

Pragmatics of Authoritative Silence as a Conflict Control Strategy Among Traditional Rulers in Ogugu Community

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Abstract

The study examined Pragmatics of Authoritative Silence as a conflict control strategy by traditional rulers in Ogugu community to achieve peaceful coexistence. A major objective is to analyze how these elders utilize pragmatics of silence as a communicative act to mediate conflicts among disputing members. Data were collected from the traditional elders using participant observation and open-ended interview. Data collected were analyzed using the instrumentality of descriptive and analytical research tools. The process of mediation by the elders revealed both verbal and non-verbal responses by the participants. Non-verbal is a language without words. Findings indicate that non-verbal behavior oozes out at every pore of humanity when communicating hence silence is an indispensable complement to spoken language. There can hardly be meaningful interpersonal or group communication without silence or untalk language. The study recommends that it is critical to develop the skills necessary to identify and interpret silence as a communicative resource through which participants derive meaning. The study adopted relevance theory developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995).

Keywords: *authoritative silence, disputing members, communicative resource, instrumentality, mediate.*

Introduction

In pragmatics, silence is a deliberate and meaningful communicative act rather than a mere void or absence of words. It serves as a dynamic strategy to convey social, emotional, and cultural meaning. Therefore, scholars of pragmatics have increasingly focused on silence as an important communicative phenomenon capable of conveying meaning within specific social and cultural contexts. Pragmatics examines not only what is said but also what is implied, inferred, or left unsaid (Levinson, 1983). On this note, silence is no longer considered merely as the absence of speech but as a meaningful communicative act that can perform various functions such as expressing agreement, disagreement, contemplation, uncertainty, deference, respect, or emotional depth (Jaworski, 1993). The interpretation of silence in most cases depends on contextual factors and the shared expectations of participants in a communicative event. Hence, it is a communicative resource through which speakers and listeners derive meaning. Additionally, interpretations of silence are deeply ingrained in shared socio-cultural knowledge, encompassing norms governing age, status, and traditional hierarchy.

Statement of the Problem

Research in pragmatics and other related fields in linguistics has largely focused on spoken utterances, speech acts, turn-taking mechanisms, and verbal strategies, while neglecting silence as a meaningful communicative resource. Silence has often been examined through Western communicative assumptions and has been associated with conversational failure, passivity, uncertainty, or social awkwardness, among other peripheral issues.

However, such interpretations hardly depict the practical realities, sense, and meaning entrenched in African communicative contexts, where silence functions positively and strategically. This is particularly evident in Nigerian institutional settings such as Ogugu Traditional Council, where the elders mediate or arbitrate conflicts in their community. Silence frequently reflects socio-cultural expectations surrounding hierarchy, age, authority, and respect. However, scant scholarly attention has been paid to how silence operates pragmatically within these contexts.

Aim

The aim of the study is to investigate the functions of the pragmatics of silence in institutional socio-cultural events, particularly the functions of silence in the mediatory roles of Ogugu traditional elders in resolving conflicts.

Research Questions

The study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. In which contexts does silence signal subtle resistance during mediation?
2. How does authoritative silence signify respect and deference in the course of conflict resolution?
3. In which contexts do the elders identify silence as a sign of agreement, disagreement, or obedience?

Objectives of the Study

The study aims to:

1. Examine how silence signals subtle resistance in the course of conflict resolution by elders in a community.
2. Investigate the contexts in which silence signifies respect and deference during problem-solving by elders.
3. Examine the situations in which elders can identify silence as a sign of agreement, disagreement, or obedience.

Methodology

The study adopted a qualitative research design. Briefly defined, the term qualitative research refers to research that is based on descriptive data and does not make regular use of statistical procedures. The aim of qualitative research often involves the provision of careful and detailed descriptions, as opposed to the quantification of data through measurements, frequencies, scores, and ratings. The study dwells extensively on the detailed description of the variables being studied, as the researcher presents a natural and holistic picture of the phenomena being studied. The researcher utilized participant observation and open-ended interview to elicit data from the Traditional Council Members. (Incidentally, the researcher used an eye-witness account, himself being a member of the Elders caucus). The interaction sessions include interrogation sessions, consultations sessions by the “Elders Caucus”, explanation sessions by respondents and resolutions.

Theoretical Anchorage

The study adopted Relevance Theory, developed by Sperber and Wilson (1995). The theory posits that communication involves not only explicit linguistic expressions but also inferential processes through which hearers construct meaning based on contextual assumptions.

The theory also holds that the human mind is designed to maximize relevance: Listeners interpret utterances based on the principle that the cognitive effects of the message justify the processing effort required to understand it. This theory provides an appropriate framework for examining how silence functions as a communicative strategy among Ogugu traditional elders in the course of conflict resolutions.

Literature Review

Concept of Silence

We are made to understand by artificial intelligence that an authoritative or directive silence is a form of powerful, non-verbal communication. It projects quiet restraint, control and calm confidence. Rather than filling a space, silence commands it, acting as an indirect way to signal expectations, assent boundaries or allow others to reflect.

This type of silence can be deconstructed into the strategic pause: Leaving a purposeful, 3-second gap after a statement or request gives it weight and forces the listener to digest the information. It controls without words: Refusing to immediately react or defend oneself projects emotional maturity and mystery, demanding respect without needing to resort to anger or volume. Listening to observe: It involves intentionally withholding input to listen better, absorb information or let others reveal their true intentions. In leadership context, deliberate pauses and controlled stillness can establish a powerful executive presence, allowing a speaker to command a room naturally. A common type of authoritative and power-driven silence is the silent treatment: a tactic of emotional manipulation used to punish, isolate or force submission by completely withholding. It forces the recipient into a state of anxiety until they yield to the manipulator. Evaluative silence is a strategic, measured pause used to assess information, gauge a reaction or allow the weight of a statement to sink in. Instead of jumping to respond, you deliberately hold back to process detail, observe body language or let the other party fill the gap. Some evaluative silence is actually signalling of guilt or consent. Another evaluative silence is the temporary silence which occurs when someone takes time to work out how to articulate the thing they want to say. Too often, managers, leaders, facilitators etc. think “silence is bad”, it can be. But it can just be the pause that people need-preparatory silence. Pragmatics of authoritative silence refers to the study of how it functions as a communicative strategy within specific social, cultural, and institutional contexts. Qizi (2025) notes that "silence refers to the presence of meaning in the absence of sound."

Scholars such as Saville-Troike, Kurzon, Jaworski, and Ephratt categorize silence not by its length, but by its communicative intent, social function, and interactional role.

1. Psycholinguistic Silence (Self-Oriented)

This silence is directed inward. It happens during hesitation, word- searching, or cognitive planning. It is a by-product of the speaker's internal processing.

Example: Pausing mid-sentence to recall a name.

2. Social/Conventional Silence (Ritualistic)

This is silence prescribed by social norms, customs, or institutional rules. It is not a choice but an expected behaviour.

Examples:

- Two minutes' silence on Remembrance Day.
- Silent prayers in church.
- Silence during a university exam.
- A moment of silence before a judicial verdict.

3. Affective and Social Conventional Silence

This silence is relational and polite, managing face and social distance. It maintains or adjusts social hierarchy and saves "face" (avoiding embarrassment).

Example: Deference is shown as a subordinate remains silent in the presence of authority figures to show respect.

The pragmatics of silence teaches us that meaning is not only found in sound, but also in the perceived intention behind the absence of sound. Silence is never truly empty; it is a linguistic zero that functions pragmatically as a powerful social variable capable of harming, healing, obeying, or resisting (Saville-Troike et al.).

Data Presentation and Analysis

Evaluative silence that signals guilt or consent.

Extract I: Land Boundary Dispute (Intra-village Mediation)

Context: Complaint between Audu versus Ojomakpene.

Mediator: Elder Onojah (The most elderly).

Elder Onojah		Audu, what is your complaint against Ojomakpene?
Participant (Audu)	A	Ojomakpene took over almost half of my father's farmland in "Okò Ojuwo".
Elder Onojah		Ojomakpene, did you hear the allegation?
Participant (Ojomakpene)	B	Yes, I did not encroach on his father's farmland at all.
Elder Onojah		Who are your neighbours on that "Okò Ojuwo"?
Participant (Ojomakpene)	B	Abutu Ojoka, Samson Omoko, and Ojogbane.
Elder Onojah		(Summons errand men) Okolo and Oma Agwu! Go to the houses of Abutu Ojoka, Samson Omoko, and Ojogbane. Tell them the elders would like to see them.
Participant (Errand Men)	C	Yes Sir. (Left like a flash of light).
Part C (Errand Men)		Here they are, Sir. The three men prostrated in greeting "dooga".
Elder Onojah		"One nyi" Abutu, Samson, and Ojogbane, you are most welcome. Are you neighbours to Audu and Ojomakpene at "Okò Ojuwo"?
Part D (The Three Men)		(In unison) Yes. We all have our different farmlands there.
Elder Onojah		Do you know the boundary between Audu and Ojomakpene?
Witness I (Abutu)		(Raises his hand to respond). It seems Ojomakpene had lost the memory of the actual boundary line between him and Audu. The portion he cleared recently encroached on where Audu's father used to farm when he was alive.

Elder Onojah		Samson and Ojogbane, what do you have to say?
Witnesses (Samson and Ojogbane)	II	Abutu has spoken our minds. When we confronted Ojomakpene, he was just imagining where his father's portion stopped. However, we showed it to him.
Elder Onojah		Ojomakpene, did you hear what the witnesses said? What do you have to say?
Participant (Ojomakpene)	B	Sir... (9-seconds pause) I... I... I will consider it.
Elder Onojah		It appears Ojomakpene has accepted that he has done wrong. He needs to be assisted to retrace the boundary between him and Audu. (Gives instruction). The three witnesses, in the company of Elders Awulu and Idoko, should go to "Oko Ojuwo" and retrace the boundary between Audu and Ojomakpene, then report to the palace tomorrow. Case settled. I thank you immensely for your efforts in this mediation. I thank you again and again.

Analysis of Extract I

Extract I is a complaint between Audu versus Ojomakpene on land boundary dispute. In the course of the interaction, the lead elder (Elder Onojah) interrogated the accused and the witnesses to ascertain the truth of the matter.

Participant B (Ojomakpene)'s staccato kind of response with a whole of 9-seconds pause (silence is not empty), "I... I... I will consider it", is an indication that he actually lost memory of his farmland. The elders discovered that his silence amounted to consent or agreement.

Authoritative Silence that signals/indicates consent or guilt

Participants: Family representatives, husband and wife (who are disputing), mediators- Ogijo (most elderly) and other Elders

Context: Brother Agene (representative of family A) believes their in-law brother Omoja seems not to have followed the communal procedures when a husband and wife disagree with each other.

Participants	Interactions
"Ogijo" (the most elderly)	Echoes communal greetings. "Megw' Omonu Ochogwu dooga." "Please, brother Agene, tell this house why you are here."
Participant A: Agene	"Ogijo, it is with a heavy heart I have come to seek your timely mediation on this matter."
"Ogijo"	"Please, tell us in plain terms your displeasure."
Participant A: Agene	"When Oka and Onu (husband and wife) had misunderstanding, my in-law, Brother Om'oja, decided to keep Oka, our wife, in his house without following the required procedures. Our elders say, "time is a factor that heals wounds, but if time is unduly stretched beyond necessary, it destroys relationships. "
"Ogijo"	"Representative of Family 'B', please take us through this matter quickly."
Participant B: Om'oja	(Om'oja jumped to his feet in fury.) "Onu inflicted injury on my daughter!"
"Ogijo"	Our great in-law, please calm down. We know that the heart of man is not stone. It can be pricked at intervals. We shall soon arrive there.

Ogijo	Representative of Family "B", please, in your wisdom, tell us what transpired between the husband and the wife.
Participant C: Onu (the husband)	(Onu, the husband, rushed to the middle of the palace and prostrated face-down before everyone. Everybody gazed with awed silence.
"Ogijo"	(Gives instruction) "Oka, come and raise him up." She did and also started to clean his body. (Great moments of silence.)
"Ogijo"	"Me gw'omonu ochogwu-Dooga." i. Ela ma fun, akoko wn ateju n. ii. Obe jen, ako je n, Iya je wn ako obe aikpana. iii. If the meat is not thick, the pepper from it will not stray into the eyes. (Literally translated.) iv. If the knife does not agree, the sword does not agree; such a circumstance makes the sword split. (Literally translated.)
"Ogijo"	(Invites another elder, Elder Idoko, to lend his voice.)
Participant D: Elder Idoko	"Megw'omonu Ochogwu-Dooga."What this young man, Onu, did, we understand, but we want him to tell us in plain terms why he did that.
Participant C: Onu	I have offended my wife, I have offended my in-laws, I have offended the elders, I have offended my family members, I have offended my friends. Therefore, I passionately plead for pardon.
Ogijo	We can now see the end of the tunnel. We have to chase the kite first before we instruct the chick not to go there again. If we follow the paths of our ancestors. We shall certainly always achieve great success. Their watchword has always been 'forgiveness.' That is why 'brotherhood' has been entrenched in our relationship. My brother Om'oja, what is your mind on this issue now?
Om'oja	"Imagine..." (5 seconds silence) "Imagine..." (3 seconds silence) A man raises his hand to inflict injury on a woman!
Ogijo	"Please calm down. Based on what we have seen and heard between this couple, what is your decision now?"
Participant B: Om'oja	Ogijo I greet you. My in-law visited my house several times with apologies, but because the matter is already at the table of the elders, I did not give him a response. My family members gave the matter a second thought and decided to forgive him, but he must be warned,
Ogijo	"Megw'omonu Ochogwu-Dooga." (Ogijo gives instruction.) Onu, his wife and his parents and his wife's parents should see the elders after now. We thank all of you for coming. We thank God and our ancestors for giving us this great success." (The two families exchanged pleasantries laboriously.)

Analysis of Extract 2

The context reflects family squabbles that resulted in assault. Ogugu Traditional Council of Elders stepped into the disagreement by interrogating the family representatives as well as the accused (Onu), who looked inward and tendered an apology to all the participants present at the mediation. Onu, the husband, prostrated in the palace, creating great moments of silence. His action suggested that silence indicates that he is guilty and pleaded for pardon.

In the same extract 2, the silence created by Om’oja, the father-in-law, depicted subtle resistance; although he changed his mind and forgave his in-law.

Discussion of Findings

Silence is of multifarious significance. It means different things to different people and in different situations. It could be a sign of feeling very comfortable with the speaker, respect for the person who is speaking, reflecting on what the speaker has said before answering, wanting to avoid embarrassing the speaker by openly asking questions or disagreeing in public, and many more reasons. It serves as a dynamic strategy to convey social, emotional and cultural meaning. In this particular discourse, silence could be a sign of subtle resistance, agreement or consent, respect or deference, disagreement or obedience. In Extract 1, the 9-seconds (silence) by Ojomakpene indicates that he is guilty and has agreed that he had lost memory of his own farm land. His silence amounted to consent.

In Extract 2, Participant C: One, the accused, prostrated amidst the participants in the palace without a word. The silence he created indicates that he is guilty and that he has accepted it.

In the same Extract 2, Omoja, the father-in-law, in his fury, created a 5-seconds (silence). This indicates a subtle resistance before Ogijo intervened; after which he finally forgave his in-law.

Conclusion

Silence actually has a voice, no matter how subtle, it speaks. In certain situations, it conveys positive impression, in others negative, and yet in others neutral impression. However, in some situations, it is difficult to clearly interpret silence.

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