or contribution to a coherent discourse.

There are two major ways of assessing silences in speech. On the one hand, there are silences that depend on the utterances earlier made as in a response to a greeting. These occur mostly in adjacency pairs where the preferred or dis-preferred responses are absent. Such silences have some perlocutionary effects. On the other hand, there are silences that are worked into speech act sequels in such a way that they are used to deny, to warn, and so on. These silences have both illocutionary forces and perlocutionary effects. The texts below provide instances of these silences and their functions.

Analyses

Silence of Disapproval

Text 1: A: I was wondering Sir. Would you be in your office, by any chance, on Monday?

B: (Silence).

A: Probably not.

The addressee's (B) silence is obviously interpreted as a negative or dispreferred response to the question. The discourse steps for the interpretation of the example above are as follows: (a) by the rules of the turn-taking system, A has validly selected the next speaker (that is himself) and thus the silence is assigned to the addressee B; (b) the rules of the adjacency pair system make a Yes/No answer transitionally relevant, and (c) the preference system isolates delay as one of the markers of dispreferred 'No', (d) Thus, the silence is interpreted as implicating 'No'.

Silence of Insult/Threat

Text 2: XXX (Telephone rings)

A: Hello!

B: { Goodmorning! This is Paul.

A: { Oh, Goodmorning, Paul.

Text 3: XXX (Telephone rings)

A: Hello!

B: (Silence).

A: Hello! Who is on the line?

B: (Silence).

The utterances “Hello” in texts 2 and 3 are indeed not greetings. They are answers to the summons (XXX) from the callers, which are embodied in the ringing of the telephone. These answers are indications that the channel is open. Following this indication is either a greeting sequence and/or a checking sequence as in text 2. A checking sequence is initiated by the caller to make sure that he/she is talking to the right person. But, where the indication is followed by silence as in text 3, the person who answers the telephone considers it insulting or threatening depending on the caller’s intention and the situation. B’s silences in text 3 are silences of insults or threats. They undermine the receiver of the telephone call. Here, A expects B to identify himself, but he keeps silent.

Tension Generated Silence

Speaker A is a confused and an inexperienced public speaker. The text was recorded during his Ph.D proposal defence. He was answering a question from an external examiner (B) about the meaninglessness of a parrot saying ‘Come and eat’ as he claims:

Text 4: A: Yeah I think (silence).

You know (silence) I found out in um (silence).

B: Did you say it has meaning?

A: (Silence).

One can see the intense mental stress that goes on in A, as he struggles to think of what to say or the right answers to give. This tension is reflected not only in the silences, but also in the changes of directions in mid-constructions. Therefore, here, speaker A’s silences indicate signs of examination stress.

Silence for Conflictual Purposes

In the following dialogue, two participants, a husband (A) and a wife (B) are in their living room. It is a domestic context with each participant in family roles. The husband is busy watching a programme on the television and

eating an apple. Another apple is on a plate. The wife comes in and initiates the following dialogue:

Text 5: B: What have you done with the knife?

A: (Silence)

B: I said I'm looking for the knife. What have you done with it?

A: (Silence)

B: Did you hear me? I want to cut some fruits.

A: I am eating these apples.

B: Not the apples. I'm talking about the oranges.

A: (Silence)

B: Do you hear what I'm saying? I'm talking to you!
Where's the knife?

A: (Looking up) why don't you shut up, you woman!

The above interaction shows an inter-personal hostile environment. With every silence, a turn-may-lapse attitude is projected by B which A fails to accept. The resulting silences are attributable ones. A continues to re-initiate talks over and over again with the aim of getting a response from B. It is important to note that A's re-initiations are metacommunicative. She speaks about what she is doing, which is obvious- "I said...." She also speaks about the communicative conditions that obviously obtain- "Did you hear me..." All these are to point out her husband's intentional non-responsiveness. B's silences are part of his discourse strategy used to ignore A. This strategy goes a long way to communicating his wish to be left alone. Note also that A's turns contain questions with clear normative expectancy of response in them, yet, there is no response. After one grudging response, B explicitly rejects A's initiations. On the overall, we see the husband coercing the wife into silence while the wife coerces the husband into speech. This speech-silence encounter results in conflict or provocation. According to Deborah Tannen in her analysis of Pinter's Betrayal, such silences occur at points in dialogue where information to be given is usually explosive (250).

Silence of Inferencing

When interaction creates ambiguities and many inferences and assumptions are made, what is communicated becomes weak or obscure; we can say that the indeterminacies are passed to retire in silence. Mrs. N. below wants her husband to retire from his job as a sales representative, which takes him away for many months in a year. The husband does not want to. She tries to get the co-operation of her husband's friend, Mr. B who visits the family often.

Text 6: Mrs. N: Oh! Mr. B, I hope you haven't been waiting for long. Poor me, I have been at the mechanic after buying some drugs at the Chemist's. From there, I went to pick the children from lesson classes- well (silence) – you know (silence) em! (silence).

Mr. B: No, I understand that.

Mrs. N: You see (silence) we had an accident in the house. Jude is always running about. His toe was cut open by a floor tile. This house is in pretty bad condition and Ben is not around to help. It is his family, you know (silence) his only family and you are his friend.

Mr. B: I'll talk to him about making arrangements for some house helps.

Mr. B, in his first, turn, gets the unstated inferences about his friend without Mrs. N. having to obviously state them. He is responsive to Mrs. N's hesitations. In the next exchange, Mrs. N, through her illocutionary acts of assertions, states mitigating reasons for her visit to the chemist's and ends with an indirect accusation of her husband's negligence of his family. There are many inferences one can draw from the above: (1) that her husband's indifference to family matters is giving her concern, (2) that she wants his sympathy, (3) that she is complaining, and (4), that the condition of the house is due to his continuous absence from home. But Mr. B chooses to ignore all the face-threatening inferences of personal negligence in favour of the inference drawn about Mrs. N needing some extra help. The tension generated by all the possible inferences is dispersed by the hesitations. But the overall underlying assumption we get from Mr. B is that the husband

Ann: Where?
John: Anywhere
Ann: I don't know.

Silences here function to disjoint the flow of interaction. The textual silences are within the stream of speech and there is no clear duration for them. In the above dialogue, John seems to be very insistent while Ann is actively disinclined to accepting John's advances. Ann is evasive, although both participants are inter-personally involved in the dialogue. But, John's effort to maintain contact through speech is an arduous task. Ann's silences signify refusals, thus, denial of friendship. Her responses are in fact geared towards letting go of John's efforts.

Active Silence

The next example is taken from a village meeting where the elders (ages 60-100 years) gathered to discuss an abomination that took place in their village. Somebody was believed to have poisoned the cow slaughtered for the funeral ceremony organized by one of them. Obviously, that was a serious issue considering the number of casualties they would have had. The conversation moved towards profound topics of life and death with notions of suspicion and fear. When the person sent to the oracle disclosed the identity of the culprit, the conversation came to a halt. All the participants were plunged in thought and there was perfect silence. This context exemplifies a communal silence filled with individual thought.

Subsumed under the active silence is the silence of awe or amazement where words are said to 'fail'. The elders have some unbelief or difficulty in accepting the truth of the matter. Here, silence signifies shock which is also the perlocutionary effect of the disclosure. The quality of this silence is coloured by the intensity of listening, which in turn is determined by the gravity of the topic. The unsaid implication of the information leaves an impression communally and individually. Silence here is an active silence of listening and participation. What then follows is a long-lasting silence that is meaningful in a different way.

Taboo Silence

After much deliberation in the said village meeting, it was agreed that the culprit should be excommunicated. His action was considered a taboo for

which he becomes unfit to continue as a member of that community. The community thus ostracizes him and makes him a non-person. Direct communication with him is forbidden and fines are imposed on anybody who is seen communicating with him. This is taboo silence.

Group Membership Silence

Silence can be jointly produced and shared as seen above, but a different meaning accrues depending on its function. In organized crimes and secret societies, vows of silence are taken by members. These vows are so strong and binding that any member caught must remain silent and die rather than give out any incriminating information about others. This is silence that functions to conceal not just information but secrets of a group to which an oath of secrecy has been sworn. This information is collectively owned therefore an individual member is not a liberty to divulge such.

Silence of Boredom

The silence of an audience in a class during a lecture or a seminar or during a speech is differently interpreted. If remarks intended to elicit some responses from the audience fail to do so, such silence is indicative of boredom or tiredness on the part of the audience especially when such lectures take very long hours. This tiredness is in response to uninteresting or monotonous discourse.

Silence of Respect

This type of silence takes into consideration age, position, and status of the receiver. If a father says to a son “Are you mad? Why are you so stupid?” the son is expected to be silent. In this particular context the questions are rhetorical and therefore require no answer. Where, for instance, the child responds, it will be considered rude on the part of the child. The silence that follows here is not the proverbial silence that is given to a ‘fool’ but the silence that gives honour to the speaker.

Conclusion

Silence can be used in many ways as communicative discourse act. Its uses are interpreted based on the context of situation; the coding and decoding principles of that situation; and finally the psyche of the sender and receiver of the silence.

In summary then, we have seen that silence is a form of powerful communicative speech act, which projects meanings that are culturally and socially significant.

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