

Relevance Theory and the Interpretation of *Conversational Silence* in Selected Pinter's

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ABSTRACT

Despite the fact that communication via language is essential and affects individuals' behavior, communication via nonlinguistic avenues must also be taken into consideration. *Silence* is regarded as a specific type of nonlinguistic means of communication. It is capable of conveying thoughts, information, and sometimes things that are difficult to express via language. As a component part and a characteristic feature of natural communication, it can add to verbal communication several expressive and interpretative functions. The current research is intended to understand *silence* with the aid of Relevance Theory, and meanwhile explore it via analyzing some extracts from selected Pinter's works, namely 'The Homecoming' and 'Mountain Language'. Thus, the data is taken from these two plays and analyzed in view of the principles of Relevance Theory. Apart from the introduction, the paper exhibits four sections to dwell on topics such as: Literary Pragmatics, as the study tackles a pragmatic issue in literary works, an Overview of Relevance Theory, Silence as a non-linguistic strategy utilized in communication, and Analysis of Silence in 'Mountain Language' and 'The Homecoming'. Some of the conclusions the paper has arrived at are: 'Conversational silence', according to Relevance Theory principles, is regarded as an *ostensive inferential act* that provides enough contextual effects to make an interlocutor's communication relevant; it lies within the inferential model of communication; it is utilized by playwrights to reveal the communicative, psychological aspects of characters in a given

play; non-verbal means of communication can sometimes communicate even much richer meaning than the verbal ones.

Key Words: relevance theory, silence, communication

نظرية الصلة وتفسير الصمت الحوارية في مسرحيات مختارة للكاتب "بينتر"

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المخلص

بالرغم من ان التواصل اللفظي لها اهميتها وتأثيرها على سلوك المتكلم، الا ان التواصل الغير لفظي لها اهميتها الخاصة ايضاً ولا يمكن اهمالها او تجاهلها. يعتبر السكوت نوع من انواع التواصل الغير لفظي، حيث ان بإمكانه التعبير عن الافكار والاراء والمعلومات وحتى بعض الامور التي يصعب التعبير عنها من خلال اللغة. بما ان السكوت مكون من مكونات التواصل البشري واحد صفاتها، بإمكانه ان يزود للتواصل اللفظي بوظائف تعبيرية متعددة. لذلك ، يهدف هذا البحث الى اظهار دور السكوت في هذا المجال بالاشارة الى نظرية "الصلة" (Relevance Theory) وتبني هذه النظرية في تحليل نماذج نصية مختارة من مسرحيات الكاتب (Pinter) وبالاخص مسرحيات "لغة الجبل" (Mountain Language) و "العودة الى المنزل" (The Home Coming)

. بالاضافة الى المقدمة، تتضمن البحث اربعة محاور وتطرق الى مواضيع مثل التداولية الادبية، ونظرية الصلة ، و السكوت كوسيلة غير لفظية للتواصل البشري، وتحليل هذه الوسيلة في المسرحيات انفة الذكر.

توصل البحث الى عدد من النتائج منها: يعتبر السكوت التواصلية، حسب نظرية الصلة، من الافعال الكلامية القابلة للتفسير و التحليل، و بإمكانها ان تحدث تأثيرات سياقية تجعل من التعبير تعبيراً ذات صلة وثيقة بموضوع الحوار، وبإمكان الكاتب والادباء الاستفادة منها لبيان جوانب من نفسية الشخصيات الموجودة في اعمالهم الادبية. وهذا دليل على ان التواصل الغير لفظي ليست اقل شأناً من التواصل اللفظي في التعبير عن آراء واحاسيس ووجهات نظر المتكلمين.

الكلمات المفتاحية: نظرية الصلة، الصمت، التواصل

1. Introduction:

Conversational (Eloquent) silence occupies an important position in conversation analysis, as it is regarded as an essential part and one of the core components of natural discourse. It supports verbal

communication with various assets that simplify the process of communication and interpretation.

Jia (2013, P. 2046) maintains that studies on ‘silence’ have been valued since late 1980s. Scholars investigated it through several sciences focusing on its intricate feature as a social category: a hybrid theory of communication covered ‘silence’ as a nonlinguistic means of communication in Saville–Troike, M. (1985). Jaworski (1997) approached ‘silence’ from different perspective, including different social sciences and disciplines. Nakane (2006) conducted researches on ‘silence’ tokens and their linguistic implications in English–as–a foreign language lessons. Each of those studies focused on a particular aspect of silence. The present research attempts to study ‘silence’ from a *relevance–theoretic* view, i.e., it quests to verify to what extent Relevance Theory (henceforth R.T.) can be utilized in the process of interpreting and comprehending *conversational silence*, especially in literary works.

‘Mountain Language’, is issued by the British writer Harold Pinter (1930–2008). The events and incidents of the play are said to be inspired by the author accompanying Arthur Miller to Turkey. The text of the play has a universal relevance; it dwells on the fact that, throughout history, many languages, such as Irish, Welsh, Urdu, Estonian, and Kurdish (as it is said to be observed by the author in his visit to Turkey), have been banned and their speakers have been deprived of using or speaking their native languages.

‘The Homecoming’ is another of Pinter’s plays. It dwells on the homecoming of Teddy, a university professor, who accompanies his wife and, later, meets his family members: (the father Max, Lenny and joey (his brothers), and the uncle Sam. In this house, with its male residents, his wife’s presence effects a complexity of sexuality and rage . The

playwright utilizes ‘silence’ as a conversational tool in the speech of his characters to convey certain meanings.

So, the data this paper analyses is taken from Pinter’s ‘Mountain Language’ and ‘The Homecoming’, with particular focus on the instances of ‘silence’ occurring in the conversation of the characters in selected scenes.

The scenario of the plays, under study, involves intermittent instances of *silence* that convey communicative information among interlocutors; and the present work analyses those instances in the light of R.T., with the aim of showing the communicative value of them in verbal communication, as well as the applicability of R.T. to literary work interpretations.

2. Literary Pragmatics

‘Literary pragmatics’ (henceforth L.P.) is a roughly new addition to the increasing repertoire available in English studies about literature, preferring the attempt of getting away from the *text*. This trend can be regarded a modern one, as most pragmatic analyses are conducted on the spoken form of language rather than the written one. Mey (2006: 256) maintains that when we talk about LP, it is worth noting that pragmatics didn’t start from linguistics proper, but rather emerged from other associated fields. Accordingly, in Mey’s words LP is concerned with the role played by the user of language in the process of producing and internalizing texts(ibid).

One of the advantages of literary pragmatic project, as maintained by Sell (1991: xiii), is to bring language specialists and literary specialists together. *Literary pragmatics*, as a new discipline, highlights the interconnectedness between language and context. It sees the way of generating and receiving language messages as specific to circumstances bounded pragmatic issues.

Enkvist (1991, p. 6), in matters related to literary interpretation, states his own viewpoint. He believes that homo-sapience are preprogrammed to seek knowledge in anything they anticipate to be the message.

The conclusion Enkvist (1991, p.8) draws concerning the discussion of *interpretability* of texts entails that we are in desperate need of a conceptual matrix above that of traditional grammar. The terms he proposes to discuss interpretability are: *intelligibility*, *comprehensibility* and *interpretability*. He believes that a given literary text is 'comprehensible' to interlocutors who are capable of identifying its syntactic, phonological, and lexical features. A discourse is 'understandable' to speakers who are able to attach a definite meaning to it, i.e., a semantic component. Besides, a text is said to be 'interpretable' to communicators who can intermingle a given text with a scenario. Taking the above three components together, one can conclude that 'intelligibility', 'interpretability', and 'comprehensibility' are interconnected and are complementary to each other; i.e. together they express the syntactic, semantic, and the pragmatic aspects of any piece of literary message. However, he confesses that "the process of analyzing any given literary genre does not confirm that it proceeds sequentially from the first to the second and third aspects, but in a complex manner involving bottom-up and top-down processing.

Regarding the role of the reader and his/her collaboration with the author in the pragmatic analysis of literary texts, and the potential validity and explanatory significance of pragmatic mechanisms for literary texts, Mey (2001: 237) has his own point of view. He believes that the reader acts effectively in the production and consumption of literary texts; and the role pragmatics plays in the analysis of given texts must broadly be taken from the *speaker's own way of thinking*. To him, it is the reader who obtains the outcome of a literary act, and by internalizing

them, meets a personal demand. In this way, the work that the writer has conducted is supported and accomplished by the reader.

Thus, the advantage of LP, as a new trend in the pragmatic study of literary works, lies in its studying and analyzing literary texts in the light of pragmatic theories and approaches, of which R.T. is one. The significance of it is that it relates literature to the science of language, and consequently brings literary specialists and language specialists together. Besides, it facilitates readers' understanding of literary texts and considers the whole process as a collaborative activity between the reader and the author.

3. Relevance Theory (A general Account):

Linguists, following Grice, made attempts to change and upgrade his theory in different aspects, and Sperber & Wilson with their Relevance Theory constitute some of them. Their theory can be taken as a substitute to Grice's approach of human communication. Unlike Grice's, their theory is cognition-based.

The theory developed by Sperber and Wilson can be said to be based on human cognition. It is generally stated in their 1986 book, but it actually appeared in the seventies and early eighties as a substitute to Grice's understanding of communication in general. Since then, it has been an effective theory, resulting in a number of studies; some supported and some criticized it, and some applied it to other research fields. It is a theory which calls for the idea that cognition is linked to the level of relevance. Accordingly, new information is taken to be relevant if it goes with past information to formulate enough situational impacts. The more the new information produces contextual effects, the more relevant it is to the point; on the other side, the more that given information requires processing efforts, its relevance will definitely be less. This theory maintains that:

‘all communicative events carry a guarantee of optimal relevance; a guarantee that they have enough contextual effects, that they require no unnecessary processing effort, and that they are interpreted in the light of this guarantee’ (Crystal, 1991, p. 297).

Relevance Theory (R.T.) is taken as an endeavor to gather Grice’s four maxims of cooperative principle under one encompassing principle, ‘relevance’. However, it still works out one of the claims raised by Grice which maintains that the key characteristic of human communication is the utterance and its intentions. There are certain points to be clarified in relation to R.T:

3.1 Code Model and Inferential Model

Broadly speaking, there are two models of communication: one proposed by Shannon and Weaver (1962), which is known as the classical code model; and another, known as the inferential model postulated by Grice (1975). The code model requires that an interlocutor converts his/her message to a signal, and this is reconverted by the addressee using a similar process. That is, according to this model, communication incorporates two types of coding known as (encoding and decoding), and the audience’s mental process of comprehension is depended on a process dubbed ‘decoding’. Whereas the *inferential* model assumes that an interlocutor shows his intention to impart a given meaning, which is deduced by the addressee according to what is shown. So, an inferred message is a message that is linguistically coded, and this means that the verbal understanding includes an item communicatively called ‘decoding’. Yet, the inference obtained by this method is merely a hint in the analytic process which introduces the utterer’s meaning (Sperber & Wilson, 2004, P. 2)

Sperber & Wilson do not deny the affiliation of RT to Grice’s opinion of the inferential mode of communication; and that pieces of language, ostensibly communicated, automatically provide assumptions which

instigate the listener's attempt to arrive at the intended meaning. But, whereas Grice accounts for the assumptions on the part of the hearer's understanding that the speaker is taking into account the cooperating maxims, RT maintains that the assumptions are illustrated in *conceptual* terms, i.e., they are principally suggesting the availability of a principle of understanding (called cognitive), without resorting to a co-operative rule.

3.2 Relevance as a Concept

The above code and inferential models resulted in a constant dispute among linguists. As a result, R.T emerged and supported Grice's idea that communication is not a mere process of 'encoding' and 'decoding'; more essentially, it is a way of making inferences together with the context. Yet, proponents of relevance suggest that a speaker, by urging the hearer's attention, shows that his utterance is pertinent to the hearer's desire, as is conveyed in the following cognitive principle: 'comprehension is bounded by the *level of relevance*', and that this relevance is the core of the communicative event (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p.260).

3.3 Measuring Relevance

Identifying the level of relevance of a given message is something proportional. That is, there is usually a number of different inputs which perhaps show some relevance for us, but we cannot reach them all at the same time. R.T. maintains that what renders an input worth choosing from a group of rival instincts is not its relevance only, but that it is *more pertinent* than other alternative inputs. By intuition, 'an input is regarded relevant to a person when it combines with the past information he has to produce results that mean to him. And when having things equal, the more the positive conceptual effects obtained by approaching an input, the less the processing effort required, the more its relevance will be'. This is tantamount to saying that the level of

relevance is bound to two main criteria: the cognitive effects and the processing effort. An assumption is taken to be relevant in a context when it has some contextual effects. Given messages are less relevant than others when their relevance is evaluated by their *effect* and the *effort* that is needed to get the effect. The hearer must try his best to obtain the knowledge that satisfies his view of the level of relevance of the message he conveys, i.e. that it is at the maximum level. And this is in accordance to the rule which states: a communicative act usually expresses an assumption of a maximum relevance. (Sperber and Wilson, 1995, p.260).

3.4 Relevance and Communication

As mentioned before, two models of communication exist: the *code model* and the *inferential model*, and each is postulated on a separate basis. Yet, the code and inferential models are integrated; they may be joined in different ways. Both may take part in the process of communication. It is claimed that discourse incorporates both ideational and mutual understanding intentions. The former is to impart an idea to the addressee, and the latter is showing him your own intention. (Sperber & Wilson, 1995, p. 52)

Thus, according to R.T., comprehension can be achieved when the speaker intention is accomplished, i.e. when the addressee does observe the intended message. So, achieving the speaker's intention needs an attempt to infer the message, apart from the linguistic 'encoding and decoding'. It is one of the prerequisites to internalize a non-verbal signal like 'silence'. The interpreting process is said to subsume:

- 1) 'Perception of the signal' (an utterance or a silence, for instance)
- 2) 'understanding the meaning of the signal' to establish a link between new

and old information by the addressee instigated by the stimulus.

3) 'Deducing a series of inference through comprehending the contextual meaning of a signal

after involving the cognitive context'.

4) 'Obtaining the speaker intention: picking out some assumptions and infer the

intended meaning controlled by the pragmatic competence'.

Among the above steps,

number one is physical, the remaining are all cognitive.

(Weidong & Xueyan 2003)

3.5 Relevance and cognition

The principles of R.T. declare that utterances show *relevance*, and this is not due to the fact that speakers apply cooperative maxims, but because seeking 'relevance' is a key characteristic of man's understanding. A message, such as silence, for instance, is intuitively taken to be maximally relevant to an interlocutor when there is a link between this message and another in his mental store to raise relative assumptions. Thus, if an individual succeeds in getting enough cognitive effects, he will need less processing effort, and will achieve more relevance. Hence, we can say that *cognitive effects* and *processing efforts* are two indispensable criteria required for an optimal communication.

In their attempt, believers of relevance strive to arouse sense of relevance on the part of interlocutors. To them, an idea is considered pertinent to a situation if it goes with the available assumptions, i.e., if it has certain tenets that are contextually advantageous. i.e. when they subsume the following points:

- a. When a new assumption is used along an old one to result in new assumptions; and this is called 'Contextual implication'.
- b. When a new assumption strengthens an existing one.

c. When a new presumption is contradicted or entirely eliminated.
(Jia, 2013, P. 2047)

4. 'Silence' as a Means of Communication:

There are broadly different ways of communication followed by interlocutors: verbal, by using language; and non-verbal, through using ways other than language, such as using gestures, signs, silence etc. The first is effective and has influence on individuals' behavior. However, the second (the non-verbal) is not to be marginalized either. A form of non-verbal communication is embodied in the use of 'silence'; though sometimes regarded as verbal for its vital importance in language communications. It can impart ideas, feelings, knowledge, and intentions. Different cultures, throughout the world, have different views of *silence*. For intercultural communication to take place, various cultural meanings of *silence* should be internalized. It is even utilized by literary writers to convey different meanings to the audience as well as to characters involved in their literary works. The present paper studies instance of *silence* picked up from selected Pinter's absurd dramas (plays), namely, the 'Mountain Language' and 'The Homecoming'. It explores how *silence* is used as a verbal means among interlocutors in these plays.

4.1 Silence, Pause, Muteness:

Despite the fact that 'silence' is understood as lack of sound, it is different from other seemingly synonymous words like *pause*, *muteness* and the like. In a spoken language, 'silence' may show that the communicator has arrived at a conclusion, or is thinking, or offering the listener a chance to reply. Moreover, a *pause* may be utilized to build 'dramatic effect', so that the audience deduce something from what is said next (Pearl, 2020, P. 2). *Muteness* can be taken to mean lack of an obvious audible sound. But in communication, this muteness is viewed as 'silence'. This case is often described as the absence of

speech. However, lack of speech does not imply lack of mutual understanding. In fact, deliberate avoidance of speech is a deliberate case of muteness, and, hence, a very effective way of communication (ibid).

4.2 Silence and Culture

Although *silence* is taken as a void in communication, it can be very meaningful in different cultural contexts. What *silence* means varies depending on the situation, and the *cultural* context of the communication. According to their different perspectives about silence, eastern and western societies are divided into *listening* and *speaking* cultures respectively. Eastern societies have a positive view about silence. They favor it and regarded as a sign of respect, attention, closeness. Nevertheless, for western societies, it is a negative sign of ignorance, disrespect, and negligence. In some cases, *silence* can be a means of saving *face*. In such cultures, *silence* can be as important as verbal means of communication.

4.3 Different Implications of Silence:

Silence can be said to have many implications in communication across cultures. It can be utilized for miscellaneous purposes: showing respect, saving one's face, threatening and so on; or it can simply denote that the addressee likes your company. Sometimes, *silence* is concerned with *not being comfortable with* the proposal than anything else. Besides, *silence* may mean *preparing an answer* to a question. Furthermore, for Chinese, *silence* can express positive thought: when Chinese communicate with foreigners, they will start first, for they think that it embarrassing to talk to people you do not know (Quan, 2015, P. 2). Thus, *silence* may have myriad meanings ranging from *agreement* to *disagreement*. Interpretations definitely differ from one society to another, and this indicates that *silence* is dependent on both context and culture (Jaworski, 1993).

5. Conversational Silence in Pinter's 'Mountain Language' and 'The Homecoming' (A Relevance-theoretic Perspective):

Silence is said to be worth investigating in much detail, as it has an effective impact on human communication. It is often utilized, especially by the literary, to convey hidden agendas, and they sometimes call it "pregnant silence" (Jia, 2013, P. 3). In 'Mountain Language' and 'The Homecoming', *silence* is rendered to express what the person has to convey and communicate, and this is not only for characters plays, but also for the readers (audience).

This section explores the advantage of R.T in interpreting specific instances of *silence* in the plays under study. The analysis reiterates the positive applicability of this theory to the interpretation of literary works in general, and plays in particular.

Instances of *silence* in 'Mountain Language'

Scene (2)

'Prisoner: She is

'Guard: Whose fault is (Mountain Language, 1988)

This scene takes place in the Visitors Room. An old woman is meeting her son, the prisoner, and speaks her native language (the mountain language). The soldier in charge punishes her and obliges her to speak the native language. Her son replies that she doesn't speak the language, and that she is old and doesn't understand what he is ordering her to do. The Guard starts laughing and saying that it is not his fault. Moreover, he states that 'he has got a wife and three kids'. The prisoner repeats what the Guard said 'I have a partner and three children'. The Guard, hearing this, repeatedly forces him say it again; but he remains silent.

In R.T. perspective, the use of *silence*, here, is regarded as an ostensive inferential act, and its function is that the Guard assumes that the prisoner's *silence* is optimally relevant to him. Since he asked the

prisoner to repeat what he has just said, the absence on the part of the prisoner (not repeating his statement) comes out as a *marked* form. The duration and repetition of the *silence* along with the context expresses the prisoner's intension to say: "what you say is ridiculous".

Scene (4)

'Guard: oh, I forgot...

'Prisoner: She can ...

This scene also takes place in the Visitors Room. In this situation, the prisoner is informed by the sergeant that they are allowed to speak their language until further notice. He anxiously asks her mother to speak to him in their own language. But she doesn't respond. The function of *silence* here is conspicuous in R.T.; the prisoner assumes that lack of response on the part of her mother is optimally relevant. She, after being punished by the sergeant for using their mountain language, is now expected to respond immediately and rapturously. Standing still and not responding to the prisoner made the latter believe that she is dead.

Instances of *silence* in 'The Homecoming':

Scene (1):

Sam: You go and ...

'Max: What do the...

...

...

This scene is in Max's place. Max, an old butcher, is arguing with his brother Sam, a taxi driver, in the presence of his sons Lenny, Teddy, and Joey. Max is insulting Sam and calls him bad names. He looks down upon him and his profession, as a driver, and claims that he bends over for half a dollar from his customers. He points his stick at him and blames him of not daring to take part in the war. Sam replies that he did. Max mockingly asks 'who did you kill? Sam keeps silent.

Sam's *silence*, according to R.T., is regarded as an ostensive inferential act. Max assumes that Sam's *silence* is optimally relevant to him. He asked Sam to reply to his question, but the *silence* on the part of the latter looks like a marked form. Along with the context, the silence expresses Sam's anger and his dissatisfaction; and to Max, the *silence*, here, is tantamount to saying that 'your question is too offensive to answer'.

Scene (2):

Max: I've got ...

Teddy: (taking it). They'll ...

...

...

This scene goes on in the same place, Max's house. The family are all present: Max, Sam, Teddy, Lenny, Joey, and Ruth. The family suggest that Ruth stays with them longer. She agrees to stay, letting Teddy go back alone to their own family and children. After Teddy bids farewell to his father, uncle, and brothers, he moves towards the front door to leave.

Ruth, his wife, calls him by his nick name, Eddie, and asks him not to be a stranger. Teddy keeps silent, goes out, and shuts the door.

Teddy's silence, in this context, as an ostensive inferential act per the principles of R.T., has its own communicative value. Ruth anticipates that Teddy's *silence* is pertinent to her. She asked Teddy not to become a stranger, i.e. to show up and let her know about their family and children; but Teddy's *silence* in return comes out as a marked form. Instead of saying 'I won't... good bye' in reply, Teddy answers and expresses his feelings via 'silence'. The *silence* expresses Teddy's broken heart because of his wife's negligence, and lack of intimacy for him and her children.; and to Ruth, the silence, here, is equal to saying that 'you are not a faithful partner'.

Conclusion

The present work has dealt with the interpretation of 'silence' in selected Pinter's plays on the basis of the Relevance Theory principles. It has focused on the communicative value of 'silence' in literary works, especially in plays. Analyzing the selected samples, the study has come out with the following conclusions:

- 1) 'Silence', according to Relevance Theory principles, can function as an *ostensive inferential act* via which playwrights can unravel their pragmatic intentions and communicative strategies in the speech of their characters.
- 2) 'Silence', as a communicative device, lies within the *inferential* model of communication, rather than the *coded* model.
- 3) 'Silence', especially in literary works, can be utilized to convey the communicative psychological aspects of characters involved in a play.
- 4) In communication, interlocutors and characters resort to 'silence' to avoid giving a dis-preferred response in a given situation.
- 5) The pragmatic principles of Relevance Theory are applicable and usable in the interpretation of literary works and, particularly, in the interpretation of 'silence' in absurd dramas.
- 6) It is a common fallacy to consider 'Silence' the failure of communication; it is rather a *speech* by itself.
- 7) Non-verbal means of communication can sometimes communicate even much richer meaning than the verbal ones.
- 8) 'Silence', as a non-verbal means of communication, is proved to be equally important in both *natural* and *literary* languages.

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