

# A Relevance-theoretic Analysis of Conversational Silence

Yanyan Jia

School of Applied English Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan, Shandong, 250014, China

**Abstract**—Playing an important role in human communication, silence is worth exploring in great detail. The paper is written in an attempt to explore silence by drawing on relevance theory and taking some examples from especially the conversational silence in the film *Waterloo Bridge*. To sum up, the paper restates the positive applicability of relevance theory in interpreting conversational silence.

**Index Terms**—silence, communication, relevance theory

## I. INTRODUCTION

As an integral part and one characteristic feature of natural conversation, silence supplements verbal communication with its multiple informative and communicative functions. Therefore, studies on conversational silence occupy a significant position in conversation analysis.

Scholars abroad have begun to value studies on silence since late 1980s. Tannen & Saville-Troike (1985) try to present current research on silence from a number of disciplines while emphasizing its complex nature as a cultural phenomenon. Samovar & Porter (1991) adopt a cross-cultural perspective. In *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Jaworski (1997) approaches silence from many points of view, including sociology, anthropology, aesthetics and ethnography. Nakane (2006) conducts ethnographic studies on silence patterns and their cultural meanings in the EFL class especially in Mainland China. Each research above may focus on certain types or aspects of silence.

There have been relevant studies on silence at home as well, such as researches by Zuo Yan (1996); Gong & Wu (2003) and Liu & Zhong (2005). They are comparatively divisive and approach the issue from cross-cultural, pragmatic and ethnographic angles.

According to Sperber & Wilson (1986), silence as an ostensive-inferential act can convey the informative and communicative intentions of the communicator by sufficient processing efforts, from which contextual effect arises. The essay tries to approach conversational silence within the framework of relevance theory by elaborating its informative and communicative intentions and contextual effects: contextual implication, strengthening of contextual assumption and elimination of a previously held assumption.

## II. RELEVANCE THEORY

Post-Gricean theorists modify and supplement cooperative principle in some aspects, and one of the most influential is Relevance Theory by Sperber & Wilson (He Zhaoxiong, 1999). Reducing all Gricean maxims to a single all-encompassing principle, relevance theory may be seen as an attempt to work out at length one of Grice's central claims, that is, an essential feature of most human communication, both verbal and nonverbal, is the expression and recognition of intentions (Grice, 1989).

### A. *Relevance and Communication*

Traditionally, there are two models of communication: the code model (also called the message model) and the inferential model.

According to the code model, the basic mechanism of human communication is a coding-decoding one, and inference plays at best an ancillary role. When a person decides what to say, he uses a code system to put the thoughts into words, transmits the words to the other, who uses the same code system to translate the message into a thought. But communication is not like a code—the purpose of communicating is not to understand the meaning of the words or gestures or silence of the other person, but to understand what the communicator intends to do or what goal a speaker intends to accomplish using words, gestures or silence.

According to the inferential model initiated by Grice, a communicator provides evidence of his intention to convey a certain meaning, which is inferred by the audience on the basis of the evidence provided. The communicator must provide evidence of his meaning. This does not necessarily require the use of coded signals. Coding and decoding, therefore, is just one part of the communication process.

However, “the code model and the inferential model are not incompatible; they can be combined in various ways... Both the code and inferential models can contribute to communication.” (Sperber & Wilson, 1986/1995: 52) They argue that communication involves both informative and communicative intention. The former is to inform an audience of

something and the communicative intention is the one to inform the audience of one's informative intention. Understanding is achieved when the communicative intention is fulfilled—that is, when the audience recognizes the informative intention.

To fulfill one's communicative intention requires an inferential process in addition to the linguistic encoding and decoding. It is especially needed for one to understand silence. Gong Weidong & Wu Xueyan (2003) summarize the interpreting process into the following steps:

- ① Perception of the signal (silence);
- ② Cognition of the conceptual meaning of the signal (silence): to form a relation between the new and old information on the part of the audience stimulated by the signal (silence);
- ③ Cognition of the contextual meaning of the signal (silence): to involve the cognitive context and infer a series of assumptions;
- ④ Fulfillment of the communicative intention: to choose some assumption and infer the implication guided by pragmatic knowledge.

Step ① being a physical process, the rest are all cognitive. The cognitive process is the key to inference and the success in communication.

### B. *Relevance and Cognition*

According to relevance theory, utterances raise expectations of relevance not because speakers are expected to obey cooperative principle and maxims or some other specifically communicative convention, but because the search for relevance is a basic feature of human cognition, which communicators may exploit.

Relevance is a matter of degree. There is a host of potential inputs which might have at least some relevance for us, but there is no way to attend to them all. Relevance theory claims that what makes an input worth picking out from the mass of competing stimuli is not just that it is relevant, but that it is more relevant than any alternative input available at that time. Intuitively, an input (a sight, a sound, an utterance, a silence, a memory) is relevant to an individual when it connects with background information he has available to yield conclusions that matter to him. Other things being equal, the greater the positive cognitive effects achieved by processing an input, the less the processing effort required, the greater its relevance will be. Thus, relevance may be assessed in terms of cognitive effects and processing effort.

Sperber & Wilson intend to invoke intuitions of relevance. According to them, a proposition is relevant to a context if it interacts in a certain way with the (context's) existing assumptions about the world, i.e., if it has some contextual effects in some context that are accessible. These contextual effects include: (i) Contextual implication: A new assumption can be used together with the existing rules in the context to generate new assumptions; (ii) Strengthening an existing axiom: A new assumption can strengthen some of the existing assumptions of the context; and (iii) Contradicting or eliminating an existing assumption: A new assumption may change or eliminate some of the existing assumptions of the context.

Here, context is a psychological construct which represents an individual's assumptions about the world at any given time and place, and is supposed to include the following:

1. Logical information: The logical inference rules valid in the context that allow us to reason. According to Sperber & Wilson, these rules are deductive.
2. Encyclopedic information: Information about the objects, properties, and events that are instantiated in the context. This information in general will help us to form the inference rules of that context.
3. Lexical information: The lexical rules that allow us interpret the natural language utterances and sentences. (Ward & Horn, 2000: 635)

## III. DATA ANALYSIS

The phenomenon that one can make something out of silence has already been exploited and employed by writers, in particular playwrights, which is known as "pregnant silence". In this section, the author will take advantage of relevance theory to interpret the specific instances of silence in the film *Waterloo Bridge*.

### A. *Silence as a Means to Convey Informative and Communicative Intentions*

According to relevance theory, one tends to choose the most relevant stimuli in the environment and process them in order to attain the maximal relevance. Bearing this in mind, one may be able to produce a stimulus, e.g. a silence, which is likely to attract the other communicator's attention to lead to an intended conclusion; the other can then make certain contextual assumptions and reach the intended meaning and can also successfully fulfill the communicative intention. Silence in the film is designed to convey the informative and communicative intentions of the person who falls silent, not only for the characters on the screen but also for the audience.

#### 1. **Recognition of Intentions by the Performers**

Look at the following episode:

1) (Waterloo Bridge. Night. Fog. Myra standing in one of the stone bays. A woman comes forward toward her.)

Woman: Is that you, Myra? Ello. Eard yo was married.

Myra: No.

Woman: That Kitty! She told me...said you'd got off with some toff! I know it was too good to be true!

Myra: Yes.

Woman: Oh, well, cheer up. Things can't be worse. Going down to the station?

Myra: (silence)

Woman: Oh, well...I'll be off on me lonesome, then. Toodloooo. (*Waterloo Bridge*, 1940: § 9)

It is the scene just before Myra's suicide. The woman tries to chat with Myra to prove whether what she has heard of is true or not. As one of the streetwalkers, she thinks it ridiculous for Myra to get married with some decent man. Her words stimulate Myra again as much as to shove her much closer to the self-destruction. The function of the silence here will be elaborated next. First, the woman assumes that Myra's silence is optimally relevant to her. Since she has offered an invitation, the absence of the second part in the "invitation-acceptance/refusal" adjacency pair stands out as a marked form. The information the silence intends to reveal is possibly that Myra is considering whether to go or not to go with this woman, and it can also be that Myra has denied her suggestion after consideration. The duration of the silence combined with the context, plus the message sent out from the heroine's performance on the screen make the woman eventually pick out the next information intended by Myra: "I am too heart-broken to go with you. But I hate to say no directly because I do not want to threaten your face". The woman helps recognize the information through certain cognitive efforts and the silence achieves Myra's communicative intention as well.

## 2. Recognition of Intentions by the Audience

Film, a form of visual art, is the channel through which message is conveyed from the director to the potential audience. Yet, the director-and-audience communication is different from daily communication to some degree. The question lies in what is the designed goal of the director. In the course of her/his work, on one hand, s/he cannot receive instant and frequent feedback from the audience; this type of communication concerning a piece of visual art is not an instant two-way communication. Usually only when it is completed can a film be watched. The audience's opinions may be varied individually. On the other hand, from the director's perspective, what s/he is making is something beautiful in itself, or satisfying to herself/himself, or something expressive or expected. Directors create a world of their own, or rather rearranges the things of their world in a new way. Film thereby is to some extent personal and individual, while longing for the potential appreciative audience. In the process of film directing during which the director creates a brand-new world, the employment of silent scenes acts as a way to promote the director-and-audience communication through the latter's efforts to infer the intended information. As a result, the director's communicative intention is brought home to the audience and a better understanding of the film can also be in anticipation.

The information in silence intended by the director is as follows: interpersonal relations in the film, either close or alienated; individual personality of a character; emotional state before a fierce breakout and the character's thoughtfulness.

Jenson (1973) remarks: "Silence can help to bind or sever relationships." The two lovers dance and dance to the tune of "Auld Lang Syne" with no words, bathed in the sweet-and-sorrowful melody of their romance. The frequent instances of Myra's silence after their chance meeting at the railway station indicate for the audience slight change from intimacy to invisible fracture at least on the side of Myra, the repression of the heroine's emotional pains, the intensity to which Roy rouses her, and the breakdown of the communication. The gap between them broadens as the plot proceeds to plan-making for the approaching marriage in Roy's birthplace.

Secondly, if one goes over the silence in the film carefully, it is easy to find most goes to Myra. Of 30 cases of turn silence, there are 22 for Myra. No matter what happens, the hero tends to settle it with strong determination and immediate action, while the heroine's reaction towards sudden changes looks very passive and pessimistic and she is liable to be bounded by traditional values. From their first encounter in the air raid to the development of their love to the reunion after so much suffering, Myra is always not so sure about the present or future happiness. It is typical of her to choose the strategy of silence, a vague but neutral and secure form to seek shelter from undesirable result. Myra's frequently turning to silence for protection reveals to the audience over again her passive and pessimistic temperament.

Thirdly, in human interaction, silence acts as a common strategy for the management of tense situations especially when people are highly emotional. The former part of the film witnesses the two lovers' first meeting, the development of their love and the determined commitment to each other, where silence serves to make clear the affection deep in heart and the ecstasy for finding the life partner. In the latter part silence is endowed with distinct functions. It helps characters to perform: to shield the emotions or evade confrontations, in spite of intense anger, bitterness, shame, or torture. Silence also helps the audience foresee the conflict and the delayed breakout.

### B. *Silence as an Agency to Infer Contextual Effect*

According to Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995), there arises a contextual effect when the stimulus can modify some element in one's cognitive context. There can be three types of contextual effect, which has been talked about in last section. To make it clear, the three types of contextual effect derived from 30 examples of turn silence will be demonstrated with the aid of the chart below:

A QUANTITATIVE COMPARISON OF THE CONTEXTUAL EFFECTS DERIVING FROM SILENCE

Contextual Effect	Contextual Implication	Strengthening	Abandoning
Cases of Turn Silence	16	6	8
Percentage	53%	20%	27%

It is obvious through the figure that among 30 cases of silence, 16 ones (accounting for 53 percent) get a contextual implication from silence; 6 ones (20 percent) make the former assumptions strengthened; and the effect achieved by 8 ones (27 percent) is eliminating the already held assumptions.

### 1. Contextual Implication

There arises contextual implication with the joint work of the previous assumption and the input brought about by silence. The contextual effect of most silence in it falls into this category.

1) Margaret: Forgive me, my dear, but are you quite well?

Myra: Yes, yes, of course, I...I had a drink, that's all, it made me feel funny-queer. What's it like in Scotland? I've never been there. It always sounds so quaint, you know the heather and the peat. Peat comes from Ireland, doesn't it? I've never been there either. (seeing Lady Margaret stare at her, Myra shouts hysterically) Why do you stare at me like that?

Margaret: (silence) (Ibid.: § 8)

This is Myra's first appearance before Roy's mother—her would-be mother-in-law. Approximately impoverished, Myra once expected much from this appointment and arranged it purposely in a restaurant. Before the lady's arrival, poor Myra read by coincidence a news thesis where Roy was listed as one casualty, which is nothing but a bolt from the blue. Too fragile to keep senses, Myra has no way to control herself. Judging from Myra's temperament, she will never turn to her lover's mother for help after she has learned the news. She is too sensitive with a strange mixture of self-respect and self-abasement. As a result, many unreasonable words are uttered when face to face with the kind and graceful lady. The problem is that Lady Margaret cannot know all this at a stroke. She meant well to talk with Myra, never anticipating such a situation. Is Roy's fiancé really so inherent and hysterical? Margaret asks herself in silence. Also this first impression prevents her from going further and possibly she has disallowed the girl. Myra's runaway remark intends to tell Margaret that she once hoped to be a member of a Scottish family but in torment at present, she would rather not talk about her "dead" lover's hometown or face the lady. In Margaret's silence, a new assumption forms in her mind: "The girl is so queer and impolite that she is not qualified to be Roy's wife."

2) Myra: Yes, he's back. ... Kitty, he wants to marry me!

Kitty: Oh, no! Such things don't happen!

Myra: It's true! Oh, Kitty, it's going to be so wonderful! For you too! Nothing will be too good for you when I'm Roy's wife.

Kitty: (silence)

Myra: Oh, I know what you're thinking. I've been thinking too. You think that would be dreadful of me, don't you? (Ibid.: § 6)

Kitty's first reaction toward Roy's coming back and the proposal is great suspension. On hearing Myra's delighted and cheerful blue print for both of them, she does not say anything. She knows the compelling force of the social consensus and worries about Myra who is too fragile to burden all this. Her silence attempts to convey this to Myra, and the latter receives it through certain cognitive efforts. She knows that her bosom friend means it still needs time to reconsider and make full preparation. Myra's following words tell Kitty that she has triumphantly recognized the contextual implication.

### 2. Strengthening of an Assumption

The assumption inferred from silence can also confirm the already held one. Let us see how it can do in the next example:

3) Kitty: Myra! Myra, darling, did he leave? Did you talk to him? Didn't you see him at all?

Myra: (silence)

Kitty: Oh, what a shame! (Ibid.: § 5)

On the eve of their planned marriage in church, Roy is called away to the front. Myra gets the news and goes to the station in haste. Somehow, she does not arrive there in time, only catching a glimpse of him. Kitty, her best friend, is concerned for her. The moment Kitty enters the dressing room, she asks a series of questions. Seeing Myra sitting there alone and upset, she has made an assumption that the meeting at the station might not go smooth. Myra's silence confirms this assumption. That is why she expresses regret afterward.

### 3. Abandoning a Former Assumption

Another kind of contextual effect occurs when the assumption produced by silence changes or eliminates the former assumption. Observe the following case.

4) Roy: You're at school, aren't you?

Myra: (silence and laughing)

Roy: Am I being funny? (Ibid.: § 1)

Roy and Myra meet each other on Waterloo Bridge, and then they seek shelter from the air raid at the underground station. Judging from Myra's naïve words and clumsy behavior face to face with dangers, Roy forms an assumption that

she must be a student far from social life. But Myra does not answer his question, which is out of his expectation. The girl's silence and laughter make him give up the former assumption. He knows he has made a mistake about Myra's identity.

5) Kitty: Myra, where have you been? Whatever made you go out on a night like this? You went and got caught in the rain, too! Now, you come on upstairs and get into bed!

Myra: (silence)

...

Kitty: Now you get those things off.

Myra: (silence) (Ibid.: § 5)

This is a rainy night after Myra and Margaret's appointment. Seeing Myra is wet through, Kitty asks about her whereabouts and tries to persuade her into putting wet clothes off and going to have a rest. Kitty has expected that Myra who is very cooperative and easy-going will answer her questions and do as what she has said. But Myra does not say anything. It is impossible that Myra does not hear her. The only valid explanation will be that she refuses to tell Kitty and to undress herself. Here the two instances of Myra's silence contradict with Kitty's initial anticipation.

### C. Degrees of Relevance of Silence

According to Sperber & Wilson (1986/1995), the assessment of relevance is a matter of balancing contextual effect against processing effort. However, contextual effect cannot be too easily acquired. Even if one makes certain processing efforts, the acquisition of contextual effect will not be definitive. Relevance is thus a relative concept because it relies partially on the context and partially on the communicator's cognitive ability and the cognitive environment. It is a continuum ranging from "maximally relevant", "very relevant", and "weakly relevant" to "irrelevant". Among them "very relevant" and "weakly relevant" can be also classified into "incomplete relevance". Most of the silence in *Waterloo Bridge* requires the interpreters to search for a large amount of contextual knowledge and be capable of inferring the meaning in a short time. So it is not unsafe to say that most cases of silence are "incompletely relevant". Take the next exchanges for instance:

6) Myra: Oh, Roy! You're alive.

Roy: Yes, extravagantly.

Myra: (silence and crying)

Roy: Oh, my poor darling. Come on, we'll go sit down. (Ibid.: § 6)

Having no way to get in touch with Myra in that unusual period, Roy only knows that since he was wounded and lost his identification disc in the battle, Myra must have learnt his "sacrifice" in some way. According to Myra's pessimistic character and the present surprising situation, Roy may interpret her silence as being too happy to believe this or too sad to utter anything. This is not completely the case on the part of Myra. So one can label the silence very relevant.

7) Myra: Roy, you must listen to me!

Roy: Myra, what is it?

Myra: I can't go to the country with you...it's quite out of the question.

...

Myra: No, Roy! I can't!

Myra: (silence)

Roy: Myra darling, I'm afraid I've been stupid. Because you've never been out of my thoughts, I-oh, I took it for granted that it was the same with you. There's someone else, isn't there, Myra? After all, you thought me...dead. There is someone else, isn't there? Don't be afraid. Tell me. (Ibid.: § 6)

Myra has kept silent or refusing to go back with Roy to get married. It is strange enough for Roy to sense the abnormality. Based on the encyclopedic knowledge stored in his brains, Roy knows that Myra must have something embarrassing hiding behind her silence or verbal refusal. As far as he is concerned, if a woman's love is put on another man, possibly she will not go together with the "dead" man who she once loved. That is his newly formed assumption in silence, which is weakly, if not very, relevant. He touches "one-eighth of the iceberg" and does not know the exact reason until the end of the film.

## IV. CONCLUSION

By analyzing the typical data in *Waterloo Bridge*, the author illustrates how to do things with silence: to convey some meanings beyond words. The essay makes an attempt to approach the specific cases of silence from the angle of relevance theory. It not only deals with the informative and communicative intentions conveyed by silence, the diverse types of contextual effect arising from silence, but also mentions the different degrees of relevance because of various factors involved in interpreting an ostensive-inferential act.

## REFERENCES

- [1] Blimes, J. (1994). Constituting silence: life in the world of total meaning. *Semiotica*. 98, 73-87.
- [2] Bruneau, T. (1973). Communicative silences: forms and functions. *Journal of Communication*. 23, 17-46.
- [3] Carlin, A. P. (2003). On 'owning' silence: talk, texts, and the 'semiotics' of bibliographies. *Semiotica*. 146, 117-138.

- [4] Gilmore, P. (1985). Silence and sulking: emotional displays in the classroom. In Deborah Tannen & Muriel Saville-Troike (eds.), *Perspectives on silence*. Norwood; New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 139–162.
- [5] Gong, Weidong & Xueyan Wu. (2003). A cognitive approach to turn silence in English and Chinese conversations. *Foreign Languages and Their Teaching*. 12, 25–28.
- [6] Jenson, J. V. (1973). Communicative functions of silence. *ETC*. 30, 249–257.
- [7] Levinson, S. C. (1983). *Pragmatics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- [8] Liu, Jun & Jian Zhong. (2005). Negotiating silence in American classrooms: 3 Chinese cases. *Modern Foreign Languages*. 4, 393–402.
- [9] Samovar, L. A. & Porter, R. E. (1991). Silence and silences in cross-cultural perspective: Japan and the United States. *Intercultural Communication*. 6, 314–319.
- [10] Saunders, G. R. (1985). Silence and noise as emotion management styles: an Italian case. In Deborah Tannen & Muriel Saville-Troike (eds.), *Perspectives on silence*. Norwood; New Jersey: Ablex Publishing Corporation, 165–183.
- [11] Sifianou, M. (1997). Silence and politeness. In Adam Jaworski (ed.), *Silence: interdisciplinary Perspectives*. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 63–84.
- [12] Sobkowiak, W. (1997). Silence and Markedness Theory. In Adam Jaworski (ed.), *Silence: interdisciplinary perspectives*. Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 39–61.
- [13] Sperber, D. & D. Wilson. (1986). *Relevance: communication and cognition*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- [14] Wilson, D. (2004). Relevance, word meaning and communication: the past, present and future of lexical pragmatics. *Modern Foreign Languages*. 1, 1–13.
- [15] Zuo, Yan. (1996). On silence in English and Chinese conversations. *Foreign Linguistics*. 2, 13–21.

**Yanyan Jia** was born in Jining, China in 1980. She received her master degree in linguistics from Shandong University, China in 2005.

She is currently a lecturer in the School of Applied English Studies, Shandong University of Finance and Economics, Jinan, China. Her research interests include linguistics and cross-cultural studies.

Ms. Jia is a member of the Chinese Association of Foreign Language Teachers.