

Rhetorical Functions of Silence among Speakers of Some Nigerian Languages: Cultural and Individual Perspectives

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Abstract

Recently, there has been renewed interest in the study of silence as a linguistic tool used by humans for communication purposes. Since the work of Nwoye (1985) on eloquent silence among the Igbo of Nigeria, little study has been conducted on the use of silence among other myriad Nigerian tribes. Yet, there has been a general claim that Africans use silence in formal and social situations more frequently than their European and North American counterparts. This study seeks to understand and explain rhetorical functions of silence among speakers of some Nigerian languages. Focus group discussions were held to elicit data from some undergraduate students of two public universities in Northern Nigeria involving speakers of Hausa/Fulani, Igala, Yoruba, Idoma, Igbo, Tiv, Meroeh, Lunguda, and Nupe. Two discussions were held with 300 level students of the Department of English, 400 level students of the Department of Physics and 300 level students of the Department of Biological Sciences. The discussion lasted about twenty minutes with each of the group. The results indicated that silence in conversation performs at both illocutionary and perlocutionary levels, having both negative and positive connotations depending on the context, situation, and the participants involved. The findings indicated that silence is ubiquitous in human communication repertoire, irrespective of culture. Intra- and intercultural variation, however, exist on the perception of various cultures around the world on the use of silence in conversation.

Keywords: Rhetorical functions of silence, Nigerian languages, illocutionary force, perlocutionary effect.

1. Introduction

Discourses about silence are an old tradition in philosophy, anthropology, and aesthetics but new in the field of linguistic studies. Saville-Troike observed that: Within linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-marking function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances. The tradition has been to define it negatively — as merely the absence of speech. (1985, p. 3). From the mid-80s, however, such lament began to diminish due to a trickle of research on silence, mainly in formal and social interactions. In some of the past research, Africans, compared to 'Westerners', were said to value silence in their interactions. Agyekum (2002), for example, stated that 'the acquisition of silence is part of the Akan child's developing communicative competence. Among the Akan community of Ghana, West Africa, children are given the necessary training on the use of silence in everyday encounters' (p. 48). He stated further that 'during certain conversations, the children may not even be in the vicinity, let alone participate in the conversation by talking' (p. 48).

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Similarly, in his study of the Igbo culture of Nigeria, Nwoye (1985) reported that there are some institutionalized silences which must be observed. These include bereavement during which: customarily, bereaved persons are avoided for some days following the death of a family member. About four days after the death, it is deemed appropriate to visit them. Sympathizers walk in, go straight to the bereaved, stand before them, then find a seat somewhere among the mourners and join them awhile in mutual silence. (Nwoye, 1985, p. 186). The above examples indicate that silence is part of African culture, and it is highly valued and revered, while volubility might be scolded or reproached.

1.1 Objective of the Research

This research is aimed at finding out cultural and individual perceptions about the use of silence in conversation. Specifically, the research seeks to explore rhetorical functions of silence among nine Nigerian ethnic groups.

2. Types and Categories of Silence

Taking a philosophical perspective, Perniola (2010) viewed silence as combining both action and contemplation. Silence is an action when it is reflected as an attitude with a particular meaning and contemplation when it reflects the psychological or spiritual state of the user. Similarly, Jaworski (1993) viewed silence as 'activity' reflecting a meaning following certain attitudes or behavior, as 'state' when it reflects the psychological condition of the user who expressed or framed it using art work. The other type is formulaic silence, which is viewed as 'a customary act of saying nothing in reaction to specific stimuli' (Jaworski, 1993, p. 59) sometimes 'accompanied by other nonverbal behavior such as bowing, smiling, waving and so on' (Jaworski, 1993, p. 78) or a type of silence used during some rituals. In discussing his typology of silence, Kurzon (2007) stressed the need for identifying factors which might influence silence and its actual practice.

These factors include the number of people actively involved in the interaction, the text, intentionality, psychological presence or non-presence of the silent person, and source. He developed a typology of silence comprising 'conversational' silence — used during dyadic conversation, 'thematic' silence — a situation where interlocutors deliberately avoid a particular topic, 'textual' silence — used by a group of people engaged in reading a particular text and in some contexts such as schools, libraries or synagogues, and 'situational' silence — used during some events or occasions 'such as the moment of silence (1 or 2 min) on a remembrance day for the war dead' (Kurzon, 2007, p. 1681). Saville-Troike (1985) categorised silence into institutionally-determined, group-determined, and individually-determined/negotiated silence (pp. 16-17). Like Perniola's, Jaworski's, and Kurzon's categories, Saville-Troike's classification also comprised spiritual as well as rhetorical meanings of silence because she perceived silence as a means of expressing one's emotional, psychological, or spiritual state, such as when he/she engages in prayers or fantasizing. The authors above categorized silence either as activity that carries meaning depending on situation and context of use or as a mystical phenomenon that has connection with the mind of the user.

3. Functions of Silence

According to Jensen (1973, as cited in Jaworski, 1993, pp. 66-67), when we view silence as a means of communication, then it (silence) serves two functions: positive and negative. Jensen states that silence can link or separate people, heal or wound, expose or hide information, indicate favour or disfavour, signal activity or inactivity. From the foregoing, Jensen classifies functions of silence into five categories:

- (i) Linkage
- (ii) Affecting
- (iii) Revelation
- (iv) Judgemental
- (v) Activity

Each of these functions can either be negative or positive. The uncertainty of the function of silence tends to generate 'confusion and misunderstanding [not only] for a cultural outsider, but for the native as well' (Lebra, 1987, as cited in Jaworski, 1993, p. 68). Taking Jakobson's (1960) communicative model, Ephratt (2008) considers the functions of eloquent silence on the framework of the six functions of language:

- (i) Referential function: Silence tends to be used as a communication tool for conveying information from one person to the other.
- (ii) Emotive function: Silence functions here to portray emotion of the speaker who uses his 'words or silences [to] express his [...] emotions, internal experiences' (p. 1916). Such function of silence is evidenced in literary works.
- (iii) Conative function: Here, silence functions as a discourse marker during conversation such as exchange during turn-taking, socially motivated silence such as the case of using silence to avoid taboo words, use of silence as a form of threat or promise, rhetorical use of silence such as that mostly used by politicians, and silence used as a form of one's admission of guilt.
- (iv) Phatic function: Primarily, this type of function seeks to establish, prolong, or discontinue communication. 'Phatic silence is a positive stimulus that brings subjects closer' (p. 1924) or separates them.
- (v) Poetic function: This is where poets or writers 'use words to speak of silence: praise it or curse it' (p. 1925).
- (vi) Metalanguage function: Silence has linguistic functions and is not inferior to speech. Both serve a similar function — communication.

In his pragmatic study of the perception and practice of silence in Australian and Jordanian societies, Al-Harabsheh (2012) identifies two major functions of silence: sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Among sociolinguistic functions of silence are silence to initiate new topics, silence to signify agreement/disagreement, silence as lack of contribution, and silence as a repair mechanism. He identified six pragmatic functions of silence:

- (i) Face saving
- (ii) Social courtesy
- (iii) Silence and expression of feelings
- (iv) Silence and embarrassment
- (v) Silence and criticism
- (vi) Silence and swearing

Despite their seeming variations, the above functions of silence by Al-Harabsheh (2012), Ephratt (2008), and Jensen (1973) tend to have something in common: silence functions just like speech does. Also, Jensen's proposal of positive and negative functions is similar to some pragmatic functions of Al-Harabsheh and the phatic function of Ephratt.

4. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Austin's (1967) Speech Act Theory for the belief the writers have on the functions of silence and speech. The writers believe that silence, as a communication tool, can play multiple linguistic functions depending on the situation and context of its use. For example, silence can be used as a warning, a promise or an order. Consider the following conversation:

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'. Whatever the meaning shall be, the silence of B yields some illocutionary force on A and results in some outcome (perlocutionary effect) which is preventing or denying him/her the use of the umbrella.

4.1 Austin's (1967) Speech Act Theory: A brief overview

One of the influential theories in the analysis of conversation is Austin's (1967) Speech Act Theory. In this theory, Austin (1967) outlines three components of speech:

- i. Locutionary acts, which can be in the form of 'noises' produced by the speaker (phonetic acts), utterance of some words (phatic acts), and uttering such words with a certain sense and certain reference (rhetic acts).
- ii. Illocutionary acts refer to the way locution is performed with a view to produce an effect on the listener such as ordering, asking permission, undertaking, and so on. In other words, illocutionary acts perform at the level of intentionality of performing locutionary acts.
- iii. Perlocutionary acts refer to the outcome of performing the two acts above. By performing those acts, for example, one will be able to persuade, mislead, or deter someone from doing something.

Even though the above acts are tagged 'speech acts,' the researchers believe that they can also be applied to the study of silence because silence is not always empty locution but an act that carries meaning. We concur with Saville-Troike (1985, p. 14), who stated that any form of analysis that is applied to speech could also be applied to the analysis of silence. So, here we are not talking of 'stupid silence' (Dinouart, 1771, as cited in Perniola, 2010, p. 4). We are talking of silence used as a communication tool, performing at the level of intentionality (illocution) with the expectation of producing an outcome (perlocution).

5. Research Design

This study chose its methodology based on the objective it seeks to achieve. Qualitative approach was conceived to be suitable for this research as the study tries to explore a social phenomenon – silence. Creswell (1994) described qualitative research design as a process of inquiry for understanding a social or human problem, based on building a complex, holistic picture, formed with words and reporting detailed views of informants (p. 1). Qualitative approach, therefore, is conceived to provide information that will help achieve the objective of the research.

6. Methodology

6.1 Data Collection Method

The method used to collect data was focus group discussion. The method was selected because it creates a conducive environment' for participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts' (Krueger & Casey, 2000, as cited in Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009, p. 2). Using focus group discussion, therefore, is thought to provide data that are 'often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-to-one interview' (Rabiee, 2004, p. 656). Through focus group discussion, it is perceived, participants will be able to state what their cultural and individual perspectives were about the use of silence in conversation.

6.2 Conduct of The Focus Group Discussion

Two discussions were held with 300 level students of the Department of English, 400 level students of the Department of Physics and 300 level students of the Department of Biological Science. The discussion lasted about twenty minutes with each group. The participants were asked the following questions:

- 1) What meaning can you give to silence?
- 2) Tell me about any belief in your culture about the use of silence in conversation.
- 3) As an individual, how often do you use silence instead of talk?

6.3 Participants

The participants were drawn from two public universities in Northern Nigeria using convenience sampling after obtaining permission from the participants' heads of departments. The participants were at intermediate level of their university education. Each of them filled in informed consent and biodata forms before the commencement of the discussion. As the schools are located in Northern Nigeria, where Hausa/Fulani speakers are dominant, the majority of the participants were Hausa or Hausa/Fulani, and a few speakers of other Nigerian languages, among which were Igala, Lunguda, Igbo, Meroeh, Idoma, Tiv, Nupe, and Yoruba speakers. The following table shows the number of participants in each group and how they are distributed according to the language they speak:

Table 1: Tribe and Number of Participants

	Group	1	2	3	4	5	6	Total
Tribe								
Igala		1	0	0	0	1	0	2
Yoruba		0	0	2	2	5	0	9
Igbo		0	0	1	0	0	0	1
Idoma		0	0	0	1	0	0	1
Nupe		0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Meroeh		0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Tiv		0	1	0	0	0	0	1
Lunguda		0	0	0	0	0	1	1
Hausa/Fulani		7	5	5	5	2	6	29
Total Number of participants per group		8	8	8	8	8	8	
Grand total								48

Groups 1 and 2 were level 300 students of the Department of English, groups 3 and 4 level 400 students of the Department of Physics, while groups 5 and 6 were level 300 students of the Department of Biological Sciences. The participants from each of the departments were classmates who were very much acquainted with one another.

6.4 Method of Data Analysis

Data was analyzed using 'axial coding' (Corbin & Strauss, 2007, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 180) — a 'coding that comes from interpretation and reflection on meaning' (Richards, 2005, as cited in Merriam, 2009, p. 180). Axial coding comes from 'open coding,' which is a 'process of making notations next to bits of data that strike you as potentially relevant for answering your research questions' (Merriam, 2009, p. 178).

7. Result and Discussion

The result and discussion was based on the responses of the participants to the questions they were asked during the focus group discussion. The responses indicated that silence has some rhetorical functions in the sense that its meaning is highly ambiguous, and depends on the situations and contexts of its use. Below are some situations when silence has negative connotations.

7.1.1 Silence as an Insult/Disrespect

Some Nigerian cultures particularly the Yoruba consider silence of someone who is expected to talk as an insult/disrespect: Actually in Yoruba, our culture, to some extent we take silence as an insult because to some extent you need to be talking to someone, actually is not like you needed the response but you just need him to say something or reply back. But the person keeping quiet is just like the person is insulting you or is being disrespectful. Above extract indicates that reticence of someone who is expected to provide explanation to something is considered an insult or a sign of disrespect.

7.1.2 Silence as a Sign of Wickedness/Threat

In addition, the Yoruba and Igala believe that when a discussion is going on, and someone refuses to participate, it shows that s/he was either wicked or someone who had some ulterior motives. A Yoruba participant explained that: When you're among your mates, amidst your friends, among your age group, maybe you're making conversation, and you remain quiet, it poses something to your friends, maybe you have problem that's why you keep silent. But if you're among your elder ones, your parents or your elder ones, and conversation is going on but you're quiet, it tends to pose a threat to them that this guy is having something in his mind. Something like trouble or trauma.

The above extract indicates the importance of context and situation in the use of silence. In the Yoruba culture, everybody is expected to contribute to an ongoing discussion. The illocutionary act of silence of the conversational partner is interpreted as malfunction, even though the performer's intention might not be to threaten or jeopardize the conversation partners. The act of silence, therefore, has perlocutionary effects on other conversational partners who tend to interpret the illocutionary act as a threat.

In some other Nigerian cultures such as the Igala, a silent person is considered a wicked person, as stated by one of the Igala participants: And in my language [Igala], some people believe that when someone is not talking is a kind of strong-hearted person, and they believe that he's a kind of wicked. In Igala culture, therefore, just like in Yoruba culture, quoted earlier, a silent person is considered a threat because it is considered that he/she might have some ulterior motives hidden to other conversation partners. Conversely, an outspoken person tends to make his motive known to everybody, and as a result, a solution or appropriate response might be provided for him/her.

7.1.3 Silence as Sign of Unhappiness/Mourning

Many other Nigerian cultures perceive silence as 'the most apt reaction to extremely painful situations' (Perniola, 2010, p. 3) such as bereavement. A Tiv participant stated that: When someone is silent or quiet, it's assumed that something is wrong. Maybe he's not happy, or somebody is dead, he's just mourning somebody. Similar is reported by a Nupe participant: In Nupe culture we don't recognize silence unless when you're mourning, maybe you missed your parents, or maybe something bad happened. Therefore, during mourning or any period when some misfortune befall someone, everybody is expected to remain silent so as to show sympathy or commiseration to the affected person.

7.1.4 Silence as an Indication of the Presence of Death/Satan

Likewise in the Hausa culture, abrupt silence among conversation partners indicates the presence of death/Satan. Hausa people say "mutuwa ta wuce" (death has passed) if conversational partners, coincidentally and concurrently were silent during ongoing conversation. A Hausa/Fulani participant said: Sometimes, when conversation is going on, and people that gathered at a certain place were busy talking talking, and at some point, they realized that everyone is quiet, and there was total silence, they will say that Satan has passed, Satan has passed. That's the belief we have, because no one will say to them all of you keep quiet. But they'll realize that, or the people there will realize that everyone is quiet within those seconds, then they'll say that okay Satan has passed.

Other Hausa participants contended that Hausa speakers say 'Satan has passed' but 'death has passed.' Either of the above being said, when speakers coincidentally and concurrently stopped talking during ongoing conversation, silence, in that context and situation, indicates premonition in Hausa/Fulani culture. The above extracts indicate that silence among the various tribes of this study is abhorred, particularly in an ongoing conversation.

7.1.5 Silence as a Sign of Illness/Malfunction

Based on their individual perceptions, some other participants considered silence as 'an illness.' One of the Hausa participants stated that 'silence is a sign of illness. So if there's this problem, so actually, we shall go and find medicine'. This belief goes *paripassu* with Scollon's (1985) description of 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' (p. 26). Many other Hausa participants, however, contested the argument and added that there were times where silence is expected instead of talk. Such situations occurred during discussion with an elderly person or those in authority. A participant added that: And in a situation where you're interrogated or accused while you're innocent you can [talk] whether it was father or your elders. The manner of the talk, however, has to be polite or talk to another elderly person on the issue being discussed so as to serve as an arbiter between the accused and his/her elder ones.

7.2 Positive Perceptions about the Use of Silence in Conversation

7.2.1 Silence as a Strategy of Thinking

The use silence in conversation is not always perceived as a negative trait in the cultures of the participants of this study. Silence is considered as a strategy of thinking. An Igala participant said: Sometimes when someone is not

talking it doesn't mean that he doesn't know how to talk or he doesn't know what to say. He may be having some perspective of thinking when the interaction is going on. Or maybe he has the idea but he doesn't understand whether the idea is going to be correct. Some use to talk whether is wrong or right. Silence, from the above extract, is used as a strategy of thinking about the topic of an ongoing discussion. However, the thinking was probably not expected throughout the discussion so as not to construe the silence as wickedness or mischief. Silence is therefore used in that context to avoid talking out of point or fear of making mistake.

7.2.2 Silence Connects With Calmness and Calmness Connects With Knowledge

Another participant provided the value of silence in conversation according to the Igala people: In my own culture, their belief about silence, there's superstition there because there's knowledge in silence. They believe that when there's silence, then there's calmness. When there's calmness there's connectivity towards the knowledge coming from us, and when there's connectivity, there's the knowledge that's passing through you, and you can also make use of it.

The Igala culture perceives that there is a connection between 'silence,' 'calmness,' and 'knowledge.' The view tends to tilt toward mystical or spiritual silence. Talking of negative medieval theology, Perniola (2010, p. 3), stated that 'there appears to be connection between silence (*Schweigen*) and calm (*Stille*), intended to indicate a state of serenity faithful to the divine presence in the soul of the pious'. This might be the reason why in many religions meditation through silence is often practiced. In their study of British Quakerism and British Buddhism, for example, Bell and Collins (2014) discovered that there seems to be a link between silence and stillness "with the implication that non-activity is a means of evoking sacred presence" (p. 1).

7.2.3 Silence Is a Sign of Respect for Elders

In addition to perceiving a link between silence and calmness, silence according to the participants of this study is a sign of respect for elders. A younger person is expected to respectfully listen to an older one, and the former rarely say anything. In Hausa and Lunguda cultures, according to some participants, 'when someone elderly is talking to you even if you disagree with what he said you are required to remain silent'. A Hausa participant added that 'in Hausa traditional setting, when someone elder than you speaks, even if it hurts you, to show your loyalty, you'll just need to be quiet'.

7.2.4 Silence as A Consent/Agreement

Also, in Hausa traditional society, silence is considered an answer to a proposal, such as marriage or anything where a proposal is made, but the affected person remains silent because, according to one of the participants, Hausa people have the adage 'Shiru ma maganace' (silence is also talk). There has been some argument among the Hausa participants of this study about the silence of a girl who is told that she is going to be married to someone. A female participant accepted that silence means consent in that situation only if 'it was the girl that brought the man'. But if she was not, her silence was ambiguous.

7.2.5 Silence as A Sign Of Shyness

Silence of a girl who was asked of her marriage proposal to someone can be due to shyness, as was expressed by many female participants of this study. The researcher observed that in all the six focus groups that were held, not a single female participant initiated a talk. In some cases, it was the male participants who asked the females to say something. When the researcher asked the female participants about their silence during the discussion, some of them said that they were shy, some associated their silence to male dominance of the discussion, and others stated that they were more tolerant than the male participants. The silence of the female participants tends to indicate that gender plays a role in the use of silence in conversation. This is not to say that all male participants talked, but the females exhibited more silent behavior than their male counterparts. This is, however, not the primary focus of this paper.

Conclusion

In this study, an attempt has been made to explore rhetorical functions of silence among speakers of some Nigerian languages based on cultural and individual perspectives.

The study has shown that there are a number of inter- and intra-cultural differences as well as similarities among the participants on the rhetorical functions of silence. The findings suggest that silence is interpretable only in relation to cultural and individual perceptions, and also on the situation and context of its use. The study has gone

some way towards enhancing our understanding of rhetorical functions of silence among speakers of some Nigerian languages, despite its limited scope in relation to languages spoken in Nigeria. The main strength of the study, notwithstanding, is its use of focus group discussion instead of one-to-one interview. Future research may benefit from using a larger population, and involving speakers of some other Nigerian languages. Also of interest is the role of gender in the use of silence in conversation. Linguistic research should seek to explore not only the observable and perceptible aspects of language use but also the seemingly trivial parts, such as silence.

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