
A Sociolinguistic Analysis of the Role of Silence in Communication in Nimo Community

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Abstract

This study uses the Nimo speech community to conduct a sociolinguistic analysis of the role of silence. The motivation to conduct this study is born out of the fact that the use of silence has traditionally been ignored for its boundary making function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances and is perceived in different ways by different people in Nimo speech community. Silence is not merely the absence of sound but it communicates something different according to when and where it takes place in the speech community. The study of silence has not got much concern in Igbo language in general and Nimo speech community in particular. The goals of this study are to explore the Nimo cultural norms, values and beliefs towards silence during conversation. A major significance of this study is that it is in line with the efforts of other linguists in the area of variables that affect speech and is expected to be used to account adequately for linguistics creativity. Austin (1967) speech act theory serves as the foundation for this research. The population for this study was 80 Nimo speech community residents drawn from the four quarters of

the village. The methods used to assess data were questionnaires and focus group conversations. A major significant finding of this study is that silence in conversation performs at both illocutionary and prelocutionary levels as well as both negative and positive connotations depending on the context, situation and participants involved. In Nimo speech community, silence is functional and meaningful and has different interpretations in different contexts depending on the relationship between the interlocutors, the context of the situation and the topics. Furthermore, it was also discovered that some positive or negative reactions to silence in conversation in Nimo speech community is psychological. This study to a large extent has enhanced our understanding of roles of silence among speakers of Nimo speech community. Future research may benefit from using a larger population, and involving speakers of some other Nigerian languages.

1.1 Introduction

Discourses about silence are old in anthropology and aesthetics but new in the field of linguistics studies. Saville–troike (1985) observes that within linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored for its boundary making function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances. The tradition has been to define it negatively as merely the absence of speech. From the mid 80s, however, such lamentation began to diminish due to a trickle of research on silence, mainly in formal and social interactions. In some of these past researches, Africans compared to westerners, were said to value silence in their interactions.

Although silence is practiced in almost all speech communities, it has not received much attention or the priority it needs from speech linguistics and sociolinguists in Igbo

communication system especially in Nimo speech community. The concern in the communicative roles of silence is as significant as speech since they complement each other (Kurzo, 1998). Silence having negatively been defined as the absence of speech sound does not receive the same attention as speech does; consequently it becomes crucial to explicate the functions and the meanings of silence in interpersonal communication in Nimo speech community. Nimo is located in the Western part of Njikoka Local Government Area of Anambra state, sharing common boundaries with Enugwu-Ukwu in the North, Abagana, Abba and Abatete on the South. It shares boundaries with Neni, Adazi and Agu Ukwu Nri on the Eastern side and it is bordered on the Western side by Eziowelle and Abacha. Nimo has four villages namely: Etiti Nimo, Ifite Ani, Egbengwu and Ifite Enu.

Giving the fact that the meaning of silence in casual conversation is problematic, this is because its interpretation depends on various factors such as; the culture, the relationship and the background of the interlocutors, the occasion as well as the verbal and non verbal contexts surrounding the silence as posited by (Johannese,1974) Johannesen further argues that human silence is pregnant with meaning because of its assumption which in other words means that silence is rich in meaning which leads to the sayings as ‘silence is golden’, ‘silence means consent’ e.t.c. Therefore without the understanding of these meanings during communication, there will be a possibility of ambiguity and misinterpretation between speakers. Bruneau (1973) postulates that absolute silence is impossible; even while we are not speaking /talking, we humans carry on a continuous interior monologue. Silence and verbal language are collocative and can also be included under extra linguistic models of communication (Ephratti, 2011) Another crucial issue is that the place and length of silence in

discourse are unpredictable, as silence is difficult to define and anticipate. Hence the study of silence requires many linguistic frames with various forms, and it carries several meanings (Jaworski, 1997). Following Jaworski's assumption, this study regards silence as a primary linguistic form in discourse. i.e, silence as a phenomenon which adds meaning to spoken words. For the purpose of illustration, silence is a form of non-verbal communication that conveys a linguistic message just as words do. Silence is not merely the absence of sound; it communicates something different according to when and where the silence takes place.

To make clear understanding about silence as a mode of communication, silence in communication can be taken for agreement. Silence can signify something quite different in another context. We can find many instances in which silence denotes anger, disagreement, an attempt of self-control, fear and a wide variety of other emotions. Silence communicates something different according to when and where it takes place. Silence is a statement in itself and conveys meaning in communication. The two types of communication verbal and non-verbal; silence as a non-verbal communication is extremely important in communication mode. Silence helps to define the distinction between personal expressive and standard communicative actions in the entire process of communication.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Silence is not merely the absence of sound but communicates volume of different things depending on the context. Many people have negative feelings or attitude towards silence. Silence can signify something quite different in different contexts to different

people and is a statement in itself that conveys meanings in communication.

The meaning of silence in is problematic in Nimo speech community because of the fact that it seems that the interpretation depends on various factors that include, culture, relationship between interlocutors, the occasion, the verbal and non verbal contexts surrounding it as well as the psychological disposition of individuals. While some members of Nimo find silence during discussion offensive, some others do not. The researcher is inspired to perform a sociolinguistic analysis of the role of silence in communication in Nimo speech community in other to find out the meaning and interpretation of silence by the people of Nimo speech community as well as, explore the sociolinguistic functions of silence in communication, evaluate the norms, traditions and functions attached to silence in the society by the people especially Nimo speech community. In tackling this problem the following questions were raised;

1.3. Research Questions

1. What are the attitudes of the Nimo speakers towards silence?
2. What are the reasons behind the use of silence in conversations?
3. How does the Nimo speaker use silence during communication?
4. How do social and psychological factors bring about the use of silence?

4 Objectives of the study

The aim of this work is to explore the Nimo cultural norms, values and beliefs towards ‘silence’ during communication through investigating the attitude of Nimo speakers as well as to describe the main reasons why silence is being employed in discussions and used during conversations. This work also clarifies the social and psychological factors that bring about the use of silence as well as their attitude towards the use of silence while conversing.

1.5 Significance of the Study

This study is used to describe the relevance, importance and uses of the role of silence in communication in Nimo speech community. This study is in line with the efforts of other linguistic researches in the area of social variables that affect speech which is hoped and expected to be used to account adequately for linguistic creativity or develop a fully universal theory of language. Additionally, this study will bring to knowledge the attitude of Nimo speech community towards silence, their understanding of it and its functions to them during communication.

1.6 Scope and Limitation

This work is limited to illustrating the way people view silence in communication especially in Nimo speech community with regards to their cultural norms, values and beliefs.

1. Literature Review

The conceptual framework, theoretical Studies, empirical studies and theoretical frame work related to the present study will be discussed.

2.1.1. Conceptual Review

2.1.1.1 Sociolinguistics

The study of the relationship between language and society is referred to as sociolinguistics. It is a sub-field of linguistics that investigates the different purposes of language in society. Individuals use language as a vehicle for the transmission of certain messages in diverse contexts; varied surroundings, institutions, at various times, locations; with various people from various backgrounds. A major concern of Sociolinguists is to understand why humans communicate differently in different social circumstances, (Deckert & Vickers, 2011).

They are interested in figuring out what language's social functions are and how it's utilized to express social meaning. It is critical to remember that in the study of sociolinguistics, mutual intelligibility, international acceptability, and linguistic characteristics are not issues to be investigated, but rather the social methods by which language systems are governed. An investigation of how individuals use language in various social circumstances yields a lot of knowledge about how language functions, as well as the social characteristics of a specific society and how people use language to express parts of their social identity.

Furthermore, Yule (1995) asserts that “sociolinguistics deal with the inter-relationship between language and society. It has strong connections to anthropology, through the investigation of language and culture and to sociology, through the crucial role that language plays in the organization of social groups and institutions”. For Yule, language and culture cannot be taken out of the society; they make a society what it is.

2.1.1.2 Silence

Silence is a non-verbal mode of communication which can be used to disseminate information which spoken words are not able to. Silence can mean different things to different people at the same time. Silence is the lack of audible sound. By analogy, the word silence can also refer to any absence of communication or hearing, including the media other than speech and music. Silence is also used as total communication, in reference to non-verbal communication.

According to cultural norms, silence can be positive or negative. Perniola (2010:3), states that ‘there appears to be connection between silence (Scheweigen) and calm (Stille), intended to indicate a state of serenity faithful to the divine presence in the soul of the pious’. This might be the reason why in many religions meditation through silence is often practiced.

2.1.1.3 Communication

Communication involves transmission of verbal and non-verbal messages. It consists of a *sender*, a *receiver* and a *channel* of communication. Communication conveys complex, sensitive and controversial information. According to Merriam-Webster dictionary, communication is the act or process of using words, sounds, signs or behaviours to express or exchange information or to express ones ideas, thoughts, feelings etc., to someone else.

2.1.1.4 Importance of Communication

The need for communication cannot be over emphasized. Communication is important to express oneself as well as satisfies one’s needs. One should have effective communication for advancement in all spheres of life. The under listed are some out of numerous importance of communication

a. Prevents Misunderstanding: When you clearly communicate your thoughts, wants, needs, and intentions there will be no misunderstanding.

b. Strengthens Relationship: We have a better knowledge of each other by talking and listening.

c. Relieves Stress: Talking about your problems and stresses actually helps to relieve the stress and anxiety. Problem shared, being problem solved makes someone to feel as if part of his/her burden has been lifted.

d. Increases Confidence: When you communicate well, people respond positively to you. And that helps to increase your confidence.

2.1.1.5 Areas of Silence in Communication

1. Silence can be a signal for agreement among peer groups: agreement usually cannot be silent but to every rule, there is an exception. Silence can be understood as acceptance when both parties had a pre-existing relationship like peer group. Here the peers signal acceptance of terms in their group where silence is to be interpreted as agreement.

2. Silence keeps your reputation and stakes guarded: sometimes, words are not what they are believed to be. Silence can yield more influence than words. The more silent one can be in crisis situation h/she is involved the more h/she will be saved from character attack since we are usually judged by our utterances.

3. Silence is used to show the level of maturity among people: a major sign of maturity is realizing that silence is more powerful than trying to prove a point that time will take care of.

4. Silence can create a listening space, study emotional intelligence: by choosing silence, one will naturally and people around will have the opportunity to share more. This enhances emotions because it creates a sense of belonging. Silence is a tool for increased emotional regulation and a space between space and a response.

2.1.2. Theoretical review

Saville-Troike (1985) observes that: Within linguistics, silence has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-marking function, delimiting the beginning and ending of utterances. It has been defined negatively as merely the absence of speech. From the mid-80s, however, such notion began to change due to rise in research on silence, mainly in formal and social interactions. In some of the past researches, Africans, when compared to Westerners, were observed to value silence in their interactions. Agyekum (2002), for example, states that ‘the acquisition of silence is part of the Akan child’s developing communicative competence.

According to Agyekum (2002:48) among the Akan community of Ghana, West Africa, children are given the necessary training on the use of silence in everyday encounters’. He stated further that ‘during certain communications, the children may not even be in the vicinity, let alone participate in the communication by talking’.

Similarly, in his study of the Igbo culture, Nwoye (1985) reports that there are some institutionalized silences which must be

observed. These include bereavement during which customarily, bereaved persons are avoided for some days following the death of a family member. About four days after the death, it is deemed appropriate to visit them. Sympathizers walk in, go straight to the bereaved, stand before them, then find a seat somewhere among the mourners and join them awhile in mutual silence (Nwoye,1985:186). The above examples indicate that silence is part of African culture, and it is highly valued and revered, while volubility might be scolded or reproached.

Taking a philosophical perspective, Perniola (2010) views silence as combining both action and contemplation. Silence is an action when it is reflected as an attitude with a particular meaning and contemplation when it reflects the psychological or spiritual state of the user. Similarly, Jaworski (1993) views silence as ‘activity’ reflecting a meaning following certain attitudes or behavior, as ‘state’ when it reflects the psychological condition of the user who expressed or framed it using art work. Kurzon (2007) stressed the need for identifying factors which might influence silence and its actual practice. These factors include the number of people actively involved in the interaction, the text, intentionality, psychological presence or non-presence of the silent person, and source.

He develops a typology of silence comprising ‘communicational’ silence used during dyadic communication, ‘thematic’ silence a situation where interlocutors deliberately avoid a particular topic, ‘textual’ silence used by a group of people engaged in reading a particular text and in some contexts such as schools, libraries or synagogues, and ‘situational’ silence used during some events or occasions ‘such as the moment of silence (1 or 2 min) on a remembrance day for the war dead’ (Kurzon,2007). Kagge, (2018) asserts that silence is the new luxury, more

exclusive and long lasting than other luxuries. This supports recent studies that indicate that thinking for pleasure does not come easily. Saville-Troike (1985) categorizes silence into institutionally-determined, group-determined, and individually-determined/negotiated silence. Like Perniola's, Jaworski's, and Kurzon's categories, Saville-Troike's classification also comprised spiritual as well as rhetorical meanings of silence because she perceived silence as a means of expressing one's emotional, psychological, or spiritual state, such as when he/she engages in prayers or fantasizing. The authors above categorized silence either as activity that carries meaning depending on situation and context of use or as a mystical phenomenon that has connection with the mind of the user.

2.1.1.6 Functions of Silence

Silence can allow us to take our time to speak and respond to people. When feeling anxious, excited, frustrated, happy, agitated e.t.ctaking a moment of quiet to collect oneself can be of great help to avoid hasty negative decisions.

According to Jensen (1973, as cited in Jaworski, (1993: 66-67), when we view silence as a means of communication, then it serves two functions: positive and negative. He states that silence can link or separate people, heal or wound, expose or hide information, indicate favour or disfavour, signal activity or inactivity. From the foregoing, Jensen classifies the functions of silence into five categories:

(i) Linkage: this means that silence can bind people together or sever relationships. Silence here can be positive or negative. While words even the most contradictory word preserves, it is silence that isolates. Silence separates and isolates us

- (ii) **Affecting:** silence can affect things positively or negatively. When silence replaces vital and timely information, things will go wrong and vice-versa
- (iii) **Revelation:** silence enables one to go within oneself to find remedy for stress and anxiety. People will relax easily in silence
- (iv) **Judgmental:** here silence can be a signal that someone's behavior is acceptable or unacceptable
- (v) **Activity:** silence is perceived as a tool for impacting knowledge. For instance, presenting an artwork silently to students for discussion and providing them active silent time to engage with and process the content and meaning. A long pause can be designed to create tension in the midst of telling a story.

Each of these functions can either be negative or positive. According to Lebra, (1987, as cited in Jaworski, 1993: 68), the uncertainty of the function of silence tends to generate 'confusion and misunderstanding not only for a cultural outsider, but for the native as well.

In his pragmatic study of the perception and practice of silence in Australian and Jordanian societies, Al- Harahsheh (2012) identifies two major functions of silence: sociolinguistic and pragmatic. Among sociolinguistic functions of silence are silence to initiate new topics, silence to signify agreement/disagreement, silence as lack of contribution, and silence as a repair mechanism. He identified six pragmatic functions of silence:

- (i) **Face saving:** this is a deliberate avoidance or termination of conversation due to possible threat to the face of the interlocutor.
- (ii) **Socialcourtesy:** silence is employed for courtesy reasons. It might not be intentional but had to be employed.
- (iii) **Expression of feelings:** feelings of anger, disapproval, and disagreement e.t.c are expressed negatively or positively with

silence.

(iv) Silence and embarrassment: silence can be embarrassing were one is expected to speak.

(v) Silence and criticism: this is using silence to criticize something or someone.

(vi) Silence and swearing: this is swearing somebody to secrecy to make h/her promise not to tell anyone what he or she have been told or shown.

Despite their seeming variations, the above functions of silence by Al-Harashseh (2012), and Jensen (1973) tend to have something in common: silence functions just like speech does.

2.1.3. Theoretical Framework

This study is anchored on Austin's (1967) Speech Act Theory for the belief that the writer has on the functions of silence and speech. This theory is one of the influential theories in the analysis of communication. The writer believes that silence, as a communication tool, can play multiple linguistic functions depending on the situation and context of its use. For example, silence can be used as a warning, a promise or an order. Consider the following communication:

1. A: Can I use your umbrella?

2. B. Silence

A. Well, i can use Ben's

A: Well, I can use Ben's.

In the above example, A interprets B's silence as a warning or order

which implies *no, don't take it* (a warning), or simply *I ordered you not use it*. Whatever the meaning shall be, the silence of B yields some illocutionary force on A and results in some outcome (perlocutionary effect) which is preventing or denying him/her the use of the umbrella.

3. A: Can I use your umbrella?

B: Silence

A: Thanks always.

The above example could mean that “you do not have to ask, you know you can always use it” this depends on the relationship

Austin's (1967) Speech Act Theory: A brief overview

Austin (1967) speech act theory is one of the influential theories in the analysis of conversation. In this theory, Austin (1967) outlines three components of speech:

- i. **Locutionary acts**; this can be in the form of ‘noises’ produced by the speaker (phonetic acts), utterance of some words (phatic acts), and uttering such words with a certain sense and certain reference (rheticacts).
- ii. **Illocutionary acts** refer to the way locution is performed with a view to produce an effect on the listener such as ordering, asking permission, undertaking, and so on. In other words, illocutionary acts perform at the level of intentionality of performing locutionaryacts.
- iii. **Perlocutionary acts** refer to the outcome of performing the two acts above. By performing those acts, for example, one will be able to persuade, mislead, or deter someone from doing something.

Although the above acts are tagged ‘speech acts,’ the researcher believes that they can also be applied to the study of silence because silence is not always empty locution but an act that carries meaning.

Methodology

3.1 Research Design

Based on the objectives, this study seeks to achieve, qualitative approach is conceived to be suitable for this research as the study tries to explore a social phenomenon – silence. Qualitative design is used to understand how people experience the world and as such is conceived to provide information that will help achieve the objective of the research.

3.2 Data Collection Method

The method used to collect data was focus group discussion. The method was selected because it creates a conducive environment ‘for participants to discuss perceptions, ideas, opinions and thoughts’ (Krueger & Casey, 2000, as cited in Onwuegbuzie, Dickinson, Leech, & Zoran, 2009: 2). Using focus group discussion, therefore, is thought to provide data that are ‘often deeper and richer than those obtained from one-to-one interview’ (Rabiee, 2004:656).

The sample for this study was 80 speakers of Nimo dialect (40 males and 40 females to ensure gender balance), drawn from the four quarters using convenience sampling after obtaining permission from the participants. The participants filled in informed consent and bio-data forms before the commencement of the discussion.

4.1 Data Presentation, Analysis and discussion of findings

This work enters on two major issues- cultural norms, values and beliefs about silence and the reasons for silence in Nimo speech community. Cultural norms, values and belief about silence as responded and discovered from the participants will be analyzed and discussed as it agrees and relates to the theory in application. The responses from participants were meant to answer the questions raised in the introductory section. Respondents gave an overall general norms, values and beliefs associated with silence in Nimo speech community.

According to them, ‘silence’ can be either positive or negatively perceived depending on the *context*, ‘who and who are involved in the discussion, where the silence is being applied and who it is being referred to as well as the nature of the individual. They also outlined many contexts which include, greeting, family, village meetings, umuada/age grade meetings, childbirth context, traditional ceremonies, marriage ceremonies, use of proverbs, and so on but for the purpose of this paper major contexts will be analyzed and discussed. They believe that silence is necessary in a bereaved family, loss of a new born. It is a norm for a bride to be talking or be involved during her bride price ceremony, and that however does not mean that she has no say in agreeing or disagreeing with her proposed husband.

4.1.1 Result and Discussion

The result and discussion are based on the responses of the participants to the questions they were asked during the focus group discussion as well as responses from the questionnaire. The responses indicate that silence is undoubtedly employed in Nimo speech community by the speakers and that silence has some rhetorical functions during communication. The meaning of

silence is highly ambiguous, and depends on the situations and contexts of its use as has earlier been stated in this paper in the speech community. On a general note, Igbo cultures consider silence from someone who is expected to talk as an insult/disrespect. Below are some situations when silence has **negative** connotations in the Nimo speech community.

4.1.2.1 Silence as an Insult/Disrespect

In Nimo speech community, silence from someone who is expected to talk is considered an insult/disrespect, they take it seriously when someone talks to another person who is supposed to say something and he or she keeps silent. This act of silence can be intentional or unintentional, either way, the person involved feels disrespected or insulted especially if it is between an elder and junior persons, Worst still if it has to do with greeting and none response. Again when someone who is expected to provide explanation about something keeps silent, it is considered an insult or a sign of disrespect. This is in agreement with Austin's (1967) illocutionary act which advocates some level of intentionality of silence in communication by interlocutors which leads to perlocutionary acts of misleading or determent. This shows that the attitude of Nimo people towards silence is that of unacceptability of someone keeping quiet where he or she should talk.

4.1.2.2 Silence as a Sign of Wickedness/Threat

Here, the Nimo people believe that during a conversation where someone who is expected to participate refuses to participate, it shows that s/he is either wicked or has some other motives especially if it is a family matter that needs everybody's contribution. When one is in the midst of h/her mates, amidst

friends, among age group, while a discussion is ongoing and remains quiet, it passes a signal which maybe wrong or right to the people involved, the person may have a problem that is preventing him/her from contributing which the in group may understand. But when among elderly ones, parents, siblings, or family and a conversation is ongoing and one keeps quiet, it tends to pose a threat to them that the person is against what is being discussed.

The above extract indicates the importance of context and situation in the use of silence. In Igbo culture and Nimo speech community, everybody is expected to contribute to most ongoing discussion around him/her; otherwise the initiator of the conversation would not have initiated it around him/her. The illocutionary act of silence of the communicational partner is interpreted as malfunction, even though the performer's intention might not be to threaten or jeopardize the communication partners. The act of silence, therefore, has perlocutionary effects on other communicational partners who tend to interpret the illocutionary act as a threat. In Nimo speech community, such silence can also be considered an act of wickedness as stated by some of the participants, some native believe that such a person is strong-hearted, and as such posses wickedness tendencies.

Conversely, an outspoken person tends to make his motive known to everybody, and as a result, a solution or appropriate response might be provided for him/her. The above extracts indicate that silence is abhorred, particularly in an ongoing communication in Nimo speech community.

4.1.2.3 Silence as Sign of Unhappiness/Mourning

Aside Igbo culture, many other Nigerian cultures and some other countries of the world perceive silence as 'the most apt reaction to extremely painful situations'. A participant stated that when

someone is silent or quiet, it's assumed that something is wrong. It is either he's not happy or somebody is dead, and he/she is just mourning. Most of the participants if not all affirmed that silence is recognized and observed at its peak in Nimo community when there is bereavement especially at the death of parents, or tragic death of a youth male or female. Therefore, during mourning or any period when some misfortune befalls someone, everybody is expected to remain silent so as to show sympathy or commiseration to the affected persons, Austin's illocutionary speech act.

4.1.2.4 Silence as an Indication of the Presence of spirit

Abrupt silence among conversing partners indicates the presence of spirit. This abrupt silence can occur even in the market when everybody will seem to stop talking and there will be absolute silence for seconds. Nimo people will say *mụọ oma a ga hee* (a good spirit has passed). When asked if such abrupt silence could be coincidental? Participants said ...at least that is what we call it in this town or what we refer to it as.

4.1.2.5 Silence as a Sign of Illness/Malfunction

Based on their individual perceptions, some other participants considered silence as '*an illness*.' A participant stated that 'silence is a sign of illness. This is in line with Scollon's (1985) description of silence as malfunction 'If one assumes the engine should be running, and then silence will indicate failures. Smooth talk is taken as a natural state of the smoothly running cognitive and interactional machine'. Other participants, however, contested the argument and added that there were times where silence is expected instead of talk. Such situations occur during discussion with an elderly person or those in authority. A participant added that ...and in a situation where you are being interrogated or

accused while you are innocent, you cannot talk especially where it is an elder that is guilty. The manner of talking, however, has to be polite or talk to another elderly person on the issue being discussed so as to serve as an arbiter between the accused and his/her elder one.

4.1.2.6 Positive Perceptions about the Use of Silence in Communication

A. Silence as a Strategy of Thinking

The most interesting findings of the study is that silence in communication is not always perceived as a negative trait in the culture of the Nimo speech community. Silence is considered as a strategy of thinking about what next to say. A participant said: Sometimes when someone is not talking, it does not mean that s/he cannot talk or that he doesn't know what to say or that he/she should talk about. He may be having some perspective of thinking when the interaction is going on or maybe having the idea but he does not understand if the idea is correct and acceptable. While some people talk whether wrong or right. Silence, from the above extract, is used as a strategy of thinking about the topic of an ongoing discussion. However, the thinking was probably not expected throughout the discussion so as not to construe the silence as wickedness or mischief. Silence is therefore used in that context to avoid talking out of point or fear of making mistake.

B. Silence Connects With Calmness and Calmness Connects With Knowledge

Another participant provided the value of silence in communication according to the Nimo speech community as a

means of acquiring knowledge, when asked further if such belief is not superstitious, they said ...there's knowledge in silence. They believe that when there's silence, then there's calmness. When there's calmness there's connectivity towards the knowledge coming from us, and when there's connectivity, there's the knowledge that is passing through you, and you can also make use of it. Some participants explained further that being calm and listening to others will enhance new knowledge from others. When in the mist of more knowledgeable people, People are encouraged to keep silent and learn said some other participants. The Nimo culture perceives that there is a connection between 'silence,' 'calmness,' and 'knowledge.' The view tends to tilt toward mystical or spiritual silence.

Functions of Silence in Nimo Speech Community

A. Silence is a Sign of Respect for Elders

In addition to perceiving a link between silence and calmness, silence according to the participants of this study is a sign of respect for elders. A younger person is expected to respectfully listen to an older one, and the former rarely say anything. In Nimo speech community according to some participants, 'when someone elderly is talking to a younger person even when you disagree with what he saying you are required to remain silent'. Even when it hurts you, the younger person is expected to show respect and loyalty, by keeping quiet'.

B. Silence as a Consent/Agreement

Also, in Nimo speech community, silence is considered as an answer to a proposal, such as marriage or anything where a

proposal is made, but the affected person remains silent because, according to one of the participants, ‘*O gbara nkịtị kwere ekwe*’ (silence is consent). There was an argument among the participants of this study about the silence of a girl who is told that she is going to be married to someone. A female respondent accepted that silence means consent in that situation only if ‘it was the girl that brought the man’. But if she was not, her silence will be ambiguous.

C. Silence as a Sign of Shyness

Silence from a girl who is being proposed to for marriage can be due to shyness, as was expressed by many female participants of this study. It was observed that in all the 40 focus groups that were held, not a single female participant initiated a talk. In some cases, it was the male participants who asked the females to say something. When the researcher asked the female participants about their silence during the discussion, some of them said that they were shy, some associated their silence to male dominance of the discussion, and others stated that they were more tolerant than the male participants. The silence of the female participants tends to indicate that gender plays a role in the use of silence in communication in Nimo speech community. This is not to say that all male participants talked, but the females exhibited more silent behavior than their male counterparts. This is, however, not the primary focus of this paper.

Other areas where silence is positive in Nimo speech community include; trying to gain processing time to think of what to say next on one hand while minimizing the period of silence on the other hand. Nimo Igbo speakers tend to use silence in conjunction with pause fillers such as ‘*eehm, eeh*’ as pause fillers while they are remembering something and as an indication to the

recipient that the current speaker is still holding the turn and that s/he is thinking of what to say next. There is also silence to select words made manifest in Nimo speech community. Silence may appear in Nimo speech community conversations when the interlocutors are selecting the appropriate words to say. They believe that their words may be used against them, particularly when they are talking about other people, or discussing important and sensitive topics. Furthermore, social and psychological factors as status, nature of one's job, age, and self pride/esteem are also factors to bring about silence during conversation among Nimo people. During conversation in a bid not to be insulted an elder might decide to be silent. A teacher or an educated man will not want to be found making blind arguments with people who may never understand his point of view. Above all, some people due to pride or self esteem will be silent in conversation to avoid their ego being affected because by nature they feel better than others are easily provoked.

Finally, there is silence for turn-taking strategies. When one speaker finishes his or her turn, s/he selects the other speaker as the next speaker, or s/he may select him or herself as the next speaker. In Nimo speech community, the current speaker tends to select the next speaker in different ways, such as using body language for instance, nodding of the head or s/he may select the next speaker verbally by nominating him or her to participate or s/he may remain silent after saying something in order to get him or her involved in the discussion. This is in line with the locutionary acts of Austin's speech act theory of (1967).

5.1. Conclusion and Recommendations

In this study, an attempt has been made to explore rhetorical functions of silence among some speakers of Nimo speech

community based on cultural and individual perspectives. Overall silence is significant and it is used effectively in casual conversation in the speech community under study.

The study has shown that there are a number of inter-and intra-cultural differences as well as similarities among the participants on the roles of silence. The findings suggest that silence is interpretable only in relation to cultural and individual perceptions, and also on the situation and context of its use. The study has gone some way towards enhancing our understanding of roles of silence among speakers of Nimo speech community, despite its limited scope in relation to languages. Future research may benefit from using a larger population, and involving speakers of some other Nigerian languages. Also of interest is the role of gender in the use of silence in communication. Linguistic research should seek to explore not only the observable and perceptible aspects of language use but also the seemingly trivial parts, such as silence.

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