Silence in Everyday Conversations amongst Students: A Case of St. Augustine University of Tanzania

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Authors' contributions

This work was carried out in collaboration between both authors. Both authors read and approved the final manuscript.

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ABSTRACT

This paper investigated the role of silence in everyday conversations amongst students of St. Augustine University of Tanzania. It sought to evaluate the role and implications of silence in everyday conversations amongst the students. In order to get appropriate information for the study, focus group discussion, unstructured interviews, and observation were used to collect data. It employed qualitative approach in data collection and analysis. The interpretation of data was guided by politeness theory which was proposed by Brown and Levinson. The findings revealed that most interlocutors tended to keep silent to grasp the content of their discussions and reduce disagreements during conversations. This was taken as a kind of politeness. However, few respondents were of a contrary opinion and argued that one's silence during conversations was a sign of being uncooperative and could limit information flow amongst the interlocutors. Generally, the study concludes that silence plays a significant role in the conversation processes in human life. Additionally, silence among interlocutors depends on the context of a conversation in terms of place and its content.

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1. INTRODUCTION

Conversation has been part of our daily life since the existence of human beings. In this era of science and technological advancements whereby the world has become a global village, the art of conversation still remains very significant in education, work places, cultural exchange and commerce. Presently, conversation is often regarded as the bridge between individuals and society. In our daily conversation, interlocutors normally communicate through talking. In the light of this reality, a conversation can be characterised both by silence and talking simultaneously. Thus, it is vital to note that talking depends on the relationship between interlocutors as well as on how the messages and their meanings are understood.

Although it is vital to have a conversation, particularly in our society, silence can affect the exchange of information during a conversation. Thus, if we think of silence as nothing more than talking, a conversation may probably not be that significant in the everyday life in society. As teachers and members of society, our goal is for the learners to be able to communicate effectively. We are obliged to help our learners and society as a whole to lead a meaningful life in this globalized world by underscoring the significance of silence in our daily conversation as human beings who need genuine contact with each other. Despite the challenges and limitations of silence in a conversation, there is no doubt that silence in conversations has multiple roles to play that society and scholars may not be aware of. This paper sheds light on the role and benefits of silence in daily conversations among people in society.

1.1 The Meaning of Silence and its Role

People communicate by using their voice to express words, but they send messages without actually saying anything verbally as well (Gundluch, 2013, p. 1). Gundluch adds that this nonverbal communication includes facial expressions, gestures, body language in general and silence. However, our study is based mainly on silence as one of the nonverbal communication forms.

Silence refers to the absence of talk or speech where it constitutes a whole realm of communication with its features, components, and variety of forms [1]. Similarly, Bonvillain [2] defines silence as an act of non-verbal communication that transmits many kinds of meaning, depending on the cultural norms of interpretation. Bonvillain adds that silence is the information that can be interpreted by the listener whether it is understood or not, though some information may not be clear since there is no verbal expression. Moreover, silence may refer to the moments during a conversation in which verbal communication has ceased [3]. This implies that, even though there is no verbal communication, still there is a message that is being communicated through active silence.

Generally, we can term silence as communication that depends on the context and cultural norms. For example, in some cultures young people tend to be silent when elders are talking. In that case, being silent during a group discussion may limit the contribution of ideas within a group discussion. In our everyday conversations, a speaker has to consider where or when silence is appropriate to bring about meaning.

Silence has different roles in our daily conversations. People can gain enough time to meditate on issues or respect a speaker during a conversation. As Gendron [3] points out, silence creates comfortable spaces within a discussion and the overall relationship to reflect, empathise and gain greater insight into one's own emotions, thoughts, and actions, as well as those of one's counterparts. This corresponds with Nakane's [4] study which showed that silence could convey multi-meanings, such as people's impressions, attitudes, emotions, and intentions with illocutionary force. Thus, we cannot ignore the role of silence since without it, sometimes people may not agree with each other, especially during a discussion.

Robert (n.d) affirms that silence can also be used to express disagreement. This can be done by taking the form of body language such as grimacing, frowning, squinting the eyes, wrinkling the nose, or pouting. It is inadequate, therefore, to merely study silence in these cases but to also note what else is expressed through body language. The ones that communicate may decide to use facial expressions to make a message clearer to whomever it is meant.

AL-Halahsheh [5] whose study was done in Jordan, asserts that silence is significant if it is used effectively in casual conversation. The study revealed that one's silence for a long

period may be interpreted as being a kind of insult to the current speaker. The study concludes that the meaning of silence is ambiguous and people may have difficulty interpreting the meaning of silence in certain situations, especially when the rapport between the interlocutors is weak.

Silence can be interpreted as a form of indirect response, the possibility that the speaker has an intention to speak but is taking time, as well as a manifestation of power, impressions, attitudes, or emotions [6]. Al-Sahawneh [7] who also did a study in the Jordanian society on the functions of silence points out that silence can be employed to avoid confrontation, exposing one's ignorance and embarrassment or enhance one's thoughtfulness, sense of safety and security, respect, patience, and wisdom or express one's resistance to authority. According to Eades [8], silence can be a source of misunderstandings, diverse interpretations, and problems in intercultural communication. Therefore, silence in conversations can bring about either positive or negative outcomes depending on its context of use.

Silence has an illocutionary force as well as per locutionary effects and enhances the truth-value in a speech. For example, silence can be used 'to question, promise, deny, warn, threaten, insult, request or recommend, as well as to carry out various kinds of ritual interaction' [9]. For example, the conversation below shows the effect of silence on one's response:

> Child: Mom! I will go to play outside.
>
> Mother: Silence (gazing angrily at her).
>
> Child: Ok, I will not go.

In this context, while the mother's silence signifies the illocutionary force of threatening or warning the child not to go out, the child's response indicates its perlocutionary effect on him/her. Therefore, the silence in the mother's response can be seen as a sign of warning.

Nakane [10] examined the communicative function of silence in Jordan by focussing on funerals and wedding parties. The study findings demonstrated that there was a great significance of silence on conversations that depended on the context of its use. The study concluded that silence was functional in Jordanian society about deaths, wedding parties, engagement occasions,

and classrooms. Consequently, this indicates that the functions of silence can vary according to the social contexts. It has, therefore, various meanings in human communication and can be taken as a cultural phenomenon.

Al-harahsheh (2012) provides some proverbs on the role of silence. He gives proverbs on silence in the Australian and Western cultures. Proverbs are the outcomes of cummulative experiences in life. Below are some proverbs that demonstrate the role of silence in discourses:

> Silence is golden.
> Only speak when you have something to say.
> Don't let your tongue run away with you.
> Three wise monkeys: hear no evil, see no evil, and speak no evil.
> A closed mouth catches no flies.
> Greate the teeth to guard the tongue.
> A still tongue makes a wise head.

In addition, silence is viewed as a way of being polite. This view relates to politeness theory which states, "To remain silent is the politest strategy for handling face-threatening acts". This concurs with (Sifianou [11] who said that a speaker remains silent as a potentially threatening act that is not just mitigated but avoided altogether. Therefore, the present study is guided by the politeness theory by Brown and Levinson [12].

2. POLITENESS THEORY

Politeness theory is a model which was proposed by sociolinguists called Brown and Levinson in their book, Politeness: Some Universals in Language Use, whose ideas were developed in the 1970s and 1980s at Stanford University [13]. The primary assumptions of the model are positive and negative face as well as the face-threatening act (FTA). Also, in Brown and Levinson's theory of politeness strategies, remaining silent is considered the politest manifestation since the speaker avoids the (FTA) altogether [12].

Tennant [14] considers silence as a manifestation of positive politeness because it relates to being understood without using any words. This form of silence can be displayed in different ways as when one avoids asking questions or letting the speaker say as much as he or she wants to. This leads to the implication that, sometimes, people tend to be silent as a sign of politeness and respect for those they are talking to.

According to Mao [15], negative politeness can be expressed with silence when it reflects recognition and respect for a speaker, when the hearer's negative face needs to be undisturbed, be ensured of freedom or be protected from intrusion. On the other hand, Sounders [16] avers that, through silence and formal courtesy, people preserve emotional neutrality.

Furthermore, silence can be connected with an off-record politeness strategy. Tennan [14] advocates this idea and argues that silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness since it is not a matter of saying one thing and meaning something else. In general, silence is the case of saying nothing and meaning something else; hence, it has a great role in a conversation.

Generally, silence can be viewed as a useful manifestation of different kinds of politeness strategies. That is, despite the long-lasting tendency to diminish the importance of the multifaceted role of silence in interactions, it has been proven that silence is a significant act of communication that displays all kinds of politeness strategies which are on-record politeness, positive politeness, negative politeness, and off-record politeness just as verbal expressions do.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study employed the qualitative approach to get detailed information since it is mainly descriptive in nature. Unstructured interviews, focus group discussions and observation instruments were used to collect the appropriate information on the role of silence in daily conversations. The study was conducted at Saint Augustine University of Tanzania (SAUT) Mwanza main campus. Twenty-eight participants were chosen from both undergraduate and postgraduate students. The participants were purposively selected based on the knowledge and skills they had in the present study. Since the participants were university students, the researchers assumed that they had deep knowledge on the reasons for employing silence in everyday conversation because they did so in their conversations during group discussions, i lectures, and other social contexts.

Additionally, unstructured interviews involving ten (10) participants were conducted to capture their personal feelings and reasons for employing silence in their conversations. The study also involved eighteen respondents in three focused group discussions, whereby each group composed of six participants. The researchers used focus group discussion to get general ideas from a larger number of people on the reasons for adopting silence their conversations as well as explore the implications of silence in everyday conversations.

The researchers further employed the observation method to capture information which could not be collected through interview or focus group discussion. It was easy to get information through observation because the researchers stayed with the participants whose conversations they observed on how silence was employed among the interlocutors. Data were analyzed both through narrative way and organized thematically in order to suit the qualitative approach in data analysis. Lastly, data were interpreted and presented based on the data collection instruments used.

4. RESEARCH FINDINGS AND PRESENTATION

This section presents the research findings pertaining the role of silence in everyday conversation based on the methods of data collection, namely, focus group discussion, interviews, and observations.

4.1 Focus Group Discussions

Groups that were involved in focus group discussions were named as groups A, B and C. The study findings indicated that there were negative and positive roles of silence in everyday conversation as presented

Firstly, interlocuters employ silence in order to express their politeness and obedience during a conversation. Most of the respondents reported that during the conversation process, some speakers tended to be quiet as a sign of being polite. They also said that was done regularly when conversations took place between young people and elders or involved authorized people. One of the respondents said:

Sometimes, it may happen that a university student is called by the Vice-Chancellor. In the conversation that takes place between the two, the student may limit his or her talking and maintain silence as a sign of respect and politeness to the Vice-Chancellor.

This finding correlates to Yuan Quan's [17] analysis of silence in intercultural

communication. Yuan Quan states, "When the person in the superordinate or upper position talks with the person in the subordinate or lower position, the latter must be silent when listening to the former's speech in order to show his politeness" (p.155). Similarly, Ambele and Boonsuku's [18] study on silence as a face-saving politeness strategy at Thai University showed that the degree of politeness between people who are strangers is higher than that of friends. Strangers tend to produce more assessment or acknowledgment backchannels than friends do so as to show more respect and interest in and for each other. Correspondingly, Agyekum [1] affirms, "In the theory of politeness, to remain silent is the politest strategy for handling face-threatening acts" (p. 34). Therefore, during a conversation, as a student, one does not give the answer hastily since the student needs to think first and politely provide his or her response by using polite language.

Secondly, people employ silence in order to express their respect to their speakers. From focus group discussion, it was revealed that listeners tend to keep silent in order to demonstrate one's respect to the speaker's ideas. To support this point of view, one of the respondents said:

During a conversation, we do consider silence as a virtue or a sign of respectability and trustworthiness in the discussion. If it happens that one of the group members is talking while others are listening, the speaker feels that his listeners respect his or her views by listening attentively.

This finding concurs with that in a study by Ambele & Boonsuk [18] who observes that the listener wishes to be respected; that is, the speaker may impose something on the listener by asking one to do something. Similarly, the study by Ambele and Boonsuk on silence as a politeness strategy in Thailand points out, "Silence as a face-saving politeness strategy was principally realized by these students in order to show respect and strengthen social rapport and to guarantee the continuation of the conversation" (p. 229). Correspondingly, Yuan Quan [17] comments, in a conversation, the one who usually keeps silent is the one in the subordinate or lower position" (p.157). Silence plays a big role in our society where without silence between young and older it shows a lack of respect.

Thirdly, silence minimizes conflicts and anger among the interlocutors. Respondents reported that a speaker may decide to keep silent if one thinks that the message being conveyed can bring about conflicts with the listeners. Therefore, being silent can give more time to one for thinking about the best response in a talk. This corresponds to Agyekum [1] who notes that silence is integral to a communicative mediation where a message is passed from the speaker to the addressee through a third party. Its mediation and indirection is meant to avoid face-to-face conflict and face-threatening acts. Ambele and Boonsuk [18] provides the same example by noting that intense (verbal) arguments between friends may jeopardize their relationship, hence, avoidance of confrontation through silence may minimize the potentially damaging effects of an ensuing verbal fight. That is why silence plays a big role, especially during a conversation or group discussion.

Fourthly, some interlocutors involve silence in their conversations in order to create ambiguity in their messages or responses. This was reported from group A when one of the participants said:

If we want to hide our secrets in our group since we differ in age and behavior during a conversation, we ought to be silent to give room to those who like spreading rumors. This brings about positive or negative revelations of the listeners' thoughts.

The findings further showed that the issue of silence as an ambiguous response may bring about problems to the interlocutors. Agyekum [1] argues, "The only problem with silence in such an encounter is that, since it carries a high degree of indirection and ambiguity, it becomes very difficult for the other participant to know what is going on in the other interlocutor's mind" (p. 34). Generally, the best way to avoid misunderstandings between interlocutors is for one to play a fool as Ambele and Boonsuk [18] points out that "the best answer to a fool is silence" (p. 228).

Fifthly, silence may occur due to different situations and contexts. The study findings identified different situations and contexts where silence can occur. For instance, in a hospital environment or worship places, silence should be employed since conversations are not encourage to take place there. In the classroom, while the lecture is in progress, or when a special event involving a guest of honor is taking place, listeners tend to be silent as a sign of politeness and expression of their respect. One of the

respondents provides an example in relation to environment and contexts by saying, "Although there are environments where we can talk, we always keep quiet in worship places to meditate what we have in our minds".

The study findings are similar to those by Yuan Quan's [17] whose study revealed that when people pray in the church or attend a concert, they were expected to be silent. Furthermore, when people are tired or sad, they will wish not to be disturbed and would prefer to stay alone and silently. On the other hand, when we want to transmit information or exchange emotions or feelings, silence becomes an improper strategy.

4.2 Individual Views

This section discusses the information about the implication of the role of silence in our everyday conversations. The findings were obtained through interviews conducted with participants in the study.

Silence leads to the reduction of quarrels and conflicts during a conversation. One of the respondents said, "Normally, I prefer silence during conversation especially when I doubt that what I want to talk about might have a negative impact on the talk. So, during such moments, I normally keep silent". This correlates to Oduro-Frimpong's [19] study on semiotic silence which indicates that silence in a situation involving conflict reduces one's anger because it offers one an opportunity to rationally re-evaluate one's position on a controversial topic. The writers also found that silence rarely occurs in smooth conversations. Similarly, Lestary et. al [20] state that a high frequency of silence indicates troubled conversations since it is triggered by conflict prior to it. Hence, in the application of silence, some of the issues or answers which may bring about conflicts, quarrels, or break up of friendship can be solved amicably among the interlocutors.

Silence is viewed as a key term during a conversation. From the study findings, it was observed that interlocutors were keen on when to keep silent during the conversation in order to maintain good relationships. That is, interlocutors seemed to think beyond where silence could be applied without affecting the listener psychologically. One of the respondents provided an example of a conversation in their environment.

Speaker A: Hello Anna!
Speaker B: Sema. Niaje? (Tell me, how is it)
Speaker A: Poa kabisa. (Very fine)
Speaker B: Nimesoma kwenye group la WhatsApp kuwa test ni next week! (I have read a message in the WhatsApp group that next week we have test
Speaker A: (Keeps silent).

The above example shows that the speaker used an inappropriate way of silence since this could lead to a limitation to information flow. Speaker A is trying to keep the conversation going on but speaker B seemed not to care about what was being said.

Silence leads to the interpretation of the content of a given message. The data collected revealed that when interlocutors applied silence without undermining the views or ideas of their friends, they came up with positive responses. On the other hand, some respondents reported that during their conversation silence was a tricky term which could be negatively or positively interpreted. The aim of digesting the content and responding to the facts, if it is used in a negative way, may limit information flow among the interlocutors. The main aim of digesting the content is to allow one to give the best response during a conversation. The study findings concur with Zsubrinszky's [6] study on an exploratory study of silence who affirms that pauses play a crucial role in achieving successful communication in that they not only allow the speaker time to organise his or her thoughts but also the listener time to understand what the speaker is saying. Pauses can also affect the formation of impressions, for instance, when somebody tells a joke and would like to hear the reactions to it (p. 2). That is why there is no way silence can be ignored during a conversational process.

4.3 Researchers' Observations

In this section, researchers collected information through direct observation of some of the conversations. Researchers concentrated on observing the people's reactions during dialogues. Te results from the field are presented and discussed below.

Researchers observed some interlocutors trying to hide their feelings or ideas during conversations. This is well demonstrated below:

Speaker A: Neema, vipi hujambo? (Neema, are you fine?)
Speaker B: Sijambo, mzima? I'm okey! Are you fine?)
Speaker A: Mzima kabisa (Very fine!)
Speaker B: Vipi test ilikuwaje? (How was a test?).
Speaker A: (Silence)
Speaker B: Mbona kimya? (Why are you silent?)
Speaker A: Kwaheri (Goodbye).

From the above conversation, it was observed that speaker A was not ready for a talk for a long time. The researchers assumed that the test might have been too difficult for Speaker A, hence, he did not want to share his views about it.

Similarly, one of the researchers had a conversation with one of her lecturers. Below is their conversation:

Lecture: Morning Geny!
Student: Morning Dr.
Lecturer: How are you doing in your research proposal?
Student: Somehow fine.

Lecturer: Geny, you need to put much effort in your work. You should know that a master's program is all about research. Read different materials to make your dissertation quality.

Student: (Silence)
Lecturer: Yes, did you get me?
Student: Yes, very well Dr. Thanks!

The above conversation shows that the student observed silence in order to get accurate information from the supervisor.

Researchers also reported another conversation that took place within a classroom between the lecturer and class members that progressed as follows:

Lecturer: Good evening class.
Students: Good evening Dr.
Lecturer: Hope you are fine!
Students: (Silence)
Lecturer: Where did we end last week?
Students: (Silence)
Lecturer: I'm asking again, what was our last subtopic?
Student: (Silence!)

The application of silence which is shown by students can be ambiguous. That is, researchers

thought that the students were not aware of the information from the lecturer or they were just uncooperative. This is because they expected the students to directly respond to their lecturer on whether they knew what they had previously learnt or not.

Also, the researchers observed a certain conversation involving two interlocutors. However, the interlocutors decided to keep silent in order to keep their information secret. The researchers assumed that e they had secret issues to talk about since they were classmates. When the researchers arrived there, they decided to remain silent. The researchers thought that they wanted to keep their stories to themselves. However, immediately the researchers had left, they heard the two interlocutors start conversing again.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDA-TIONS

This paper investigated the role and implications of silence in everyday conversation. The findings showed that most of the people tended to be silent because it was a sign of expressing their respect, it reduced anger among interlocutors, it was a kind of showing their obedience and politeness. Furthermore, the findings showed that employment of silence depended on the context it was applied. The study concludes that silence can have negative repercussions especially when it leads to conflicts or creates ambiguities among the interlocutors or show that some people do not care.

Silence is something that cannot be avoided during a conversation because interlocutors need to be attentive during conversations in order to grab the intended information in a conversation. It is in silence when interlocutors create good relationships, especially when the listenersrespects the speakers during a talk.

The study recommends that more studies should be conducted on silence in different places, especially in school and family contexts to expand the knowledge on this topic.

COMPETING INTERESTS

Authors have declared that no competing interests exist.

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