

A Relevance-theoretic Approach to Turn Silence

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Abstract—The understanding of silence has been approached in various fields of research such as philosophy, anthropology, linguistics, etc. Researches in these fields have defined silence by clarifying its varied forms, functions and other distinctive perspective. In linguistics, Levinson's distinction of three types of silence has laid typological foundation for the investigation of silence within the framework of Conversational Analysis (CA) and pragmatics. Turn silence is the most studied among the three types of silence in linguistic inquiry. This paper firstly discusses turn silence within the framework of CA, which seems to fail to account for the communicators' psychological factors, i.e., why they resort to silence rather than other means of communication in order to avoid giving a dispreferred response. Then it explores turn silence within the framework of Relevance Theory (RT), including the informative and communicative intentions conveyed by it and its relevance and the contextual effects, moreover, some important factors affecting the use and interpretation of turn silence. Through the discussion and exploration, it is found that turn silence itself is a speech rather than the failure of communication. This paper also suggests that research on turn silence within the framework of RT might be conducive to further cross-cultural study and the study of silence in classroom teaching.

Keywords—turn silence; Relevance Theory; Conversational Analysis

I. INTRODUCTION

Communication, as Larry A. Samovar et al define, is a two-way, on-going, behavior-affecting process in which one person (a source) intentionally encodes and transmits a message through a channel to an intended audience (receivers) in order to induce a particular attitude or behavior [1]. Human communication can be verbal and non-verbal. Though verbal communication is predominating, non-verbal communication is by no means negligible. The latter can sometimes communicate even much richer meaning than the former. Silence is a prevalent means of non-verbal communication whose importance is acknowledged by American writer and philosopher Henry David Thoreau's famous quote which goes "In human intercourse the tragedy begins, not when there is misunderstanding about words, but when silence is not understood". Naturally silence has become a much discussed research object of scholars in many disciplines such as anthropology, psychology, philosophy and linguistics, to name just a few.

In linguistics silence has drawn the attention of many linguists who set out to study the functions of silence in communication. They have proposed quite a few topological distinctions of silence and studied the implication of silence in human interaction. In the study of conversational analysis people take turns at speaking in a given communication. When one person refuses to speak at his turn, his silence constitutes the so-called 'turn silence' which conveys, in most cases, rich pragmatic meanings or implies certain communicative strategies. Why the speaker remains silence in his turn to speak invites his communicator to infer the speaker's communicative intention. In other words, one person's turn silence is an ostension he intends for his audience to take some mental effort to make inference. Regarding such ostensive-inferential communication, this paper aims to employ the Relevance Theory proposed by Sperber and Wilson to investigate turn silence in people's daily communication.

II. RELATED WORKS

Silence as a research subject generally adopts a dichotomy in its definition in the available literature. Bilmes asserted that the simple absence of sound is "absolute silence" and the relevant absence of a particular sound is 'notable silence' [2]. Sobkowiak distinguished pure silence from pragmatic or communicative silence in that the former refers to acoustic silence while the latter refers to other volitional, teleological and contextual absence [3], to name just a few. In the western academia, the studies on silence have been mainly approached from the domain of anthropology, psychology and linguistics.

A. The Study of Silence in Anthropology

Anthropologists have been concerned about the identification of cultural similarities and differences of silence. Edward T. Hall discussed, in his most well-known masterpiece *The Silent Language*, the significance of nonverbal behavior such as silence [4]. Samarin studied the cross-cultural differences in the meaning of silence [5]. Bauman investigated silence in Catholic and Quaker worship in which silence represents space within which God may work [6], and Basso showed the importance of silence among the Apache [7].

B. The Study of Silence in Psychology

Psychologists have long studied silence from a cognitive perspective. Goldman-Eisler made strenuous efforts to study

the relationship between pause and cognitive activities [8]. Maclay and Osgood probed into the hesitation phenomenon in spontaneous English speech [9], and Cook analyzed the role of silence in psychotherapy [10]. Jaffe and Feldstein interpreted the rhythmic and synchronic patterns of silence in interpersonal interaction [11].

C. The Study of Silence in Linguistics

Linguists have been interested in the explanation of functions of silence. Bruneau and Jensen discussed certain types and functions of silence. Bruneau distinguished three forms of silence, i.e. psychological, interactive and socio-cultural silences [12], while Jensen classified five types of functions, i.e. linkage, affecting, revelational, judgmental and activating, each of which has both a positive and a negative effect [13]. Jaworski categories silence into three types, one of which interprets silence as a communicative sign like other linguistic forms [14]. Kurzon classified silence as intentional and unintentional by adopting Grice's distinction between natural and non-natural meanings and analyzed silence in legal discourse [15]. A decade later Kurzon updated his classification of silence on the basis of its characteristics in interpersonal communication, and he distinguished four types of silence, namely conversational silence, thematic silence, textual silence and situational silence [16].

Other linguists have examined the phenomenon of silence in conversation, hence falling into the research domain of pragmatics, a subfield of linguistics. Levinson was one of such leading scholars, who studied silence by combing its forms with its functions. He classified silence within conversation into three categories [17], which will be discussed in the next section. Zuo explored silence as it occurs in dynamic English conversations by stating three dimensions are associated with silence, i.e. structures, meanings and functions from the perspective of conversational analysis [18]. Song explored silence between the eastern and western cultures, by pointing out that silence conveys rich information and sometimes express even much more than speech [19].

D. The Capitulation of the Research Status Quo

On the basis of the above-mentioned studies on silence, it is clear that studies on silence have drawn interdisciplinary attention in the past few decades. As for studies on silence in linguistics, most studies have focused on the classification of silence types and explanation of its functions from either pragmatic or cross-cultural perspective. Levinson's distinction of three types of silence has laid typological foundation for the investigation of silence within the framework of conversational analysis and pragmatics. Turn silence, is a quite common phenomenon that the communicator remains silence when it is his turn to speak or respond to his conversational partner. However, previous studies on turn silence do provide us with insightful findings, but they seem to fail to account for the communicator's psychological factors. In the next two sections, we will first explore turn silence in Conversational Analysis (CA) and then move on to investigate it within the framework of

Relevance Theory. By doing so, we aim to compare the two linguistic approaches to turn silence and hopefully illustrate the theoretic advantages of relevance theory over conversational analysis in accounting for the communicator's intentions and pragmatic meanings of turn silence in daily communication.

III. TURN SILENCE WITHIN THE FRAMEWORK OF CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS

Inspired by Harold Garfinkel's ethnomethodology and Erving Goffman's conception of the interaction order, CA was developed in the late 1960s and early 1970s principally by the sociologist Harvey Sacks and his close associates Emanuel Schegloff and Gail Jefferson. One of the main research fields of CA is the turn-taking system which includes the topic of adjacency pairs, sequence expansion and preference organization. In the next sections we will try to approach turn silence by employing some of the CA theories (e.g. turn-taking, adjacency pairs and response priority).

A. Turn-taking and Turn Silence

Turn is a fundamental unit of any conversation and a normal conversation is characterized by turn-taking. Harvey Sacks and his associates, leading founders of Conversational Analysis, described turn-taking as "at least one and no more than one party talks at a time" [20]. In other words, people take turns at speaking in a given conversation in which only when one person stops will another begin to talk. Later on Levinson employed turn-taking system by integrating its forms and functions and assigned different values to silence in conversation and categorized such silence into three types: within-turn silence (pause), inter-turn silence (gap or lapse), and turn silence (significant / attributable silence), as is shown in the table below.

TABLE I. LEVINSON'S CATEGORIZATION OF SILENCE IN CONVERSATION

Silence in Conversation	within-turn silence	pause
	inter-turn silence	gap lapse
	turn silence	significant / attributable silence

The two term "within-turn silence" and "inter-turn silence" were primarily discussed by Fasold [21] and Tannen [22]. Within-turn silence, or pause, occurs when the speaker may intentionally pause between words, phrases or sentences within his turn. Inter-turn silence can be either gap or lapse. Gap is the silence when the current speaker terminates his turn and the next speaker is not nominated. In other words, gap takes place before any other party self-selects or before the current speaker continues to speak when no other party self-selects. Lapse is the silence when the current speaker completes his current turn, and no next speaker or self-selected next speaker continues the next turn and the current speaker does not continue either. Sometimes it is difficult to distinguish gap and lapse, because when the gap becomes long enough, it turns into a lapse which is also called

extended gap. As for the third term 'turn silence', it is the silence that occurs when the next speaker is selected and therefore it is attributed to him, hence the name attributable silence. Such type of silence conveys rich communicative meanings, hence the name significant silence.

Among the three types of silence in conversation, inter-turn silence, generally speaking, do not convey meanings. Only within-turn silence and turn silence can convey particular communicative meanings. Now that many studies have been done on within-turn silence, this research status quo has led to our focus on turn silence, which has been approached by employing relevant CA theories such as adjacency pair and response priority.

B. Turn Silence and Adjacency Pair

Adjacency pair is an example of conversational turn-taking, composed of two utterances by two speakers, one after the other. The speaking of the first utterance (the first-pair part) provokes a responding utterance (the second-pair part) [23]. Therefore a particular first-pair part requires a particular second-pair part, e.g. offers require acceptances or rejections; greetings require greetings, and so on [24].

It is believed that there is strong transition relevance between the first-pair part and the second-pair part, which usually grants the second-pair part a high structural predictability. However, if the second-pair part fails to occur, such noticeable absence called the 'relevant absence' may convey diverse communicative meanings under different circumstances. Now let's look at the following example.

(1) A conversation between two young men.

A: Hey, bro, C'mon down here.

B: [silence]

A: I got lotta stuff. Could you just come and help?

In this conversation A asks B to come down to give him a hand, but B just keeps silent, showing his unwillingness to help. The silence of B in this example is the second-pair part of asking someone a favor. Naturally A expects B to respond either positively or negatively, but B's silence not only results in the absence of information required by A (gap) but also make such turn silence obtain certain implied meaning.

C. Turn Silence and Response Priority

The idea that some utterances are preferred to others was first proposed by Schegloff, Jefferson and Sacks [25], who discussed the question of how speakers correct errors in conversation. Later on the idea of preference organization found its way into the concept of preference in adjacency pairs. For instance the reply of acceptance is preferred whereas the rejection is regarded as the dispreferred response in the adjacency pair of invitation-acceptance/rejection. Bilmes further proposed the response priority theory and defined priority response as "If X is the first priority response, then any response other than X (including no response) implicates (when it does not explicitly assert) that X is not available or is not in effect, unless there is reason to suppose that it has been withheld" [26]. Therefore a pause or a silence

may serve as an indicator of the absence of the first priority response, leading to the implication of rich communicative meanings. Let's illustrate this by the following example.

(2) John and Mike are roommates. John is playing music in his stereo while Mike is writing his paper.

John: Am I disturbing you?

Mike: [silence]

John: [silence, turn off the stereo]

In this conversation John completes his current turn (1) by asking a question and selects Mike as the next speaker. For John the priority response would be a verbal response like "yes / no", "it doesn't matter" or "I'd appreciated it if you could turn it down", which is expected and preferred. But Mike remains silent, giving a dispreferred response and indicating that he does mind the noise.

Thus we may see a dispreferred second pair of an adjacency pair might be preferably realized by silence turn. Then why is it silence rather than an explicit verbal response that is the first priority response in this case? The framework of CA seems to fail to account for the communicators' psychological factors, i.e. why they resort to silence rather than other means of communication in order to avoid giving a dispreferred response. This demerit of CA leads us to the pragmatic-cognitive approach to turn silence to be explored in the next section.

IV. THE RELEVANCE-THEORETIC APPROACH TO TURN SILENCE

This section will mainly explore turn silence with a pragmatic-cognitive approach, the Relevance Theory (RT). We will start with a brief introduction of RT, and moves on to discuss the informative and communicative intentions of turn silence, and finally explore the relevance of silence and three types of contextual effects.

A. An Overview of Relevance Theory

Relevance theory (RT) was proposed by Dan Sperber and Deirdre Wilson in 1986 with an attempt to explore human communication from a cognitive perspective. Human communication, as they argue, is an ostensive-inferential communication and there are two models of communication: the code model (also known as the message model) and the inferential model. In Sperber and Wilson's own words, communication is a process in which "the communicator produces a stimulus which makes it mutually manifest to the communicator and the audience that the communicator intends, by means of this stimulus, to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions" [27].

The "stimulus" may refer to any modification of the physical environment that is perceivable. An utterance, for example, is a stimulus in the usual sense. Thus turn silence is a special stimulus in the current discussion. 'To be manifest' is to be perceptible and inferable to an individual at a given time. However, there are a number of contextual perceptible or inferable at a given moment. Thus the communicator

intends to make manifest some contextual assumptions that are relevant enough to the audience to be worth his attention.

Human cognition is relevance-oriented. Relevance depends on two main factors: the contextual effects and the processing effort. Contextual effect is achieved in a context when and only when new information interacts with the old one. The relationship between contextual effect and relevance is that other things being equal, the greater the contextual effect is, the greater the relevance will be. There are three kinds of contextual effects, i.e. strengthening or confirming existing assumptions in the context; contradicting and eliminating existing assumptions; or combining with existing knowledge to produce a contextual implication. The processing effort is the mental effort made to achieve the contextual effects. The relationship between processing effort and relevance is that other things being equal, the smaller the processing effort required, the greater the relevance. In a word human cognition is geared at cognitive efficiency in that we try to use less mental effort for more cognitive effects.

Another key notion in RT is the understanding of context which is, in Sperber and Wilson's eyes, a psychological construct established and developed in the course of interaction. More specifically context is understood as a conceptual representation of a set of assumptions about the immediate physical environment or the immediately preceding utterances or expectations about the future, scientific hypothesis or religious beliefs, anecdotal memories, general cultural assumptions, beliefs about the mental state of the speaker. All these assumptions manifest to an individual constitute his or her cognitive environment.

It is on the basis of this expectation of relevance as well as the above-mentioned key notions that the criterion for evaluating possible interpretation of turn silence is established.

B. The Informative and Communicative Intentions of Turn Silence

Within the framework of RT, a communicator's intentions can be divided into the informative intention and the communicative intention. The former is to make manifest or more manifest to the audience a set of assumptions, while the latter is to make it mutually manifest to the audience and the communicator that the communicator has the informative intention.

Although the speaker keeps silent when it's his/her turn to speak, why can the hearer still understand what the speaker intends to communicate? As far as the turn silence in question, the communicator has to choose the relevant stimulus capable of fulfilling his or her intentions. Under certain circumstances silence seems to be the most relevant stimulus to realize this effect. Let's elaborate this with the preceding example (2) in which Mike's silence fulfills both informative and communicative intentions. The informative intention is that Mike does mind the noise, which is made manifest to John by means of Mike's being ostensibly silent, which is his communicative intention. Mike's communicative intention is correctly recognized because

John turns off the stereo later. Thus we can see both the informative and communicative intentions are fulfilled in this example. Let's analyze another example:

(3) A conversation between a wife and her husband.

Wife: What do you think of my new shoes?

Husband: [silence]

Wife: Is it nice?

Husband: [silence]

Wife: You must be angry at my shopping again.

In this example, assumed that the husband has heard his wife's question, his keeping silence twice fulfills both informative and communicative intentions. His informative intention is that he does not like her new shoes and her spending too much on shoes, which is made manifest to her by means of ostensive silence. His communicative intention is correctly recognized when his wife says that he must be angry at her shopping again.

From the above two examples, it is clear that turn silence can convey the communicator's informative intention and communicative intention. Then how can these intentions be recognized by the audience? Relevance is the psychological factor that plays the vital role in the interpretation of turn silence.

C. The Relevance of Turn Silence and Contextual Effects

Interpreting a silence is a process in which the relevance of the silence is established. To understand the informative and communicative intentions of turn silence, the hearer must process relevant contextual assumptions in which relevance will be maximized for the smallest amount processing effort. The old information stored in the communicator's cognitive environment interacts with the new information conveyed by the silence. As has been mentioned earlier, there are three types of contextual effects, i.e. the addition of contextual implications, the strengthening of previously held assumptions and elimination of false assumption [28]. The following examples will be used to illustrate these three types of contextual effects respectively.

1) *The addition of contextual implication:* This type of contextual effect is to combine the communicator's existing knowledge about the world (e.g. cultural beliefs and assumptions) and the immediate situational context of situation of the utterance so as to produce a contextual implication. In the current discussion of turn silence, the audience's silence is the new information, the immediate or on-the-spot contextual information, and the communicator has to resort to his knowledge, old information stored in his cognitive environment, to understand the information and communicative intentions of his audience. The following is a frequently quoted example.

(4) A conversation between two Japanese lovers.

Man: Please marry me.

Woman: [silence; head and eyes lowered]

How does the Japanese man understand the woman's silent response? He first must assume the relevance of her turn silence, and then combine the old information in his cognitive environment with the new information conveyed through her turn silence. He knows clearly that: (a) In Japan girls often express agreement with heads and eyes lowered and saying nothing; (b) he asks the girl to marry him and she lowers her head and eyes without saying a word. Therefore he can infer and correctly recognize the woman's communicative intention that she accepts his proposal. This is a typical example of the addition of contextual implication in that the existing general cultural assumption is combined with the new and situational contextual information, i.e. the silence together with certain gestures).

2) *The strengthening of previously held assumptions:* Since human cognition is relevance oriented, a communicator would spend the least mental effort in processing the most relevant assumption in a set of assumptions evoked by his audience's refusal to respond verbally (i.e. silence). Unlike the addition of contextual implication, this second type of contextual effect requires no previously stored knowledge in the communicator's mind. Instead the audience's silence, together with associated gestures, serves as the most relevant stimulus that facilitates the communicator's selection of the most relevant assumption perceptible or available to him in the context. What's more, such facilitation may even become the strengthening of the communicator's previously held assumption, leading him to the correct interpretation of his audience's communicative intention. Let's elaborate this point by the following example.

(5) A quarrel between a husband and his wife.

Husband: What have I said to make you angry again?

Wife: [silence; with an irate face]

Husband: I didn't mean it.

The wife's silence evokes him to make contextual assumptions that (a) his wife is angry with him for what he has said; (b) she is not angry at all. Considering the irate facial expression of his wife, which is the immediate contextual information available to him, the man spends the least effort in understanding his wife's turn silence and making the contextual assumption relevant: she is angry with what he has said. So he later explains that he didn't mean it. Therefore it is clear that the wife's turn silence strengthens the previously held assumption of the husband.

3) *The elimination of false assumptions:* When a communicator asks a question and expects a response, the silence of his audience may lead him to reconsider the assumptions he might have in his mind and select the most relevant one and meanwhile eliminate the false one. In some cases a communicator might hold certain assumption before he speaks, and such assumption might not be true or appropriate for the context of situation. The audience's silence serves as a good hint for the communicator to

eliminate false assumption and hence adopt new communicative strategies. Let's elaborate this point with the following example.

(6) A conversation between two passengers on the street

Man: Excuse me Ma'am where is the No.67 bus stop?

Woman: [silence]

Man: [take a closer look at the woman] Sorry, miss, could you please tell me what the No.67 bus stop is.

Woman: Go straight ahead, and turn right at the next crossroad.

The woman keeps silent obviously because she is unhappy about how the man addresses her. By addressing her Ma'am, the man might assume that the woman is married probably on the basis of her dressing style. This is the previously held assumption of the communicator before he starts to speak to his audience. However, when taking a closer look, he finds he has made a big mistake and corrects it immediately by addressing her miss. His false assumption is thus eliminated. In this case the woman hears the question but keeps silence, which is the most relevant contextual effect worthy of the man's attention with.

V. CONTEXTUAL FACTORS AFFECTING THE INTERPRETATION OF TURN SILENCE

The interpretation of turn silence depends largely on the specific context of situation in which the conversation takes place. In this section we will briefly discuss several major contextual factors that affect the use and interpretation of turn silence.

The first contextual factor is the interpersonal distance between the communicators. Are they close to or distant from each other? Common sense tells us that we are more likely to turn a deaf ear and shut our mouth when a stranger talks to us or asks a question.

(7) A street vendor is coming up and peddling his goods.

Vendor: Hey, bro. Wanna take a look at this fancy apartment?

Man: [silence; shake his head and straightly walk away]

It is quite usual nowadays in such Chinese metropolis as Shanghai and Beijing that a real estate salesman walks up to you and peddles apartments to you. The man's silence turn shows the interpersonal distance between him and vendor, showing no interest or even disregard to him. On the other hand, what if such silence occurs between two close persons? If a child gets bored with his parent's question, he is likely to remain silent. If a parent keeps being asked the same question by his child, he would also remain silent. In such case, the silence turn conveys much richer meanings than disregard, the interpretation of which depends on the actual context of situation.

The second contextual factor is the place when the conversation takes place. For instance, patients and their family members are likely to keep silent when their doctors

talk to them. Their silence often implies their anxiety, worries and distress. On the negotiation table, when one party proposes a certain requirement and the other party keeps silent, it would probably indicate the latter is thinking the matter over before giving an answer or giving a refusal in a silent way. Then what if the lawyer asks a witness a question at the court, and he remains silent?

(8) A lawyer is testifying a witness before a jury.

The lawyer: Did you actually see the accident?

The witness: Yes sir.

The lawyer: How far away were you when it happened?

The witness: Thirty-one feet, six and one quarter inches.

The lawyer: Well, sir, will you please tell the jury how you knew it was exactly that distance?

The witness: [silence]

In this example the jury usually requires an immediate answer from the witness. If the witness keeps silent for a long time before giving his answer, the jury tends to conclude that the witness is probably making up a story.

The second contextual factor is the length of the silent period. It is common and natural for people to hesitate and pause in daily conversation. If the silence lasts too long, it tends to generate possible implication. It may imply, for instance, the audience's disregard, disagreement, reluctance or uncertainty of how to respond.

(9) A teacher is asking a student a question in class.

The teacher: What kind of undertone does the author have in describing the main character in the story?

The student: [silence for more than 20 seconds]

The teacher: well, does the author think positively or negatively of the character?

In this example the student keeps silent for too long and the teacher tends to consider that the student perhaps does not the answer or has no clue. That's why the teacher goes on to give the student some hint regarding the question. If the student remained silent for just about 10 second, the teacher would not give hint and would regard such silence as normal reaction in that the student takes time to think how to answer the question. But the same period of silence, say 10 seconds, occurs in an interview. It would probably lead to different interpretation in that both the candidate and the interviewer would feel embarrassed and get intense. The interview might have a poor impression of the candidate, as he might conclude that the candidate is not quick responsive and lacks adaptability and flexibility.

The fourth contextual factor is cultural difference. It is universally acknowledged that people from different cultures may interpret silence in their culturally specific ways. For instance, a silence in response to the question 'will you marry me?' would be interpreted as uncertainty in England and as acceptance in Japan [29]. Interestingly in Philippines when an electric appliance such as TV or water heater does not

work and the owner calls an electrician, the electrician who keeps silent for a while on the phone and then promises to come will not come at all and the owner will just call another one. However, in many cultures if the repairman promises to come even though he keeps silent for a while, people tend to believe that he will come as promised.

The fifth contextual factor is the personal elements of the communicators such as their sex, age, social status and roles, etc. These personal features should also be taken into account when we interpret turn silence in people's daily communication. For instance, when people of higher social status or professional position seek advance from his subordinates, the latter would, in a nation that values social hierarchy, keep silent so as to show obedience or respect to their superiors. However, it is not the same thing the other way round. In addition, sex difference also affects the interpretation of turn silence. A typical example is that wives should keep silent to their husbands' criticism in Japan so as to show obedience.

VI. CONCLUSION AND SUGGESTION

Through the above discussion it is obvious that silence is a natural part of human interaction and rich in meaning according to the context of situation. This paper first adopts the categorization proposed by Levinson in 1983 and classifies it into three categories, namely within-turn silence, inter-turn silence and turn silence. Our attention is focused mainly on turn silence. We have investigated turn silence within the framework of CA and RT respectively and concluded that RT can provide a cogent rationale for the analysis of conversational turn silence because it takes into account the communicators' psychological factors, i.e why they resort to silence rather than other means of communication in order to avoid giving a dispreferred response.

Turn silence can be of much importance in cross-cultural communication, because it's better to know when to keep silent and how to interpret turn silence under different cultural circumstances. In addition, turn silence is of equal importance in the classroom if teachers want to achieve better teaching effects. They have to carefully observe when their students keep silent and figure out the meanings of their silence in different situations. What's more, students should know how to keep students from being silent in class. If teachers can control and take good advantage of turn silence in classroom interaction, it will be useful to the teaching effects.

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