

Silence in Ostensive Communication

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. Studies on silence

In recent years, uses and functions of silence have started to draw the attention of scholars from various approaches, such as discourse analysis (e.g. Jaworski 2005, Nakane (2006)), conversational analysis (Roberts et. al. (2006), Mushin & Gardner. (2009)), sociolinguistics (Kurzon (2007)) and pragmatics (Ephratt 2008)). However, most scholars concentrate on describing how silence appears in discourse or interaction and thus fail to capture exactly what and how silence communicates. Moreover, there is no boundary between issues for pragmatics and issues for anthropology/sociology. For example, while categorising 'eloquent silence' based on Jacobson's six communicative functions of language, Ephratt (2008) uses examples not only of silence in conversation but also of a blank page in a novel or silence at funerals and other religious ceremonies, which are highly institutionalised and hence do not fall under the scope of pragmatics. In this study, focus on silence that the speaker deliberately deploys. In other words, the scope of this study is silence in ostensive communication. This study aims to propose a cognitive account of how silence is interpreted and what it communicates.

. Silence and relevance

In relevance theory, ostensive communication is defined in terms of speaker's intentions – the informative intention and the communicative intention:

- (1) Ostensive-inferential communication
 - a. The informative intention:
The intention to inform an audience of something.
 - b. The communicative intention:

The intention to inform the audience of one's informative intention.

(Wilson & Sperber (2002:255))

Once the hearer recognises the speaker's communicative intention, then she is entitled to expect that it is worth her while to pay attention to the stimulus the speaker provides:

(2) Communicative Principle of Relevance

Every ostensive stimulus conveys a presumption of its own optimal relevance.

(Sperber & Wilson (1995:158))

(3) Optimal relevance

An ostensive stimulus is optimally relevant to an audience iff:

a. It is relevant enough to be worth the audience's processing effort;

b. It is the most relevant one compatible with communicator's abilities and preferences.

(Wilson & Sperber (2002:256))

This means that when the hearer recognises the speaker's communicative intention, she is entitled to expect that what the speaker is communicating is optimally relevant.

Morgan & Green (1987) argue that silence can be an ostensive stimulus and could thus be analysed in relevance theoretic terms:

The definition of ostensive stimulus does not rule out silence as an ostensive stimulus, however, because all it requires is that the stimulus attract the audience's attention and focus it on the communicators intentions. (Morgan & Green (1987:727))

Remaining silent is a marked response and is unnatural, and silence, through the conscious lack of auditory stimulus, can be seen as a stimulus. In other words, by not responding or by using silence, the speaker is ostensively communicating his intention of not providing a verbal response that the hearer would normally expect. This leads the hearer to search for the interpretation which satisfies a presumption of its own optimal relevance, and the hearer would recover an interpretation such as *'I am not willing to communicate.'*

In next section, I will discuss exactly what silence communicates and how it is done.

3. What and how silence communicates

Wilson and Sperber (2002) argue that ostensively used silence communicates an implicature:

When the silence is ostensive, we would like to be able to analyse it as merely involving an extra layer of intention, and hence as COMMUNICATING – or IMPLICATING – that the addressee is unable or unwilling to answer.
(Wilson & Sperber (2002:257))

The question is, exactly how does silence communicate an implicature? Naturally, people fall silent when they are unable or unwilling to respond. Berger (2004) carried out a questionnaire and identified three main causes for natural silence:

- (i) Unexpected information/deviant behaviour
- (ii) Stress, extreme emotion and nervousness
- (iii) Lack of information/knowledge about the topic.

It is possible that the speaker “hijacks” natural silence and imitates it in order to achieve optimal relevance.

3.1. Interpretive resemblance

In relevance theory, representations that people entertain are not limited to descriptions of states of affairs but include representations of other representations that they resemble. Any phenomena can be used as a representation in this way (*i.e.* interpretively). For example, when you want to tell someone in a short distance away that she ought to keep something secret, you can mime the action of fastening a zip across your own mouth in order to let her know that you are asking her not to say anything. Sperber & Wilson (1995) states:

In appropriate conditions, any natural or artificial phenomenon in the world can be used as a representation of some other phenomenon which it resembles in some respects.
(Sperber & Wilson (1995:227))

The important point is that we can also use utterances as representations in this way. For example, an utterance can be used to represent another utterance by

virtue of their phonetic resemblance:

- (4) British boyfriend does not like his girlfriend's American accent:
Girlfriend: We could have tomato [tə'meɪtəʊ] soup and baguette for tea?
Boyfriend: I'd rather have tomato [tə'mɑ:təʊ] soup, not tomato [tə'meɪtəʊ], if that's alright?

Here, what the boyfriend intends to convey is not the propositional content of the utterance. The utterance phonetically resembles his girlfriend's pronunciation.

Or, the speaker can use an utterance which has the same semantic representation:

- (5) Peter: And what did the inn-keeper say?
Mary: I looked for it everywhere. (*ibid.*:228)

Suppose Mary's utterance in (5) is a direct translation of the inn-keeper's utterance in French. Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995) say that Mary produces this utterance as it resembles what the inn-keeper said.

As Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995) have emphasized, resemblance does not necessarily mean identity and it is up to the hearer to identify the properties which the two representations share and the extent of the resemblance. Thus, a speaker may use any of the utterances in (6b) to (6d) to represent the source utterance in (6a):

- (6) a. I've got a baby.
b. She's got a baby.
c. She's not as carefree as she used to be.
d. She can't come out tonight.

3.2 Ostensive silence as an interpretive use of 'natural' silence

Let us assume that silence can be, as any phenomenon, used to represent other thoughts by virtue of its resemblance. When silence is ostensive, the speaker is using it as an interpretation of silence as a natural behaviour. Silence as a natural behaviour often activates an emotional or mental state of the speaker (*e.g.* shock/inability/unwillingness) in the audience. Ostensive silence interpretively represents

a (set of) assumption(s) silence as natural behaviour could communicate (e.g. I am unable/unwilling to communicate). When using silence as an ostensive stimulus, the speaker assumes that the hearer can access to representations about his mental state that natural silence activates in the hearer, and assumes that the hearer can recognise his intention for her to access them. The speaker also assumes that the representations about his mental state that natural silence activates in the hearer are sufficiently similar to his own.

The following example (7) is a case where one of the participants of the conversation does not contribute to the exchange when it is obviously her turn¹ to speak:

- (7) [Mother & daughter in law are in the lounge. The mother in law has a tendency to have a stereotypical view on other cultures and the daughter in law wants to her to stop saying inappropriate things about/to her mixed race baby son. The daughter in law uses what her own father said as an example]

Daughter in law: So, I was talking to my dad about Jack potentially having an identity crisis, being half Japanese and half British, and not being neither... and my dad just said 'Jack is Jack', which I thought was a very good way of thinking.

Mother in law: (Silence)

Daughter in law: Anyway, what time did you say we would have tea?

In this example, the mother-in-law's silence interpretively resembles silence as a natural behaviour and communicates a representation of thoughts similar to an emotional or mental state of the speaker, such as inability or unwillingness of the speaker, shown in (7'a):

- (7') a. I am unable to respond.

One might question why the speaker chooses to use silence rather than simply say 'I don't want to respond.' Sperber & Wilson (1987) argue that the extra processing effort required by the use of silence (and any other indirect stimulus) can be balanced out by the extra effect it creates:

[A]ny element of indirectness in an answer encourages the hearer to look for

1 I am using the term 'turn' loosely, not as a technical term for Conversational Analysis.

additional contextual effects to offset the extra processing effort incurred
(Sperber & Wilson (1987: 746))

And indeed, Morgan & Green (1987) examine example (8) and argue that the use of silence has contextual effect that a direct answer would lack, shown in (9):

- (8) David: What about God? God defies explanation, and you believe in Him.
Maddy:
David: Oh, no! Don't say it! (Morgan & Green (1987:727))

- (9) I don't want to make you feel bad by saying this in so many words. (*ibid.*)

Fundamentally, the reason for the speaker to use silence can be explained in terms of the notion of optimal relevance (see (3) above), which explicitly states that a stimulus in ostensive communication will be seen as the most relevant one the speaker could have produced, in line with her ability and interest. In other words, the hearer can expect that the stimulus the speaker chooses is comparable with the best of his ability and interest. Indeed, the speaker chooses to use silence so that he can avoid a social conflict, unpleasantness, or unnecessary stigmatisation in cases like (8). Consequence of saying *I don't want to respond* would be worse than remaining silent. The question now, however, is whether the extra effect such as (9) is the only thing the speaker is trying to achieve by using silence. While it is possible for (9) to be recovered, would it be the only assumption that the use of silence in (8) communicates? There is a range of other assumptions that could be recovered:

- (10) a. I am surprised that you even asked me that question.
b. I think it is a silly question.
c. I believe in him but not as passionately as you do.

Analysing silence in (8) only as communicating an extra effect of (9) raises two questions. First, it fails to capture other assumptions the use of silence makes salient. Second, it does not consider the fact that sometimes the speaker's intention is too vague to pin down.

In his discussion of non-verbal communication, Wharton (2009) describes how a gaze could be used to communicate a wide array of weak implicatures

which contribute to shared impressions, rather than communicating one specific proposition:

The sights, sounds and smells perceivable in her (the hearer's) physical environment interact with her inferential abilities and her memories to alter her cognitive environment in a way he could have foreseen, making it possible for her to have further thoughts, memories and feelings similar to his own. This is all that Jack (the speaker) intended: to share an impression with Lily (the hearer). He did not mean anything in the strong Gricean sense. His intention cannot be pinned down to one specific proposition or small set of propositions. It was simply to make more manifest to Lily whatever assumptions became manifest to him.

(Wharton (2009: 45))

Wharton (2009:45) further argues that when the speaker's intention is too vague to be pinned down to a specific proposition, 'it might be preferable to use behaviour that falls somewhere between showing and meaning or saying.' In relevance theory, this type of communication is described as *weak communication*.

3.3. Ostensive silence and weak communication

When the speaker uses silence as a communicative stimulus, it leads the hearer to recover multiple interpretations. In other words, silence communicates a package or a layer of assumptions. It may have a 'label' saying 'I am unwilling to communicate'. However, it comes with a range of other assumptions, and the speaker does not care which one the hearer recovers, as there are a wide range of assumptions and all of which are quite similar. Silence, when used ostensively, carries multiple assumptions with varying degrees of strength.

Sperber & Wilson (1995) show that communication is a matter of degree:

An act of communication merely makes manifest which assumptions the communicator intends to make manifest, or, equivalently, it merely makes these assumptions manifest on further assumption that the communicator is trustworthy. It does not necessarily make the audience actually entertain all the assumptions communicated. This is true of implicatures too. Implicatures are merely made manifest by the act of communication (again, on the further assumption that the speaker is trustworthy). Some implicatures are made so strongly manifest that the hearer can scarcely avoid recovering them. Others are made less strongly manifest. It is enough that the hearer should pay attention to some of these weaker implicatures for the relevance of the intended interpretation to become manifest.

While the assumptions may not themselves be intended, their recovery is a result of following a line of processing made manifest by the speaker. In other words, it is weakly communicated.

A proposition may be more or less strongly implicated by an utterance. It is strongly implicated (or is a strong implicature) if its recovery is essential in order to arrive at an interpretation that satisfies the expectations of relevance raised by the utterance itself. It is weakly implicated if its recovery helps with the construction of an interpretation that is relevant in the expected way, but is not itself essential because the utterance suggests a range of similar possible implicatures, any one of which would do (Wilson & Sperber (2002: 269))

Note that strong and weak implicatures are not mutually exclusive:

Typically, a spoken utterance involves a mixture of strong and weak communication. (Wharton (2009:46))

When silence is used ostensively, it makes salient assumptions associated with silence as a natural behaviour (e.g. inability or unwillingness to respond). Then, the hearer recovers a specific (strong) implicature *I am unwilling to respond* as well as a wide range of weakly communicated assumptions.

The following is an example of how this is applied to an analysis of silence in ostensive communication. In (7), the mother-in-law's silence interpretively resembles silence as a natural behaviour and communicates a representation of thoughts similar to the emotional or mental state of the speaker, such as inability or unwillingness of the speaker, shown in (7'a). However, it is possible that the silence in (7) also communicates other assumptions such as ones in (7'b) – (7'd):

- (7') a. I am not willing to respond.
b. I am not comfortable with this conversation.
c. I don't agree with you.
d. I didn't know you thought I was a racist.
e. Please stop talking about this.

Here, the mother in law does not care which assumption the hearer recovers. Her

intention is for the hearer to access a range of representations about her mental state and share an “overall feel”. In other words, the relevance of these weakly communicated assumptions lies in the way they help the hearer to recover the *impression or feeling*.

In (11), silence is used ostensively as a response to an offensive joke:

- (11) [At a party, a man tells a joke to a woman, who considers it sexist.]
A: What do you call a blonde with no legs? A slug!
B: (Silence)

Silence in (11) is used because of its resemblance to silence as a natural behaviour and makes salient assumptions such as *I am unwilling/unable to respond*. This interpretation can be accompanied by a range of other assumptions such as (11'b) to (11'd). The intention of the speaker is for the hearer to represent a range of assumptions that she has in her cognitive environment. In (11), her intention is for the hearer (who told the joke) to access a range of representations about her mental state regarding her feeling towards his joke and the fact that he has made the joke.

- (11') a. I am not willing to respond.
b. it is not acceptable that you made such a joke.
c. Your joke is disgusting.
d. You should not have said that.

Similarly, in example (12), Rita's silence will lead Tina to recover a wide range of assumptions such as (12'b) to (12'd), in addition to a more specific assumption (12'a).

- (12) [A newsagent owner Rita gives permission for the shop assistant Tina to have a break to have a bath with her boyfriend Graeme, who is renting a room from Rita's friend Emily. Tina and her boyfriend Graeme used Rita's bathroom instead of Emily's and it causes damage to bathroom floor in addition to the downstairs ceiling and a laptop. Rita is furious with Tina and Graeme, and Tina has not spoken to Rita since.]
Tina: I think it was time me and Graeme find a place of our own. Don't you?
Rita: (silence)
Tina: I'll take that as a maybe then?

Rita: You don't want us pensioners cramping your style love.

Tina: We haven't fallen out too badly though, have we?

(ITV Programme *Coronation Street*, broadcast on 24th September 2010)

- (12') a. I am not willing to respond.
b. You should find a place of your own with Graeme.
c. You must move out.
d. I can't stand living with you anymore.

Again, the speaker is not concerned which assumption the hearer recovers, as long as the use of silence triggers the hearer to access further thoughts and enables the hearer to 'share an impression' (Wharton (2009:45)) or to have an overall interpretation of the feeling. Relevance is achieved not by a recovery of a specific proposition that is relevant, but through a range of weakly communicated assumptions.

4. Why always a negative response?

In her analysis of silence in a question-answer exchange, Duffy (2006) correctly points out that the use of silence often triggers a negative interpretation and explains the negativity in terms of the notion of the cognitive structure of negation (c.f. Yoshimura (1993), (1999)). Duffy (2006) argues the reason for negative interpretation of silence might come from the fact that the use of silence deletes the expectation for a reply. Let us first see how interrogatives are dealt with in relevance theory.

Sperber & Wilson (1995) argue that interrogatives can be analysed in terms of the notion of interpretive use:

Our hypothesis is that the hearer of an interrogative utterance recovers its logical form and integrates it into a description of the form *The speaker is asking Wh-P*. [...] We want to analyse *asking WH-P*, where *WH-P* is a *yes-no* question and *P* is the propositional form of the utterance as communicating that the thought interpreted by *P* would be relevant if true. [...] In other words, interrogative utterances are interpretation of answers that the speaker would regard as relevant if true.

(Sperber & Wilson (1995:252))

When a yes-no question is asked, the hearer would construct an explicature in (13):

(13) The speaker is asking whether it is true that *P*.

Sperber & Wilson (1995) also claim that when asking a question, the speaker believes that the hearer is able to provide the answer. The assumption that silence is an answer not only suggests the answer is not ‘yes’ (as, if the answer is ‘yes’, i.e. true, it achieves relevance) but it also contradicts the expectation that the hearer can provide the answer. The speaker of the original question would then search for alternatives. This is in line with my analysis of silence in terms of interpretive resemblance. Silence in ostensive communication enables the hearer to access a wide range of contextual assumptions and hence provides the hearer with means to recover a relevant interpretation. If the speaker wants the hearer to recover a positive interpretation (e.g. yes), then the use of silence is not the most economical way of responding. Instead, the speaker uses silence in order to communicate an array of assumptions that would enable the hearer to access the speaker’s mental state. Recall example (11), where an offensive joke is met with silence. Ostensively-used silence in (11) interpretively represents an emotional or mental state of the speaker (e.g. surprise/shock/inability/lack of information/unwillingness) which silence as a natural behaviour often activates in audience. We also saw Berger’s (2004) description of causes of natural silence, which include (i) unexpected information/deviant behaviour, (ii) stress, extremely the emotion and nervousness and (iii) lack of information/knowledge about the topic. As one can expect, none of the above can be described as ‘positive’ response. In other words, it is only natural that ostensively-used silence often triggers a negative interpretation, as it is used in virtue of resemblance to silence as a natural behaviour.

5. Conclusion

In this paper, I presented an analysis of silence in ostensive communication from a cognitive point of view and examined silence in ostensive communication in terms of interpretive resemblance and weakly communicated assumptions. This shows that silence can be treated in a same way as any other ostensive stimulus and that there is no need for separate theories of silence in discourse or silence in communication.

However, there is one issue that remains unaccounted for. While silence

communicates an assumption *I am unable/unwilling to communicate*, it is not clear how ‘implicit’ this assumption is. In other words, while this assumption is recovered thoroughly via inference (i.e. not linguistically encoded / developed from linguistically encoded meaning), this assumption is very strongly associated with silence and thus there is a possibility that it is now ‘culturally encoded’ with the behaviour. One might want to call it ‘explicature’, although it cannot be an explicature by definition, as there is nothing linguistically encoded by the silence. This issue awaits further investigation.

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