



**Pragmatic Functions of Silence in Ola Rotimi' *Kurunmi* and Wole Soyinka's  
*A Dance of the Forests***

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**Abstract**

The paper investigates the function of silence in conversation through two selected play texts entitled *Kurunmi* by Ola Rotimi and *A Dance of the Forests* by Wole Soyinka. The researchers believe that the functions of silence identified in the texts are what obtains in real life interaction since play texts are close to naturally occurring conversation. In analysing the data, the authors make use of insight from the concept of context which means that it is the contexts in which the silence occurs that are used in interpreting its functions in the selected texts. The authors identified nine functions of silence in the play texts among which five have not been documented in the literature. Among the novel functions of silence discovered in the two play texts are: silence is used to indicate the brief period of shock when one's interlocutor is trying to consider the full implication of a piece of news; silence to indicate that somebody's contribution to an ongoing discourse

is totally strange or unexpected; silence to indicate that one does not want to commit oneself to a specific response in a communicative encounter where polar questions are asked; silence to indicate that the response to the current speaker's question is not likely to be a favourable one among others.

## **I Introduction**

Human beings are unique creations of God when it comes to utilising different means to pass across different messages during communicative encounter. In other words, human beings do not always depend on speech for communication. Generally, human beings make use of both verbal and non-verbal means for communication, but the fact remains that people choose the one which they think is more appropriate to pass across specific messages between the two. However, between the two broad categories, different options are possible. For non-verbal communication, silence, which is the focus of this study is an important medium of communication. Different authors or scholars have different views or understanding of what silence means and how it should be classified.

Aladesanmi (2018:103) writes that silence means “complete absence of sound.” Writing further, she claims that “silence, a kind of non-verbal communication can indeed be a powerful message. It can convey much information that words fail to do” and that “in different areas of life, people use it more frequently, understand it more easily and sometimes value it as being more important” than speech or word. Shcherbak and Potienko (2021) declare that “in speech culture, silence is a universal but very heterogeneous phenomenon.”

Perniola (2020) declares that silence encompasses both action and contemplations. Ibrahim, Abdullah, Rafik-Galea and Mohd Katim (2017:57) explain the above thus “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.” Saville-Troike (1985) in Ibrahim et. al. (2017:57) classifies silence into “institutionally-determined, group-determined and individually-determined/negotiated silence.” Schcherbak and Potienko (2021) classify silence into “communicative silence or communicative-significant and non-communicative or communicative insignificant” silence. Communicative silence is the type with a certain intention behind the speaker's silence while the type of silence without any

motive of passing across any message or meaning falls under non-communicative silence.

Many authors have revealed the functions which silence performs in communication. Aladesanmi's (2018) work centres on four functions which silence performs in Yorubaland. These are: situational – determined silence, an impromptu answer in the form of silence, silence as a means of learning and silence as a means of showing respect. It is important to note that the above functions are different from the ones identified by the current research. Apart from this, the contexts for arriving at the functions are not provided. Shcherbak and Potienko (2021) discuss the functions of silence broadly using Roman Jakobson's functions of language. In other words, the authors broadly highlight the referential function of silence, emotive function of silence, conative function of silence, phatic function of silence, the aesthetic function of silence, the poetic function of silence and the metalanguage function of silence. These functions are discussed without making reference to specific text, or culture or context unlike the current research that is based on specific play texts where the contexts in which the silence occurs will shed light on the specific functions that silence performs in the communicative encounter.

Amer, Naser and Abdulmajeed (2019) in their work generally identify four functions of silence: rhetoric function, expressing empty words, conveying emotions and expressing politeness. These are briefly explained without any concrete examples. After this, the scholars discuss functions of silence in a novel entitled *The God of Small things*. It is important to note that the kind of approach used in discussing the functions of silence in novel and poetry is not the same kind of approach used in discussing functions of silence in conversation illustrated through the selected plays for this study. Ibrahim, Abdullah, Rafik-Galea and Mohd Kasim's (2017) work is on "Rhetorical functions of silence among speakers of some Nigerian languages" using focus group discussion as a method of data collection from university students who are from various cultural backgrounds in Nigeria. The authors declare that silence performs both positive and negative functions. The above clearly shows that scholars have worked extensively on the functions of silence. However, to the best of our knowledge, there has been no

scholarly works on pragmatic functions of silence in Ola Rotimi's *Kurunmi* and Wole Soyinka's *A Dance of the Forests*. By silence in this work, we mean where words and phrases like "silence", "Kurunmi is silent" "There is silence" "Demoke remains silent" etc. are written as stage directions in the two plays when interactions are ongoing.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The phenomenon of silence during conversation has no specific or fixed function or meaning. It is the context of the use of the silence that determines its functions or uses. Several authors have attested to the importance of context in the interpretation of the functions of silence. Aladesanmi (2018:102) writes that "sociolinguistically, it is believed that silence is not meaningless; hence, different societies attach and associate different meanings to silencing. Silence is believed to have contextual meaning based on the nature of a particular interaction." Amar et. al (2019) also emphasise the significance of context in interpreting silence when they write that silence is an actual meaningful means of communication and it has various functions in different contexts and different cultures. Emphasising the role that context plays in assigning different functions to silence, Ibrahim, Abdullah, Rafik-Galea and Mohd Kasim (2017:58) aver that "... silence as a communication tool can play multiple linguistic functions depending on the situation and context of its use." The above has revealed that the context of interaction is the best tool that can be used in deciding effectively the various functions of silence in the two texts under analysis.

## **Sources of Data**

The data for this work were obtained from two play texts entitled *Kurunmi* by Ola Rotimi and *A Dance of the Forests* by Wole Soyinka. Generally, play texts are written to mirror real- life situation, hence, the two plays are selected for this research because they contain naturally-occurring conversations where different contexts naturally and logically arise to warrant the use of silence with different pragmatic meanings. This type of data makes it possible to have concrete contexts

to justify the different functions of silence identified in this current work. The researchers believe that silence is a longer break in interaction than pause.

### **Method of Data Analysis**

The data analysis is carried out by providing a specific function of silence in the texts under analysis followed by a brief explanation to further clarify the point where necessary. Excerpts are brought out from the texts to illustrate the point. Such excerpts provided are briefly explained in order to provide or establish the context or situation that leads to the occurrence of the silence being discussed.

### **Data Analysis**

This section discusses the pragmatic functions of silence in the two texts under analysis. Each function that is identified is illustrated with one excerpt.

**i. Silence to indicate agreement or to indicate that somebody is considering the previous speaker's view or comment. The excerpt below clarifies the point**

ROLA: The whole sentimentality cloy in my face. That is why I fled. The whole town reeks of it... The gathering of the tribes! Do you know how many old and forgotten relations came to celebrate?

OBANEJI: Now we've got it. They pushed you out of house.

ROLA: I've a mind to go back and set fire to it. If I haven't got a house, they can't stay with me.

DEMOKE: It's a good thing in a way. I mean as long as they don't do it too often. I am sure none of them had ever been down here before.

ROLA: O... oh. The silent one has broken his vow. I suppose you wouldn't like to come and live with a pack of dirty, yelling grandmas and fleabitten children? (*Demoke remains silent*).

ROLA: I thought not

DEMOKE: Don't jump to conclusions. I suddenly realized that I was foolish to talk. When the cockerel decides it's fire burning on his head, the only thing to do is pour water on it (*pg. 6. A Dance of the Forests*)

In the excerpt above, Rola, a female character is complaining bitterly about a certain culture in the town called "The gathering of the tribe" where people who are related even distantly will come together for a celebration at a particular time. Her problem is that people in the village receive too many visitors on account of this event. However, a male character referred to as Demoke believes that the tradition or culture is not a bad idea as long as it is not an event that comes up very often. Rola counters Demoke by asking if he would like to live "with a pack of dirty, yelling grandmas and fleabitten children" simply because of the culture of the gathering of the tribe. To this question, Demoke does not reply, hence the stage direction "Demoke remains silent". When Rola discovers that Demoke is silent, she believes that he has agreed with the point she makes in her third turn above. Hence, silence may indicate agreement with the current speaker. However, Rola's comment in her last turn above quickly makes Demoke say that Rola should not "jump to conclusions." This last comment by Demoke illustrates that silence can also mean that a character is ruminating over the last speaker's comment.

**ii. Silence to indicate that one is not happy with one's interlocutor's comment or remark or observation and one does not want to say it out openly probably because the interactant has a certain power over one.**

Sometimes when interaction is ongoing, the current speaker may say something which does not go down well with the listener. The listener may decide to remain silent instead of open disagreement with the speaker owing probably to power differential between the two. That is, the person being talked to may decide to remain silent if they perceive that the current speaker has a sort of power over them. The excerpt below clarifies the point.

MURETE: These rites of the dead, I don't know why you take them on.

ARONI: Do not question. You have not done your share

MURETE: You wanted witnesses. I guided four human beings towards you.

ARONI: [*lifting up a mighty fist*]. You did what?

MURETE: Well, they passed by me and didn't miss their way. So you might almost say I provided them

ARONI: Come out. Come out at once.

[*Murete gingerly pops up his head. Comes out, sheepish-impudent*].

ARONI: (*eyes him sternly.*) I could force you to stay, you know that. (*Murete maintains a stubborn silence*) (pg. 10. *A Dance of the Forests*)

From the interactions between the two characters above, it is clear that Aroni wields a sort of power over Murete judging by Aroni's manner of interacting with Murete. Aroni's first turn above with Murete starts with an imperative sentence, the second is an interrogative sentence (you did what?), the third is equally imperative (come out...). His last turn with Murete above after which we have the stage direction "Murete maintains a stubborn silence" performs the function of threatening. Contextually, the silence of Murete after Aroni's last turn or comment indicates that he is not happy with Aroni's threat but he cannot openly disagree with him because of the power which Aroni seems to have over him.

**iii. Silence to indicate the brief period when one's listener(s) is trying to consider the full import of the current speaker's utterance.**

This is a situation where one's listener(s) appears to be in a deep thought or temporarily shocked because of the current speaker's comment. It may equally be that the listener is trying to digest the full implication of the previous speaker's comment. Consider the excerpt below:

OBANEJI: Before I tell you, I must let you know the history of the lorry. When it was built, someone looked at it, and decided that it would only take forty men. But the owner took it to the council... now, my friend, this

is something for you to investigate. One of your office workers took a bribe. A real bribe. And he changed the capacity to seventy.

DEMOKE: Seventy!

OBANEJI: Yes. Seventy. From forty

ROLA: That's nearly twice

OBANEJI: You said it-nearly twice. Now what do you think would happen if such a trap suddenly caught fire?

DEMOKE: When?

ROLA: (*Shuts her eyes tightly.*) No, no, no, no,

OBANEJI: Yesterday. That is why they have called it the incinerator since yesterday. Of the seventy people in it, five escaped. It overturned you see, and the body was built of wood. Dry and brittle in the Harmattan Season too. They were all on their way here – to the gathering of the tribes

*[There is a short silence]*

ADENEBI: Seventy did you say?

OBANEJI: Excepting five. Only five escaped [*pages 16-17; A Dance of the Forests*]

In the above, a wooden lorry that was initially built to carry forty passengers is eventually made to carry seventy passengers; unfortunately, the lorry is involved in a fatal accident in which sixty-five out of the seventy passengers were burnt to death. The silence which follows the terrible news as given by Obaneji is the type that follows terrible news in which listeners are trying to picture or digest its full implication. The silence denotes the brief period when listeners are short of words based on the grave nature of the news. In the excerpt above, the silence denotes the period when the listeners are picturing or visualizing how sixty-five people are burnt to death in a wooden lorry conveying them to the village ceremony. The question asked by Adenebi after the silence confirms that the listeners are initially in a state of shock and incredulity hence, speechlessness (silence).

**iv. Silence to indicate that somebody's contribution to an ongoing discourse is totally strange and unexpected.**



Sometimes, when interaction is ongoing and somebody's response or contribution is totally strange or unexpected, the interactant's immediate response may be silence in order to express their surprise. The excerpt below clarifies the point.

COUNCELLOR: There is still hope. We have heard nothing of Forest Father. Perhaps Aroni merely acts on his own.

AGBOREKO: (*Shakes his head*) Oro cried last night and Bashiru vanished from his bed. Do you still wonder what became of your friend? Proverb to bones and silence.

COUNCELLOR: I am sorry

ADENEBI: But where does your Forest Father come in? Who is he anyway?

*[There is total silence while they all stare at him]*

*(pg. 38: A Dance of the Forests)*

In the above, when Adenebi asks the question that "But where does your Forest Father come in? Who is he anyway?", there is total silence because the questions are unexpected in that everybody in the community is supposed to know who Forest Father is.

**v. Silence to indicate that one does not want to commit oneself to a specific response in a communicative situation where polar questions are asked**

When the current speaker asks a polar question from the listeners during ongoing interactions and they are not sure of the response, the listeners may be silent in order to pragmatically convey the message that they do not want to commit themselves to a specific response so that they will not violate the maximum of quality in pragmatics which says that one should not say anything about which one lacks adequate evidence. The excerpt below clarifies the point.

QUESTIONER: Who sent you?

DEAD WOMAN: I am certain she had no womb, but I think it was a woman.

QUESTIONER: Before your time?

Was it before your time?

DEAD WOMAN: My weakness, Forest Head It was a woman. I was weak.

QUESTIONER: And the other. The one who sent you. The one you call a wombless woman. Was she weak?

*(The woman is silent)*

*(pg. 65–69: A Dance of the Forests)*

The “wombless woman” being referred to by the Questioner in the last turn above is the one being referred to by Dead Woman in her first turn above. From all indications, Dead Woman does not know much about the “wombless woman”, so there is no way she can answer the question posed by Questioner truthfully, hence, her desire not to commit herself to any concrete response; this can only be achieved by remaining silent by the woman.

#### **vi. Silence to indicate power over the current speaker**

During interactions, silence may be pragmatically used to indicate that one has a certain power over one’s interlocutor. This normally happens when one asks questions from somebody of a higher status or somebody makes a comment that requires the response of the person of higher status. The person of a higher status (+ power) may simply ignore the question or the comment by remaining silent (refusing to answer the question). Consider the excerpt below.

KUTENLO AND OBAGBERI: Your greatness, may you live long to protect the land of our fathers against vandals.

*(No Answer)*

KUTENLO: *(after a while)* My lord, may we rise -

KURUNMI: Your stomachs glued to the dust for ever, you may transform into snakes if you wish.

*(pg. 26: Kurunmi)*

In the above excerpt, Kutenlo and Obagberi are messengers to Alafin Adelu of Oyo – a very powerful king in Yorubaland in Nigeria. Immediately Kurunmi (the Generalissimo of the Yoruba Empire and Lord of Ijaiye but not a supporter of Alafin) see them, he knows that they have come to deliver an unpalatable message to him from Alafin. This is the reason he does not answer them when they pay

homage to him and when they ask him if they could stand from their prostrate position. In essence Kurunmi remains silent when the two messengers are addressing him in order to exhibit his power over them. Kurunmi knows that without answering them, or giving the order they cannot leave their prostrate position.

**vii. Silence to ignore somebody's comment as though it is senseless and meaningless, hence not worth replying to.**

The excerpt below clarifies the point.

OBAGBORI: My lord, Alafin Adelu, Supreme Lord of the kingdom, said we should ask you why you did not come to his crowning.

*(Silence)*

KUTENLO: My lord, we are talking to you.

KURUNMI: Supreme Lord of the Kingdom? The Supreme Lord is dead. How can a dead King expect me to come to his crowning?

OBAGBORI: We mean the new king, Alafin Adelu, son of the dead Alafin Atiba.

KURUNMI: Oh, I see. It is well. I shall explain.

In the above, a new king has just been crowned in Oyo called Alafin Adelu, but the Generalissimo of the Yoruba Empire and lord of Ijaiye called Kurunmi does not recognise the new Alafin because according to him, it is another person that should have been crowned. After the whole event, Alafin Adelu sent two of his messengers above to Kurunmi to inquire why he fails to attend his (Alafin's) crowning. However, Obagbori deliberately uses a very powerful appositive phrase to describe his master (Alafin) which is "Alafin Adelu, Supreme Lord of the Kingdom" which might have angered Kurunmi. Hence, he (Kurunmi) acts as if the messenger has said something meaningless, and consequently he does not need to reply to it. This pragmatic meaning of his silence is confirmed in his second turn where he said "The Supreme Lord is dead. How can a dead king expect me to

come to his crowning?” This pragmatic function of silence is different from the fourth point above.

In the fourth point above, the interlocutor innocently makes their contributions and not intentionally hurt the feelings of his listener. But in the current situation, the speaker intentionally makes a comment in order to pass across certain meanings to the listener. The listener, however, gets the intention of the speaker, hence he too pretends as if the message is meaningless.

**viii. Silence to indicate that the response to the current speaker’s question is not likely to be a favourable one.**

Consider the excerpt below:

*(Soldiers march out. But as Kurunmi and Areagoro are about to leave, three Ijaiye warriors rush in panic stricken)*

AREAGORO (*startled*): Labudanu! Adejumo!! You too Abese!!! (*They prostrate themselves, panting*)

KURUNMI: What does this mean?

AREAGORO: You were all supposed to be in Iwawun defending Iwawun.

LABUDANU (*hysterically*): Ogunmola led them. The Ajaiyi – all of them – and Osi Osundina too.

KURUNMI: Is this man well in the head?

ABESE: Iwawun has fallen, my lord

AREAGORO: Fallen! How could Iwawun fall?

ADEJUMO: We fought hard, my lord

LABUDANU: But Ogunmola, Ogunmola himself led them in attack. Ajaiyi too. and Osi Osundina – all of them.

AREAGORO: Iwawun taken

KURUNMI: It is the water that is spilt. The calabash is still unbroken. We fight on! We fight on! I say – (*with sudden anxiety.*) What about my sons? (*silence*) Answer, I pray you; to be dumb is no glory.

- ABESE: Efunlabi was killed defending the hill-top, my lord
- AREAGORO: What about his older brother?
- ADEJUMO: Fatoki was killed too. With a spear.
- AREAGORO: What about Sangodele?
- ALABUDANU: Ajaiyi shot him off his horse. In three places he shot him
- ABESE: His brother Ogundele rushed forward to rescue him, but... he too, was shot.
- LABUDANU: Speared – Latosisa speared him in the neck
- AREAGORO: What about Arawole?
- ADEJUMO: He was taken prisoner by Ogunmola himself.
- AREAGORO: He still lives then
- LABUDANU: (*proffering a bag*): We found his head at the foot of a hill!
- (pages 89-90; *Kurunmi*)

In the above, there is a war between Ijaiye and Oyo because Kurunmi does not want to recognise the authority of the new Alafin. At a point, three of his trusted warriors who should have been fighting and defending a town called Iwawun suddenly come to inform Kurunmi that Iwawun has fallen. This is a bitter and an unexpected blow to Kurunmi, but he condoles himself with a Yoruba proverb after which he encourages them to fight on, but suddenly he realises that it is at Iwawun that his children are supposed to be fighting and none of them is among the warriors who have come to inform him of the fall of Iwawun. This prompts him to ask suddenly “what about my sons?” which is followed by “silence” after which he says that “Answer, I pray you; to be dumb is no glory”. It is after this second time of asking that he is informed that five of his children have been killed in the battle – Efunlabi, Fatoki, Sangodele, Ogunlade and Arawole. The initial silence is a pragmatic device of indicating that the response to Kurunmi’s question is not likely to be a favourable one. This is because it is not easy for a bad news to be relayed to powerful people like Kurunmi. In other words, silence such as in the context explained above signals bad news.

## ix. Silence to indicate grief or sorrow

In Yoruba traditional society, silence is a major way of exhibiting grief by elderly persons as well as powerful persons like kings, Chiefs and warriors. This is illustrated in *Kurunmi* by Kurunmi. Consider the excerpt below:

AREAGORO: Wicked! They killed them! Killed them all... that's wicked!

ADEJUMO (to *Kurunmi*): Take heart, my lord

LABUDANU: They shall be avenged!

AREAGORO: Wicked!

ABESE: Take heart, my lord

KURUNMI: It is not the beating of rain-drops that hurts... it is the... the touch of dew... the soft touch of dew... (*silence*)  
(pg. 90; *Kurunmi*).

In the above, Kurunmi's notable warriors are trying to condole with him because of the loss of five sons in the war he is waging against Oyo.

However, he does not respond to their condolence message of "Take heart, my lord". In the last turn above, Kurunmi starts his speech fluently and later becomes non-fluent until he becomes silent which is a way of showing grief over the tragic death of five children in the battle. In this situation, Kurunmi cannot cry or break down openly for two reasons: first, it will destabilise other warriors and second, it is like saying that other people who have lost their children in the war are fools.

## Discussion and Conclusion

Silence is an important means of communication which has made many researchers to be interested in discovering the different functions it performs in different climes cultures and contexts. The current work aims to contribute to scholarship in this direction by identifying other novel functions performed by silence in an extended discourse or context typified by two selected play texts. The authors of this paper are able to identify nine functions which silence performs in different contexts. This agrees with the position of Johannesen (1974:29) that human silence "is pregnant with meaning..."

The first function of silence identified in our data is that it is used to indicate agreement or to indicate that somebody is considering or ruminating over the last speaker's view or comment. This function is in tandem with the findings of Harahsheh (2012) and Ibrahim et. al (2017). Harahsheh (2012) cited in Ibrahim et. al writes that silence is used to signify agreement or disagreement. Ibrahim et. al (2017) declare that silence is used to indicate consent or agreement. Our second assertion in the point above is also in agreement with the position of Ibrahim et. al (2017:61) that silence is a strategy of thinking.

Our second finding in this research is that silence may be used to signal that one is not satisfied or does not agree with one's interlocutor's comments or remarks. This finding also agrees with the position of Harahsheh (2012) that silence is used to indicate disagreement. However, unlike the work of Harahsheh (2012) cited in Ibrahim et. al., the current work is able to reveal the reasons for keeping silent instead of giving negative vocal response. The authors have been able to point out that interlocutors will prefer to use the communicative tool of silence to show their disagreement where they believe that their co-interactant has a certain power over them.

Our third finding that silence is used to indicate the brief period of shock when one's listener is trying to consider the full implication of a piece of news appears not to have been discussed in the literature probably because earlier researchers in the area have not had the benefit of extended discourse or context which the current researcher exploited. The next finding that silence is used to indicate that somebody's contribution to an ongoing discourse is totally strange or unexpected appears to be a novel addition to the functions of silence already documented in the literature. The fifth finding of this paper which is that silence is used to indicate that one does not want to commit oneself to a specific response in a communicative encounter where polar questions are asked also appears to be a novel contribution to scholarship in this area of research. Moreover, to the best of our knowledge, the finding that silence is used to indicate power over the current speaker is a new addition to the function of silence already identified in the literature.

The next finding that silence is used to indicate that the response to the current speaker's question is not likely to be a favourable one has probably not been documented in the literature, thereby making it a new addition to the functions of silence to be documented in the literature. The last function of silence discovered in our paper supported the earlier findings of Ibrahim et. al (2017) that silence is a sign of unhappiness or mourning. The current paper, no doubt, has contributed to scholarship by discovering more novel pragmatic functions of silence as they occur in different contexts. This paper has confirmed that people, apart from using speech, pass across different meanings through communicative silence. However, it seems that this important skill is naturally acquired and deployed by any normal person when the need arises, that is, it is not learned.

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