

SILENCE AS A COMMUNICATIVE PHENOMENON IN DISCOURSE

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Abstract: This paper explores silence as a communicative and nonverbal phenomenon within discourse. Drawing on interdisciplinary approaches from linguistics, pragmatics, and communication studies, the research analyzes the structural, functional, and semantic properties of silence. The study argues that silence is not merely the absence of speech but a meaningful communicative act that conveys intentions, emotions, and social relations. The findings demonstrate that silence performs multiple functions, including emotive, strategic, and evaluative roles, and its interpretation depends heavily on context and shared knowledge. The paper contributes to expanding the theoretical understanding of nonverbal communication and highlights the importance of silence in discourse analysis.

Keywords: silence, nonverbal communication, discourse, pragmatics, speech acts, communication theory.

Introduction

Silence is a universal phenomenon accompanying human beings throughout their lives. Like speech, it is an inherent and natural component of communication. However, while speech has been extensively studied, silence has received comparatively less scholarly attention.

Modern linguistics increasingly recognizes silence as an integral part of discourse. It reflects not only communicative processes but also psychological, social, and cultural dimensions of interaction. Silence can convey agreement, disagreement, hesitation, emotional states, and strategic intentions. Therefore, it should be analyzed not as an absence of communication but as a meaningful communicative act.

The relevance of this study lies in the growing interest in nonverbal communication and discourse analysis. Understanding silence is essential for interpreting human interaction accurately, especially in cross-cultural contexts.

The aim of this paper is to examine silence as a communicative phenomenon, identify its functions and structure, and analyze its role in discourse.

Literature Review

Silence has been studied across multiple disciplines, including philosophy, psychology, semiotics, and linguistics. Its interdisciplinary nature highlights its complexity and importance.

According to Safarov (2008), pragmatics expands the scope of linguistic analysis beyond verbal elements, incorporating nonverbal components such as silence. Similarly, Svetlova (2010) emphasizes the multifunctionality of silence in discourse, particularly in literary texts.

Krestinsky (2002) provides one of the most comprehensive analyses of silence, proposing its functional classification and structural model. He argues that silence carries a communicative load comparable to speech.

Stalnaker (2017) highlights the importance of presupposition in communication, which is crucial for interpreting silence. Without shared knowledge, silence may lead to misunderstanding.

Shevelyova (2018) introduces the concept of “silential acts,” suggesting that silence can function similarly to speech acts by conveying complex meanings and psychological states.

Despite these contributions, silence remains insufficiently explored, particularly in terms of its role in real communicative situations.

Methods

This study employs a qualitative research methodology based on:

- theoretical analysis of linguistic and pragmatic literature;
- discourse analysis of communicative interactions;
- interpretation of examples from literary texts;
- functional and structural analysis of silence.

The research adopts an interdisciplinary approach, integrating insights from linguistics, pragmatics, and communication theory.

Results

4.1 Silence as a Communicative Unit

The analysis shows that silence functions as a meaningful communicative unit. It can replace speech acts when communicative intention is preserved. In such cases, silence acts as a “silential act,” carrying semantic and pragmatic meaning (Shevelyova, 2018).

4.2 Types of Silence

Silence can be classified into two main types:

- **Communicative silence** – meaningful pauses within interaction;
- **Non-communicative silence** – ritual or context-independent silence.

Communicative silence plays a key role in discourse, while non-communicative silence is often culturally determined.

4.3 Functions of Silence

Based on Krestinsky’s classification (2002), silence performs multiple functions:

- **Contact** – indicating mutual understanding
- **Discontact** – signaling withdrawal from communication
- **Emotive** – expressing emotions (fear, joy, anger)
- **Informative** – conveying agreement or disagreement
- **Strategic** – used intentionally to achieve goals
- **Rhetorical** – emphasizing speech or attracting attention
- **Evaluative** – expressing attitudes
- **Stimulating** – prompting action

These functions demonstrate that silence is highly versatile and context-dependent.

4.4 Structure of Silence

Silence has a complex internal structure consisting of:

- presuppositional content
- propositional content
- implicative content
- intrasilential content
- postsilential content

This structure confirms that silence is comparable to speech in terms of communicative complexity.

4.5 Silence in Interaction

Silence influences communication in various ways:

- regulates turn-taking
- creates emotional tension
- signals interpersonal relationships

- reflects cognitive processes

Examples from literary discourse illustrate that silence can express anxiety, hesitation, agreement, fear, and surprise.

Discussion

The findings confirm that silence is not simply the absence of speech but a meaningful communicative phenomenon. Its interpretation depends on context, shared knowledge, and cultural norms.

One of the key challenges in interpreting silence is ambiguity. While speakers understand their intentions, listeners may interpret silence differently. This can lead to communication breakdowns.

The role of context is crucial. As noted by Pavilenis (2015), meaning in communication often depends on elements not explicitly stated. Silence relies heavily on such implicit information.

From a pragmatic perspective, silence can be considered equivalent to a speech act. However, unlike verbal communication, it lacks lexical form, which increases both its ambiguity and expressive potential.

Cultural differences also play an important role. In some cultures, silence indicates respect, while in others it may be perceived as discomfort or rudeness.

The study suggests that silence should be integrated into models of communication and discourse analysis as a fundamental component.

Conclusion

Silence is a complex and multifunctional communicative phenomenon. It serves as a powerful nonverbal tool capable of expressing meanings that are often difficult to verbalize.

The study demonstrates that silence has structure, functions, and communicative significance comparable to speech acts. Its interpretation depends largely on context and shared understanding.

Future research should focus on cross-cultural aspects of silence and its role in digital communication environments.

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