

A PRAGMATIC STUDY OF THE ROLE OF SILENCE IN PEACE-BUILDING AND CONFLICT MANAGEMENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR MODERN PEACE PROCESSES IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

This study examined the role of silence as a communicative strategy in peace-building and conflict management, with specific implications for modern peace processes in Tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Conflict is an inevitable feature of human interaction, particularly in work places like the university environment which is characterized by tribal, ethnic, religious, age, social status and political differences. Existing studies reveal that most universities embrace conventional approaches to conflict management and often prioritize verbal communication such as dialogue, mediation and negotiation. Silence, as a non-verbal communicative strategy, is often misconstrued as absence of communication and has remained underexplored. Three institutions were randomly selected for the study. They include, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Imo State University, Owerri and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbaram. A qualitative research design was adopted for the study. Data were collected through a structured questionnaire, oral interview, participant observation and discourse analysis of conflict-related interactions. 120 participants form the sample for the study, 30 lecturers and 90 students. 10 lecturers and 30 students were purposely selected from each university. The purposive sampling was employed based on the participants experience in campus conflict situations. Drawing on Austin (1962) and Searles (1969) Speech Acts Theory, Levinson's theory of Politeness and Critical Theory of Silence by Charles Scott and Kenan Ferguson (2022), the study explored silence as a pragmatic tool that shapes meaning, intention and interpretation in conflict situations. Data were analyzed using the pragmatic approach. Findings reveal that silence is a strategic tool for conflict de-escalation, respect negotiation, emotional regulation, conflict avoidance and power dynamics. Furthermore, it prevents the use of provocative language which is a conflict trigger. It signals respect, helps individuals to manage emotions and to avoid impulsive reactions. Recommendations include the recognition of silence as a communicative strategy in peace-building,

mediation and negotiation in work places. It should also be included in the curriculum as one of the peace-building and conflict management processes in modern day peace studies in Nigerian universities.

Keywords: Pragmatics, Silence, Peace-building, Conflict Management, Modern Peace Processes

Introduction

Conflict is an unavoidable phenomenon in human life, especially in workplaces or institutions where individuals from diverse linguistic, ethnic, cultural and ideological backgrounds interact daily. Universities in Nigeria frequently experience conflicts arising from academic disputes, political disagreements, cultism, interpersonal misunderstanding, administrative tensions and social competition. Ohajanwa (2013) argues that workplace conflict can also arise from clashing personalities, miscommunication, perceived backbiting and a perception of hidden agenda. However, most conflict management studies emphasize dialogue, negotiation and mediation which centre on verbal communication while neglecting the communicative value of silence.

Traditionally, communication studies focuses more on spoken utterances, while silence is viewed merely as an absence of speech. In contemporary pragmatics, it is seen as a meaningful communication tool capable of transmitting powerful messages depending on context, culture and interpersonal relationships. Silence can indicate consent, disapproval, fear, respect, anger, emotional pain, resistance, contemplation, or reconciliation. In African societies, silence often carries deeper sociocultural meanings linked to wisdom, maturity, respect for authority, preservation of communal harmony.

However, within the university environment, silence may function positively as a mechanism for peace-building and conflict management. Students may remain silent to avoid the escalation of violence, while administrators may strategically employ silence during negotiations to reduce tension. In some instances, silence allows emotional healing and reflection after conflicts. Conversely, silence can also generate suspicion, fear and emotional repression when wrongly interpreted. The study, therefore, investigates the pragmatic significance of silence in peace- building and conflict management within Universities and its implications for modern peace processes in Nigeria.

Statement of the Problem

Despite increasing scholarly attention to pragmatics and discourse studies, little research has specifically examined silence as a strategic communicative tool for peace-building within Nigerian tertiary institutions. Most conflict management studies emphasize dialogue, negotiation and mediation while neglecting the communicative value of silence.

In most universities in Nigeria, conflicts among students, lecturers, administrators and campus groups continue to occur, yet the role silence plays in managing or escalating these conflicts remains underexplored. Most often, the misinterpretation of silence may worsen disputes, while strategic silence may facilitate reconciliation and peaceful coexistence. This study, therefore, seeks to fill the gap by analyzing silence from a pragmatic perspective.

Aim of the Study

This paper aims to raise awareness of silence as a pragmatic tool, communicative strategy and its significant applications for peace building and conflict management. The paper also introduces language crimes which are linguistically oriented and dependent on the abuse of language. Language crimes like bribery, perjury, libel, solicitation, threatening and conspiracy are dealt with in this paper. These crimes need good training in pragmatics. An application has followed, with focus on speech acts. Forensic

Linguistics is a relatively new branch of linguistics. It is an interdisciplinary field, as it depends in its analysis upon many different fields: (critical) discourse analysis, pragmatics, stylistics, conversation analysis, phonetics, phonology, sociology, syntax, semantics, and law, among others. Statement of the Problem: The field of forensic linguistics is relatively new if it is compared

Significance of the Study

This study contributes to pragmatics, sociolinguistics, discourse analysis, peace studies and communication studies. It expands scholarly understanding of silence as an active communicative strategy rather than mere absence of speech. The research also provides practical insights for conflict managers, university administrators, mediators, counselors, and policy makers on the effective use of silence in peace-building processes. Furthermore, the study enriches African pragmatic scholarship by foregrounding indigenous communicative values associated with silence and communal harmony.

Pragmatics

Pragmatics is a branch of linguistics concerned with how context contributes to meaning. It specifically studies how a hearer understands another person's intended meaning based on what they have said and the context in which they have said it, and how speakers craft their utterances with that in mind. In short, pragmatics is the study of the relationship between what is said and what is meant, and between what is meant and what is understood. In addition, Jacob Mey (2006) states that Pragmatics studies the use of language in human communication as determined by the conditions of the society. Scholars like Grice (1975) and Levinson (1983) argue that pragmatics analyzes implicatures, presuppositions, speech acts, and context-dependent expressions. In view of the different scholarly perspectives, one would conclude that in pragmatics, meaning depends on context, speaker intention, hearer interpretation and shared social knowledge.

Workplace Conflict

Workplace conflict is one of the intra- group conflicts or oppositions which occur between members of a group. This includes members of the staff of a school; college or university, business organization, family, political party, a community, etc. Conflict may arise as a result of ideological differences, struggle over resources, tussle for power, psychological or communicational variables, etc. Ohajanwa (2013) states that workplace conflict is a time-consuming and expensive problem that can have a brutal impact on businesses and the entire organizational system, and if left unresolved, can lead to hostility, stress, wasted resources, loss of workforce and others.

Concept of Silence in Pragmatics

Silence has attracted scholarly attention in pragmatics because meaning is not always communicated through spoken language alone. It is a form of non-verbal communication and can appear in different forms. They include: Hesitation silence (uncertainty or fear), Respectful silence (honour or politeness), Strategic silence (avoidance or manipulation), Emotional silence (grief, anger and shock), Conversational pause (turn-taking signal) and Resistance silence (protest or disapproval).

Silence may function as a communicative act shaped by context, participants, culture and intention. Medubi (2021) argues that silence in Nigerian cultures serves important communicative and communal functions beyond mere absence of speech. Similarly, studies in Hausa and Yoruba discourse reveal that silence can communicate warning, disagreement, emotional control, respect, and social discipline. Scholars further note that silence operates a discourse strategy that enables individuals to negotiate interpersonal relationships and avoid communicative confrontation.

Silence and Conflict Management

Conflict management involves strategies employed to reduce tension, prevent violence and promote reconciliation. In many African societies, silence functions as a traditional mechanism for maintaining social harmony. In conflict situations, silence may prevent emotional escalation and provide room for reflection.

Research on rapport-management strategies in conflict discourse demonstrates that communicative restraint and indirectness often help preserve social relationships during disagreements. Traditional Nigerian conflict management systems also combine verbal and non-verbal communicative strategies to achieve reconciliation and peace.

Silence and Peace-building in African Context

African societies generally perceive silence as a symbol of wisdom, maturity and emotional intelligence. In Southeastern Nigeria, communal institutions frequently employ silence during mediation rituals and reconciliation processes. Indigenous peace-building institutions such as *umuada*, *otu ogbo*, etc utilize culturally recognized communicative strategies including strategic silence, to de-escalate conflict. Scholars further observe that silence contributes to communal stability because it discourages impulsive reactions capable of escalating violence.

Modern Peace Processes

Many scholars view peace from different perspectives such that the definition of the concept seems to be fairly problematic. However, some are of the opinion that it is freedom from war, hostilities, strife, dissection and civil commotion. Nwolise, O.B.C (2006) argues that true peace is the presence of social justice.

It is not the absence of war but involves responding to diversity and conflict with tolerance, imagination and flexibility; fully exercising one's responsibilities to ensure that all totally enjoy human rights (United States Department of Justice, 1996).

Best (1997) defines Peace as an ideal and perfect world where everybody and everything lacks nothing and therefore, encounters no adversarial events which could lead to dispute or conflict.

However, modern peace processes include those processes which are channeled towards the achievement of peace. They include; peacemaking, peacekeeping, peace-building, peace enforcement and many other forms of humanitarian and peace interventions.

Peacemaking is the general effort made to bring hostile parties to agreement while peacekeeping is a technique that expands the possibilities for both the prevention of violent conflict and for making peace. On the other hand, peace-building encompasses those activities which are geared towards putting in place facilities that serve as de-escalators of violent conflicts in the society. In addition, Ohajanwa (2013) distinguishes peace-building in the following ways:

Pre-conflict peace-building which requires the establishment of incentives that can prevent the outbreak of violent conflicts, and Post-conflict peace-building which refers to the undertaking of rehabilitation, reconstruction and reintegration projects in a bid to restore damages done on the society by war, in other to stop further outbreak of violent conflicts in that society.

Theoretical Framework

The research study is anchored on Austin and Searle's Speech Acts Theory, Politeness Theory by Brown and Levinson and Critical Theory of Silence by Charles Scott and Kenan Ferguson.

The proponents of Speech Acts Theory, J. L Austin and John Searle explain how utterances perform actions. Although the theory primarily examines spoken language, silence may also function performatively because through silence, individuals may refuse, protest, consent or reconcile, forgive, apologize without any form of verbal expression.

Charles Scot and Kenan Ferguson in Critical Theory of Silence maintain that silence is not mere absence of speech but a meaningful philosophical, political and existential force. For Scott, silence reveals inner consciousness and allows deeper awareness. It connects humans to existence beyond language. Scott believes that modern society is dominated by excessive speech and noise, Silence, therefore, becomes important because it creates reflection, allows self-discovery and opens space for memory, pain, healing and spirituality. He sees silence as a way of encountering truth that words sometimes cannot express.

For Ferguson, silence is political; it is not always weakness or oppression but can function as resistance against domination since refusing to speak may reject oppressive systems. He criticizes Western democracy which often values voice and public speaking as the main forms of participation but ignores the political power of silence.

Silence can also function as a protest and a means of exposing injustice, hence, marginalized groups can use silence strategically for identity formation and communal solidarity.

In Imo State University, silence has been proven to be a very strong communicative strategy and tool for resolving conflicts and promoting institutional peace. It has also helped people to bond through shared grief, rituals, mourning, meditation and communal silence.

Methodology

Data Collection Procedure

The study combined the use of questionnaire, interview, participant observation and discourse analysis of conflict-related interactions. The questionnaire was tagged Lecturer's Response to Silence as a Communicative Strategy is made up of two sections, the personal data and the question items. There were twenty question items with the columns of the likert scale type ie, strongly agree, agree, disagree and strongly disagree. The questionnaire was administered personally by the researcher. Some were retrieved almost immediately while others were collected later. Some students and lecturers were also interviewed. Tables were generated for the analysis. Some discourses on conflict-related interactions were also descriptively analyzed using the pragmatic approach.

120 participants form the sample for the study, 30 lecturers and 90 students. 10 lecturers and 30 students were purposely selected from each university. The universities include: Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka, Imo State University, Owerri and Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu University, Igbariam. The purposive sampling was employed based on the participant's experience in campus conflict situations.

Data Presentation and Analysis**Table 1**

Attitude of lecturers to the use of silence as a communicative strategy to promote or obstruct peace building in tertiary institutions

No	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
30	5	5	10	10

Table 1 shows the number of respondents are 30. This result vividly depicts that 10 lecturers show positive attitudes towards the use of silence as a communicative strategy to promote or obstruct peace building in tertiary institutions while 20 of the same sample population have negative attitudes. They see silence as non-verbal and an absence of communication.

Table 2

To what extent does strategic silence promote peace in conflict situations?

No	Strongly Agree	Agree	Strongly Disagree	Disagree
30	13	7	5	5

Table 2 shows the extent at which the lecturers use or have used strategic silence to promote peace and/or obstruct conflict in the university. Conflict maybe between students and lecturers, and lecturers and administration or management. Strongly agree and Agree show the degree of positive response to the usage while Strongly Disagree and Disagree show the negative response. The negative responses are as a result of a list of factors including mistrust, information vacuum and rumours, power asymmetry, cultural differences, etc.

Table 3

To what extent do contextual and sociocultural factors shape the interpretation of silence in conflict situations?

No	VGE	GE	LE	VLE	NE
30	4	3	2	1	0
	16	10	2	2	-

Table 3 shows the extent at which contextual and sociocultural factors like cultural norms and values, power distance, existing relationship between the participants, gender difference, religious beliefs and values, etc can shape the interpretation and meaning of silence in conflict situations. They can be used for peace building or as a post conflict tool to restore peace. Very Great Extent and Great Extent show the degree of positive responses while Low Extent, Very Low Extent and No Extent, portray the negative responses.

Table 4

To what extent does silence contribute to conflict escalation, misunderstanding or the suppression of grievance?

No	VGE	GE	LE	VLE	NE
30	4	3	2	1	0
	5	5	10	5	5

Table 4 shows that silence can facilitate the escalation of conflict, misunderstanding and suppression of grievance depending on how it is used, interpreted and contextualized. The following interpretations of silence can intensify conflict: rejection or hostility, indifference, punishment, resistance and accumulated resentment.

Some Discourses on Conflict-related Interactions were also analyzed.

1. Lecturer-Student Interaction

A lecturer asks a student: “Why did you tell other students that there is no lecture today.”

The student remains silent.

Here, the student’s strategic silence could mean the following: to avoid giving the wrong answer which could trigger conflict, a form of apology, and also a form of politeness.

Pragmatically, using the Speech Acts theory, silence performs the act of apologizing. It is used to show respect.

2. Lecturer-Lecturer Interaction

Lecturer A asks Lecturer B: “Who reported me to the Head of the Department?”

Lecturer B remains silent.

Here, using Brown and Levinson’s Politeness theory, silence is used as a way of saving ‘face’.

Hence, lecturer B avoids direct confrontation, accusation and workplace conflict. It is a diplomatic silence in institutional discourse. However, possible implicatures of silence in this context may include: concealment of information, protection of someone, fear of consequences, guilt or disapproval of question. Silence is highly meaningful rather than being empty.

3. Lecturer-Administrator Discourse

The Head of Department asks Lecturer A and Lecturer B: “Why didn’t you attend the departmental meeting?”

They remain silent.

According to the Speech Act Theory, the HOD’s question is not merely seeking information; it functions as a directive act demanding explanation and indirectly, a form of reprimand. The lecturers’ silence serves as a non-verbal response which pragmatically performs the following illocutionary acts of refusal to answer, tacit admission or passive defiance.

From the perspective of Politeness Theory, the HOD’s question threatens the lecturers’ ‘face’, especially their positive face (desire to be respected and approved). The silence may, therefore, function as a face-saving strategy, an attempt to avoid self-incrimination, or avoidance of public embarrassment. Instead of giving an excuse that may worsen the situation, silence minimizes further exposure.

Discussion of Findings

Findings reveal that silence often helps to reduce emotional intensity during confrontations. Many respondents, including lecturers and students indicated that remaining silent during heated arguments prevents violence and creates opportunities for rational reflection.

In the university environment, silence, oftentimes, is used to show respect and emotional control. Students, for instance, frequently use silence when addressing lecturers and administrators as a sign of respect and institutional discipline. Among lecturers, it also functions as emotional regulation during tense situations.

The study also reveals that silence may also communicate dissatisfaction and resistance. Students, sometimes, employ silent treatment, boycotts, or non-participation as forms of protest against perceived injustice.

Some respondents associated silence with fear of victimization, intimidation or institutional punishment. In such situations, silence becomes a maker of suppressed grievances rather than peaceful coexistence.

Silence can be used in peace building. Findings reveal that silence contributes positively to reconciliation processes by allowing emotional healing, reducing aggression and facilitating negotiation, strategic pauses during mediation sessions, and encouraging reflection and empathy among conflicting parties.

Implications for Modern Peace Processes

The study demonstrates that silence should not be dismissed in modern peace-building frameworks. Effective peace processes require attention to both verbal and non-verbal communication. Silence can:

1. promote emotional healing after conflict
2. reduce aggressive communication
3. encourage reflective dialogue
4. preserve interpersonal relationship
5. facilitate negotiation and mediation

However, silence must be interpreted carefully because prolonged silence may also conceal trauma, resentment or injustice. Educational institutions should therefore integrate pragmatic communication studies into peace education and conflict resolution programmes.

Conclusion

Silence is a meaningful communicative resource in conflict management and peace-building. Within tertiary institutions, silence functions as a pragmatic strategy for emotional control, respect, negotiation, reconciliation and conflict de-escalation. While silence may sometimes intensify misunderstanding when misinterpreted, its constructive use contributes significantly to peaceful coexistence and institutional stability. The study, therefore, concludes that modern peace processes in Nigeria should recognize silence as an important dimension of communication capable of promoting sustainable peace.

Recommendations

1. Universities should establish pragmatic communication and peace education programmes.
2. Silence should be recognized as a communicative strategy in peace-building, negotiation and mediation in workplaces.
3. Conflict mediators should recognize silence as a meaningful communicative strategy.
4. It should be included in the curriculum as one of the peace-building and conflict management processes in modern day peace studies in Nigerian universities.
5. Students and staff should be trained on non-verbal communication in conflict resolution.
6. Counselors should create safe spaces where silence-related trauma can be addressed.
7. Further research should examine silence in other Nigerian tertiary institutions.

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