



The Sociolinguistic Function of Silence in Communication in Nigeria: Dell Hymes' Ethnography of Communication

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ABSTRACT

Silence is, in fact, one of the most potent aspects of communication in Nigeria, which is home to over 500 ethnic groups. Based on Dell Hymes' Ethnography of Communication, this paper describes the sociolinguistic functions of silence in Nigeria's rich cultural and linguistic environment. Silence counts as an intentional and context-specific act since it is not limited to the absence of speech. It serves culture, relationship stability, conflict resolution, and power balance. The study explores the use of silence in setting it up in places, among others, traditional ceremonies, relationships with other people, and political protests. The research brings value to the study of silence by showing how it behaves with cultural norms, participant roles, and situational contexts so that it can be made meaningful. Silence in Nigeria has cultural implications: it communicates respect, spirituality, and community harmony. Also, it serves as a mode of resistance and a medium for expressing dissent. These findings take silence into a new generation of dynamic and integral components of human communication.

Introduction

Language is the tool of communication; however, the most passive act, silence, can possess intuitive and deep meaning, especially in a country that has thousands of rich cultures as Nigeria does. It is a means by which Nigerians communicate verbally and with silence to transmit remarkable social norms, feelings, and ideas. Sitti (2018), thus, gives a picture of it as being a culturally and contextually complex mega-system that differs hugely depending on the type of ethnic group involved, whether Yoruba, Hausa, Igbo, and so forth.

Silence has sociolinguistic relevance because it maintains social harmony, negotiates power dynamics, and represents cultural values. Operating within a context of common meanings and expectations, silence is frequently just as expressive in many Nigerian communities as spoken words (Carbaugh & Boromisza-Habashi, 2015). Silence, for instance, can be seen as a show of resistance, respect for elders, or a strategy to avoid confrontation (Medubi, 2010). Nigeria's intricate sociocultural fabric shapes how silence is interpreted, with elements including religion, ethnicity, age, gender, and social standing all having an impact.

The Ethnography of Communication by Dell Hymes offers a theoretical framework for comprehending silence as a tool for communication. Hymes (1962) provides a lens through which silence can be examined in its sociolinguistic and pragmatic dimensions by emphasizing the interaction of language, context, and culture. In Nigeria, where communication is ingrained in cultural norms and practices, his SPEAKING model—which places an emphasis on the context of communication—is especially pertinent to the study of silence.

Using Hymes' framework, this paper investigates the sociolinguistic purposes of silence in Nigeria, looking at how it is employed in diverse interpersonal, social, and cultural situations. The study challenges the conventional understanding of silence as simply the absence of speech by highlighting it as a dynamic and context-dependent aspect of communication. Gaining an understanding of silence in Nigerian communication enhances sociolinguistics and sheds light on the larger connection between communication and culture.

Dell Hymes' Ethnography of Communication

The Ethnography of Communication by Dell Hymes is a thorough framework designed to comprehend how communication works in particular cultural contexts. Hymes' method places more emphasis on the interaction between language use, social context, and cultural norms than standard linguistic models, which mostly concentrate on language structure (Wodak et al., 2011). Studying how silence functions as a communication tool is made easier with this ethnographic viewpoint, especially in culturally varied nations like Nigeria.

Hymes presented the SPEAKING model, an acronym for the elements that influence any act of communication:

- Setting and Scene: The physical and psychological environment where communication occurs.

- Participants: The individuals involved in the interaction, along with their roles and relationships.
- Ends: The goals or outcomes expected from the communicative act.
- Act Sequence: The order and structure of speech or silence in the exchange.
- Key: The tone, mood, or attitude that accompanies the communication.
- Instrumentalities: The forms or channels of communication used, such as verbal speech, silence, or non-verbal cues.
- Norms: The social rules and conventions governing communication.
- Genre: The type or category of communication, such as formal speech, casual conversation, or ritualistic silence.

According to this concept, silence is a deliberate act of communication that, depending on its context, transmits particular meanings rather than just being the absence of sound (Carbaugh & Boromisza-Habashi, 2015).

Silence in Nigerian Communication Through the SPEAKING Model

Setting and Scene

Different forms of silence in Nigeria are: formal, informal, and ceremonial. For instance:

- During a meeting with elders or religious leaders, silence indicates attention and respect.
- At any traditional ceremony silence can become a special sacred tool exemplifying relevance or spiritual ties (Issa, 2019).

Participants

Participants' social roles affect how silence is interpreted. When a younger individual interacts with an adult, the Yoruba believe that silence is a sign of respect. In Hausa societies, a superior's quiet may be interpreted as a sign of disapproval or a purposeful pause for emphasis, while a subordinate's silence may be used to demonstrate devotion to superiors (Issa, 2019).

Ends

Silence in communication can be used to convey deference, maintain social harmony, or quietly communicate disapproval. For instance, in Igbo culture, keeping quiet during a family conflict may be used to reduce tensions, putting the good of the group ahead of individual expression (Umeh, 2016).

Act Sequence

There are hints for interpretation in the order of words and silence. A conscious pause before answering can indicate hesitancy or thorough thought. Silence during the welcoming phase highlights the gravity and solemnity of the exchange in Hausa interactions (Issa, 2019).

Key

Silence's emotional tone is very important. While remaining silent during a religious ceremony conveys respect and deference to higher powers, it can also convey tension and quiet resistance during a heated disagreement.

Instrumentalities

Other non-verbal clues, such as gestures or facial expressions, frequently accompany silence. When welcoming someone, Yoruba culture views a bent head and silence as a sign of profound respect.

Norms

The proper time and manner of observance of silence is determined culturally. Silence is usually adopted by the Igbo as a form of avoidance, thus reflecting the group's penchant for indirectness in dealing with delicate matters (Umeh, 2016).

Genre

Silence can take on different roles depending on what sort of genre the communication is: For example:

- Silence during informal discussions could be interpreted as unease or disagreement.
- Strategic pauses during formal speeches highlight the seriousness of the speaker's remarks.
- Long periods of quiet during rituals can indicate a time for introspection or group contemplation (Ibrahim, 2017).

Relevance of Hymes' Model to Silence in Nigerian Communication

Hymes' speaking model is used to analyze the subtle meanings of silence in speech in Nigeria. Silence is not passive; instead, it is an active and meaningful communication influenced by outstanding cultural norms and expectations (Wodak et al., 2011). It focuses on conceiving silence as a strong tool for maneuvering social engagements, conveying emotions, and solving power relation issues.

The Role of Silence in Nigerian Communication

Silence can fulfill many purposes in Nigerian communications, depending on many factors, such as the circumstance, the persons involved, and the objective. It is quite intricate since it is culture-influenced. In Nigeria, with over 500 languages and ethnic groups that coexist, silence does not only refer to the absence of speech but also a deliberate and meaningful act of communication. Such purposes would go beyond using language to ensure social order, paying respect, settling disputes, and even power dynamics (Medubi, 2010).

1. Cultural Interpretations of Silence

Nigerian cultural norms and traditions are strongly rooted in silence. Ethnic groups differ greatly in how silence is used and interpreted.

- **Yoruba Culture:**

Silence is frequently linked to the Yoruba values of respect for authority and *iwa pele*, or soft temperament. For example, younger people are supposed to remain silent in front of seniors as a sign of respect and focus (Oyeleye, 2005). In moral discourse, silence also serves as a symbol of wisdom and self-control.

- **Igbo Culture:**

Silence is often a strategy for diplomacy among the Igbo, particularly in settling disputes. Without putting one party in the situation of being right or wrong or with a tendency to exaggerate, it is a means of de-escalating conflict (Umeh, 2016). It can also mean consensus or approval, depending on the specific situation, by remaining silent in family or community meetings.

- **Hausa Culture:**

Silence is believed to be a sign of humility by the people of Hausa, especially in formal or religious contexts. It is said to be obedient in God's ear when one is silent in worship or prayer. Silence in the arena of social situations can be seen in civility or conformity to social codes that prohibit speaking loudly in public spaces (Akindele, 2011).

2. Silence and Power Dynamics

Generally, silence is often important in Nigerian communication when balancing or negotiating power relations.

- **Deference to Authority:**

Silence is a common approach for subordinates to show respect and deference in hierarchical situations. Employees might, for instance, be quiet during meetings with superiors so that they can talk without interruption. Similar to this, in traditional contexts, it is considered respectful and an acknowledgement of social hierarchy for younger or weaker people to remain silent in front of authoritative persons like kings, chiefs, or elders (Ndimele, 2003).

- **Authority's Strategic Use of Silence:**

People in authority could also use silence as a tactic. Silence at a meeting may lead people to think that the leader's silence is due to criticism, reflection, or beckoning them to think about their actions. The contemplative silence maintains power and brings a kind of attention in itself (Blank, 2017).

3. Conflict Resolution and Avoidance

In Nigeria, silence serves a traditional alternative for resolving conflict. It retains relationships and harmony among groups by allowing individuals or groups to manage delicate situations without creating a full-blown conflict.

- **Diplomatic Silence:**

In collectivist cultures, such as Nigeria, silence is the preferred mode of resolving disputes. The choice of a participant to remain quiet during family altercations, for example, can illustrate their wish to keep the matter from worsening and to place group interests above personal considerations (Umeh, 2016).

- **Cooling-Off Periods:**

Silence can also play the part of a break so that people can calm their emotions. This is especially crucial in settings that are prone to conflict since quick verbal exchanges could cause tensions or misunderstandings to worsen.

4. Silence in Traditional Ceremonies and Rituals

Silence is frequently a key element of rituals and ceremonies performed by several ethnic groups in Nigeria.

- **Yoruba Ancestral Worship:**

Silence is maintained during prayer and meditation in Yoruba traditional worship in order to foster a sense of respect and spiritual kinship. Silence is thought to improve communication with the holy and enable believers to show their devotion without using words (Oyeleye, 2005).

- **Hausa Islamic Practices:**

The refrain of every prayer and supplication during Islamic ceremonies, especially to Hausa communities, often accompanies silence signifying humility to submit before God. But this application must be related also to the more general Islamic teaching on self-discipline and introspection (Akindele, 2011).

5. Silence as Resistance

In Nigeria, as in any oppressive political setting, silence will mostly be interpreted as resistance or dissent.

Subtle Defiance:

Other uses of silence involve its invocation as a form of subtle resistance with the conditions of repression or marginalization. For instance, a community can choose collective silence over directive noncompliance, express non-cooperation, and not go to the government directly (Jens, 2024).

Symbol of Protest:

In some demonstrations and campaigns, silence can also come out as a sign of resistance. Participants might, for example, include silent periods during the political march or demonstration to remember victims or to highlight social injustices suffocated by words (Ndimele, 2003).

6. Silence in Interpersonal Relationships

It can distinguish a number of feelings in silence such as love, meditation, or even rage.

Romantic Relationships:

Silence has a lot of meanings. For instance, in situations between couples, it can mean 'I don't know how to feel' or 'I'm angry.' For example, some spouses may prefer to be quiet rather than speak, because they want to work through their feelings or avoid saying something that will be regretted later in the heat of the moment (Oduro-Frimpong, 2010).

Parent-Child Relations:

In parent-child communication, silence becomes a form of punishment. It gives parents a chance to teach moral and behavioral lessons and to signal their kids about their discontent without actually involving them in any oral correction (Oduro-Frimpong, 2010).

For communication in Nigeria, silence goes beyond the absence of words. It represents a conscious as much as a traditional strategy for surviving oppressive sociopolitical settings, governing social relationships, and keeping social order intact. The various functions of silence—from resistance and respect to conflict resolution and ceremonial observance—emphasize its importance as a dynamic component of Nigerian sociolinguistic practices, as demonstrated by Dell Hymes' *Ethnography of Communication*. Scholars and practitioners can recognize the strength and adaptability of silence as a communication tool by comprehending it within the Nigerian cultural context.

Applying the SPEAKING Model to Silence in Nigeria

The SPEAKING model by Dell Hymes offers a strong foundation for examining silence in Nigerian communication. This paradigm is particularly helpful in examining silence in Nigeria's linguistically and culturally varied society because it highlights the need of sociocultural context in comprehending communicative behaviors (Kaarina, 2022). The application of the SPEAKING paradigm to silence in Nigeria is examined in depth below.

1. S - Setting and Scene

The physical and psychological contexts in which communication takes place, known as the setting and scene, have a big impact on how silence is used and understood.

- **Formal Settings:** Silence is frequently used to express respect and solemnity in formal contexts such as courts, traditional councils, or religious institutions. For example, silence is observed at significant points in traditional Yoruba chieftaincy ceremonies to express respect for the event's holiness (Oyeleye, 2005).
- **Informal Settings:** Silence can convey unease, reflection, or even disdain in informal settings like family get-togethers or public locations.

The significance of quiet is also determined by the scene. A silent pause during an argument in an Igbo home environment is very different from a moment of silence during a community prayer in a Hausa mosque.

2. P - Participants

The connotations that silence has held for individuals must also be considered with regard to their personality traits, their position, and their relationships with one another.

- **Juniors and Elders:** When juniors engage with elders, silence is a sign of respect in several Nigerian cultures, including the Yoruba and Hausa. When an adult speaks, a younger person's quiet indicates that they are paying attention and respecting their authority (Oyeleye 2005).
- **Authority Figures and Subordinates:** When a king or chief is silent, he might be thinking, displeased, or conveying a subliminal command to the other authorities to take action; likewise, silence gives the connotation of regard or caution to subordinates.
- **Peers:** Silences of an equal might point to agreement or otherwise disagreement or hesitancy. For instance, openly loud interruption is prohibited in Igbo society; a silent stand-by during a conversation provides tacit agreement (Umeh, 2016).

3. E - Ends (Goals)

The goals or expected outcomes of communication shape how silence is used.

- **Conflict Avoidance:** Silence is frequently used to defuse tense situations. A person's silence during Igbo family conflicts can indicate that they prefer harmony to conflict (Umeh, 2016).
- **Demonstrating Respect:** Especially in hierarchical settings, silence can be used as a social technique to show respect or preserve harmony in encounters.
- **Realizing Reflective Thought:** Silence can also be a deliberate break that induces introspection. For instance, within the tradition of the Hausa, a person's silence may compel others to think and refine their positions before taking action.

4. A - Act Sequence

The sequence of acts of communication including silence will give an idea of the role it plays.

- **Timing and Place of Silence:** Silence is meaningful only when in context. A brief pause following a proverb in Yoruba speech may shoud a demand on the audience with respect to the wisdom to be considered and analyzed (Oyeleye, 2005).
- **Followed by Action or Speech:** Additionally, especially in negotiations, silence might be indicative of impending action. For example, in Igbo traditional dispute procedures, a leader may exhibit the seriousness of his choice through silence before rendering verdict (Umeh, 2016).

5. K - Key (Tone or Mood)

The feeling or atmosphere that accompanies the continued stillness gives an interpretation to it.

- **Positive Key:** As demonstrated by Nigerian Christian and Islamic customs, silence during a religious ceremony can express respect and spiritual concentration.
- **Negative Key:** Silence can indicate dissatisfaction, passive resistance, or fear of retaliation in uncomfortable situations, such a conflict at work (Akindele, 2011).
- **Neutral Key:** Silence could simply signal some concentration and reflection while being devoid of any emotion in neutral contexts.

6. I - Instrumentalities (Forms and Channels)

Instruments can be understood as ways one may communicate or even the areas that are included, such as silence between the auditory forms of nonverbal message.

- **Silence Combined with Non-Verbal Cues:** Silence frequently complements body language, gestures, and facial emotions in Nigerian cultures. For example, a bowed head and silence together represent humility and respect in Yoruba communication (Oyeleye, 2005).
- **Medium-Specific Silence:** Digital silence, such as delay in responding to messages, can mean a lot socially in present-day Nigeria, such as disagreement or indifference to the issue in question.

7. N - Norms

In the Nigerian cultures, silence is strongly defined by the societal norms guiding communication.

- **Cultural Expectations:** The cultural expectations of civility, deference, and self-control are firmly ingrained in silence. For example, excessive talking is banned in Hausa communities since it is seen as an indication of a lack of discipline (Akindele, 2011).
- **Religious Norms:** The rules of religion influence silence too. Another example that captures the aspect of silence relative to prayers among Muslims in Northern Nigeria is the aspect of collective silence during prayers, which is understood as a sign of devotion and submission to God's will.

8. G - Genre

The nature of silence varies according to type of communication.

- **Ritual Communication:** Silence is Applied in Many Ways in Religious or Traditional Ceremonies to Create an Aura of Sacredness and Concentration among the People. In Yoruba ancestral worship, silence connects people with the spiritual realm by punctuating important prayer and meditation times (Oyeleye, 2005).
- **Political Communication:** Silence can be used as a symbolic form of resistance in political demonstrations or campaigns. In Nigeria, for example, protesters have utilized silent times to pay tribute to victims of state violence or to express disapproval without resorting to physical conflict (Ndimele, 2003).

Silence in Nigerian communication is exposed as a dynamic, culturally rooted phenomenon through the use of Dell Hymes' SPEAKING paradigm. Silence is a purposeful, context-driven act of communication that expresses respect, emotion, power, and opposition rather than just being a passive lack of speech. The approach emphasizes how situational circumstances, participant roles, and cultural norms interact to shape what quiet means.

Conclusion

A complex and culturally rich phenomena, silence in Nigerian communication reflects the country's variety and deeply rooted social conventions. By using Dell Hymes' SPEAKING paradigm, silence is no longer viewed as a passive lack of communication but rather as an active, dynamic, and intentional component of engagement. It becomes evident that people purposefully employ silence to maintain social institutions, regulate relationships, and communicate meaning.

Silence in Nigeria has many meanings that differ based on the context. It is silence that helps settle arguments in public situations; silence expresses respect in relations characterized by hierarchies; silence draws participants into bonding spiritual ties during formal religious rituals. Besides, silence shows power relations when it allows superiors and their inferiors to perform their duties without necessarily talking to each other and stretches itself as the method of communication in protest and civil disobedience.

The use of Hymes' ethnography of communication shows how participant roles, cultural norms, and contextual elements interact with silence to produce meaning. Setting, participants, and norms are all elements of the SPEAKING model that contribute to the deconstruction of the many meanings of silence in Nigerian society. For instance, silence becomes a sign of defiance and unity in political movements, while in ritualistic contexts it represents reverence and sacredness.

This sophisticated understanding of silence has further ramifications for sociolinguistic study and cross-cultural communication. It emphasizes how crucial it is to analyze nonverbal communication in certain cultural circumstances in order to prevent misunderstandings. One more way silence proves itself is contradictory to the Western view of communication that places speech over other forms of contact. Like most African societies, silence may serve as a very powerful medium for communication and expression in Nigeria.

Silence is used in Nigerian communication to reflect the complex nature of interpersonal relationships and the vast importance of cultural context in making meaning. Social negotiation and conflict resolution take place through silence and also speak of ideals like community, respect, and spirituality. By recognizing and valuing the role silence plays in the different ways of communication in Nigeria, one will understand so much more.

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