

## The Meaning of Silence and its Functions in Politics

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### Abstract:

This study deals with one of the essential topics in English linguistics and politics silence, which plays a significant role in politics given the numerous functions it serves. Particularly, it examines and analyses the meaning and function of silence of some well-known current politicians, namely former US presidents, George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The rationale behind this choice stems from that these political figures tend to have silent pauses for particular purposes such as disagreement, and insulting. Drawing on Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann's "Spiral of Silence" paradigm and van Dijk's Critical Discourse Analysis, this study also seeks to answer the following main question: what types of silence can be deduced from former US presidents and how can we explain silence from this and other perspectives. It also reviews the interpretation of silence in different contexts and discusses the functions and types of this concept. Results this study has obtained from analysing the data show that silence can showcase a range of categories of communicative functions. This study presents evidence for a number of functions that can be conveyed by the use of silence in speech in political discourse. These include face-saving, affecting, evaluating and linking. Results also suggest that since speakers (politicians) do not identify specific victims by name, they may want to achieve victim equity. This is due to the possibility that bringing up a certain name could bring up issues related to race, religion, politics, etc. Additionally, a speaker could appear depressed while attempting to avoid mentioning the name of a certain family member. As a result, that family's sorrow can deepen.

**Keywords:** silence, discourse analysis, politicians, political speeches, human reaction.

## معنى الصمت ووظائفه في الخطابات السياسية

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### المخلص:

تتناول هذه الدراسة أحد الموضوعات الأساسية في اللغويات والسياسة الإنجليزية - الصمت ، الذي يلعب دورًا مهمًا في السياسة نظرًا للوظائف العديدة التي تخدمها. على وجه الخصوص ، يفحص ويحلل السياسيين. تميل الشخصيات السياسية إلى فترات توقف صامتة لأغراض معينة مثل الخلاف والإهانة. عملاً بالاطار النظري المقدم من قبل الباحثة السياسية المعروفة إليزابيث نويل نويمان الذي وضعت نظرية "لولب من الصمت" تسعى هذه الدراسة أيضا إلى الإجابة على السؤال الرئيسي التالي: ما هي أنواع الصمت التي يمكن استنتاجها من الرؤساء الأمريكيين السابقين وكيف يمكننا تفسير الصمت من هذا المنظور وغيره؟ تظهر النتائج التي تم الحصول عليها من تحليل البيانات المعدة لهذه الدراسة أن الصمت يمكن ان يظهر لنا مجموعة من فئات ووظائف التواصل حيث تقدم هذه الدراسة أدلة لعدد من الوظائف التي يمكن نقلها من خلال استخدام الصمت في الكلام في الخطاب السياسي. وتشمل هذه الوظائف حفظ ماء الوجه والتأثير والتقييم والربط. وتشير النتائج أيضا إلى أنه نظرا لأن المتحدثين (السياسيين) لا يحددون ضحايا معينين بالاسم، فقد يرغبون في تحقيق المساواة بين الضحايا. ويرجع ذلك إلى احتمال أن يؤدي طرح اسم معين إلى إثارة قضايا تتعلق بالعرق والدين والسياسة وما إلى ذلك. بالإضافة إلى ذلك ، قد يبدو المتحدث مكتئبا أثناء محاولته تجنب ذكر اسم فرد معين من أفراد الأسرة تجنباً لتعاضم حزنها. تقتصر هذه الدراسة على الصمت في الخطابات السياسية ووظائفها وأنواعها. يقدم عددًا من الأمثلة التي تعيد النظر في هذه العملية في الأطر الرئيسية ذات الصلة التي تمت مناقشة الصمت على أساسها كأداة خطاب في الاتصال. كما تم إبداء عدد من الملاحظات الختامية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الصمت، تحليل الخطاب، السياسيون ، الخطب السياسية ، الانفعالات الشخصية.

## 1. Introduction:

Instances of silence that people could, in their own right, produce different meanings such as acceptance, or disapproval. These interpretations are subject to cultural considerations. As such, they may not elude being subjective and relative. Accordingly, silence is influenced by context and culture (Jaworski, 1993). Indeed, it may be found in some cultures like the Eastern ones that silence may be translated into positive communicative impressions. On the other hand, silence in western cultures, may be understood as sign of social coldness or may project people as being un-cooperative (Tannen, 1985). It may also indicate lack of knowledge on the part of the speaker (Irvine, 1978).

Critical discourse analysis is considered as a branch of critical linguistics which studies the relationship between discourse events, sociopolitical and cultural factors. This is different from 'text linguistics' which displays formal aspects of linguistic principles in covering structural characteristics of texts. However, the domains of both of these two areas may, in some respects, overlap with each other. For example, both disciplines share a sharp focus on cohesion insofar that it would be premature to present a principled distinction between them. In semantics, it is used in the context of a range of entities, topics, situations, etc., within which a particular speech event makes reference" (Crystal, 2006: 149).

Trask (2007:61) states that the analysis of texts can be conducted within their social setting. It is feasible; of course, to look at content from the perspective of the lexicon and developments it employs as well as the phonetic tools it utilises to relate one portion to another, and so on. However, the approach called basic discourse analysis is distinctive as it is essentially inquisitive about the social setting in which a content is composed. Why was this content constructed at all? To whom is it tended to, and why? Does the author or speaker have concealed purposes, and, in the event that so, what are they? What covered up assumptions and biases underlie the content? These are the sorts of questions sought after in this examination. This study seeks to investigate how politicians conceal or otherwise certain meanings while employing silence in their speech. The linguistic methods included in such examinations are often critical in nature.

## 2. Theoretical Framework

### 2.1. *The Concept of Silence*

The word 'silence' refers to an aspect in which speech is absent. It can occur anywhere and perform a wide range of tasks. When an actor's lack of conduct stands out from essential desires, it shows how they should act in a relevant situation. It is interesting to observe the connection between the desire for being 'silent' and the ability to recognize its presence: for what is popularly referred to as "silent," which is not so much an observational issue of reality. For example, a total absence of voice is a societal product. As a state of inaction, silence pertains to others when their immobility stands out visibly when compared to others. When it comes to assessing democratic strengthening, the concept of silence is distinguished from the concept of voice. Although this differentiation is not fundamentally incorrect, it is overgeneralized, often implicitly, with an

unanticipated outcome. Most scholars, for example, do not look into whether silence, like voice, might be an enabling decision in and of itself (Gray, 2014:7).

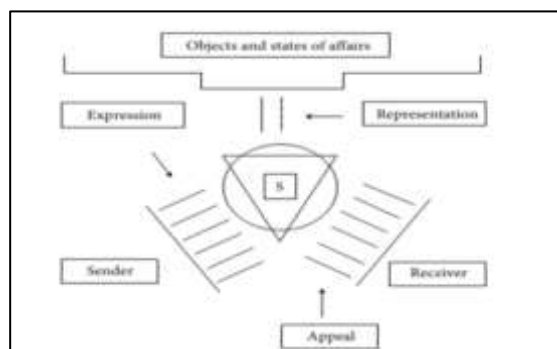
Strict silence can show power, like when one party refuses to discuss a topic that the other would instead do to maintain control. However, silence can also serve as a brief period of time for both parties to think about what they have said so far and how they want to move forward. Even if there is no form of spoken communication, it does not mean that there is a complete lack of it. There are diverse effects on the communication flow when a discussion comes to an end. It has the potential to enhance one's understanding of another's point of view. It also shows the potential to substantially limit another party's ability to communicate their thoughts and feelings completely (Gendron, 2011:1-2).

The use of language as a tool for human reaction and construction of what it is to be human is connected to political conflicts, identities, and ideologies. It is truism in politics that speaking and expressing themselves are critical to building a solid community and engaging in political action. However, the belief that language is simple and that everyone continually uses it in the same way, is only a saying: language is widely deployed without issues (Ferguson, 2002:2).

It is common for models of communication to be provided with an entity that presents few physically visible signs that can be recognized to demonstrate occurrences in the outside world and/or be planned to communicate with different kinds of meaning. Message twists and situational components or linguistic capacities may variously be incorporated in different models. However, all models will be incomplete without the three elements, which are at the very least more or less isolated.

Almost universally, people agree that silence can be a type of communication. However, this communication model appears to be missing a simple yet influential component. Schröter (2013:13) argues that (Bühler, 1934) has considered language as a communication too and hence provides a robust platform for considering what occurs when the work is accomplished without using the instrument.

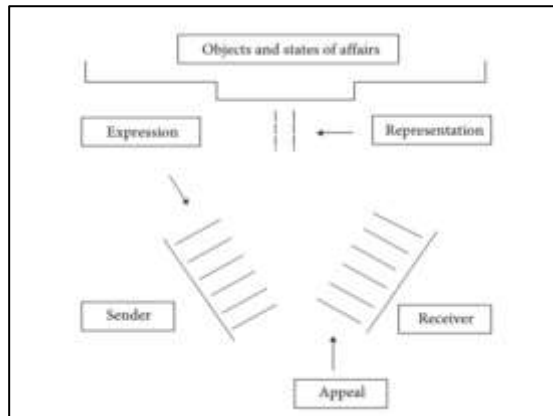
"Bühler's model of communication" can be seen in the following figure:



**Figure (1): "Bühler's Model of Communication (Speech)"**

. Consider the example in Figure (2), where the word "silent" appears. Nothing happens because there is no indicator (the triangle with an S in it). Hence, a hint is needed to indicate a sender's desire to convey something and a trigger to

make the receiver interpret this clue to some form of the message the recipient should analyze.



**Figure (2):** Silence as adopted from (Baytimur et al., 2020)

Either politicians choose to speak or not in a communicative circumstances. The possibility of speaking lessens the significance of its absence. There is no denotation without signs; hence the meanings and interpretations of "silence" seem to depend on the situation wholly. (Schröter, 2013:15).

A meaningful political event can be described as silence. This sort of political involvement develops new political subjectivities and alters current realities by rearranging power relations. Politicians remain silent to dissent and assert it as a strategy utilized by creating political collectivity to form itself noticeably, announce a form, and challenge organization control. To put it another way, the silence occasion under review not only welcomes our attention being turned toward an instrument that separates politics from speech, but it also encourages a re-evaluation of what we usually accept as political activism. Silence could be a fundamental practice since it demonstrates an elective possibility of being and acting. Nevertheless, by doing so, it obstructs previously formed conceptions of thought and practice, in particular the strict dichotomy between speech and silence. Not only does silence serve to ignore a particular topic or disagreement, but it can also serve to de-empower the other person and degrade the quality of their engagement as a whole.

It is possible to employ silence as an aggressive instrument, both in the context of a single contact and as part of a larger aggression strategy directed at a person or a group. (Lusternberger and Williams, 2009 cited in Gendron, 2011:3), and (Hatzisavvidou, 2015).

Lack of communication in silence can negatively affect a person, a group of people, or an organization. For example, a victimized coworker may be refused access to data and computer programmers critical to their job performance. When Silence is used to restrict access to data, trust between the parties would be eroded. It means here avoiding spreading misconceptions and misperceptions by keeping your mouth shut (Gendron, 2011:3).

## 2.2. *The Meaning of Silence*

The unit of analysis distinguishes between nonverbal meanings and functions. When it comes to the elucidation of messages, meanings reveal how well messages are explained, while functions show how perceptive people can be. This is because they may be based on nonverbal communication theories like systems theory, interactionism, and cognitivism, each offers an invaluable framework for analyzing nonverbal behavior.

Silence can have different meanings depending on the context. These run as follows:

1. **"Positive Silence"**: Means that the person uses communication through silence to strengthen or maintain a relationship.
2. **"Negative Silence"**: It is important to remember that negative silence implies that you are either isolating or ignoring others. It also implies that you are disagreeing with them.
3. **"Neutral Silence"**: This kind of silence conveys contemplation more than anything else, such as hurting or healing a relationship, because it shows a lack of emotional expression.
4. **"No Silence"**: It is the case where a person does not want to keep speaking in both formal and informal cases (Ling, 2003: 132-133).

## 2.3. *Features of Silence*

Features that are attributed to silence are as follows:

1. Even if you do not know what it means, there is a relation between silence and other people's recognition. While the non-behavior of a single actor can imply silence, silence cannot stand on its own. In order to exist, silence must exist between other people and be directed towards them. Silence has a social element that distinguishes it from concepts like separation and isolation, mistaken for silence. On the other hand, these aforementioned thoughts go in a more individualized direction, i.e., away from open living. In contrast to solitude, silence fosters a more profound sense of connection with the outside world.
2. Silence has several attributes; one of them is the assumption of presence. A silent performer makes us believe that they are connected to us and that this connection has not just broken off - like when people run away from a quarrel or stop a political party or leave their country of residence because it is not suitable for them. Only those who remain silent can claim credit for it (Gray, 2014:8).

Silence differs conceptually from notions like egress, the location and functions of which have been thoroughly recorded in democratic theory and practice because of the presupposition of presence, whether direct or indirect (Dowding and John 2012; Hirschman 1970; Warren 2011 cited in Gray, 2014:9).

## 2.4. Types of Silence

It is important to note that the term "expression" is being used lightly because silence is not an expression in the strictest sense. Often, when people talk about communicative silence, they are talking about an entirely different kind of silence—the kind that does more than you would expect it to. Nonlinguistic residuals of choice, such as communicative silences, are thought to reveal a politician's inner feelings, decisions, or preferences to a larger audience. On the other hand, Silence can be a communicative tool if silence is recognized, especially when silence is recognized as given. Silence is non-behavior; to put it another way, silence becomes communication when an audience interprets such non-behavior as an active statement of choice.

While they may be viewed as "active" or "silent," politicians who are silent actively work to achieve a goal. Active silences might sometimes be prompted by hazy motives like uneasiness or unease lurking just above the surface. (Gray, 2014:17).

Distinguishing between silence-based and voice-based communication is equally important when evaluating when silence is genuine communication. Researchers generally recognise voice in terms of the public expression of choice that is either appears as phonetic in substance or quickly decodes as a dialect medium. However, communication takes many forms in a law-based framework. Because it may be used in arguments, campaigns, deliberations, petitions, and votes, amongst other ways, empowered voice communication is a hot topic among academics. (Gray, 2014:18).

Communicative silence is used to identify nonlinguistic communications acquired as the result of observed non-behavior by differentiating. Collaborative decision-making is affected by what is read into silence, appropriately or incorrectly. This can happen inside groups as well as other social and political relationships. While vocal flourishes can enhance silence, like when silent rebels use pennants or placards to make their silence more clear, silence is communication on its own, even when it is not. Silence registers in abstentions, impediments, detached memberships within groups, and implicitly accepted collective choices serve as means of communication in this context. (ibid, 2014:19).

Considering the implications of a specific choice to remain silent, it is essential to consider what conclusions can be derived from silence in the specific situation. In general, the repercussions of choosing silence can be classified as falling into one of four types:

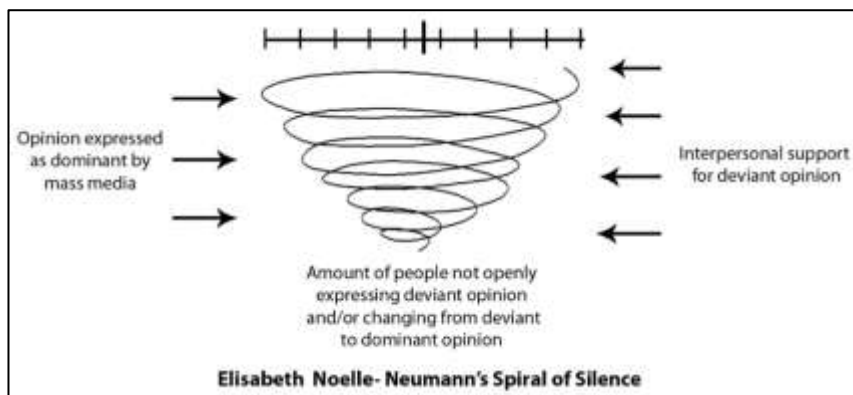
- ❖ "**Affective silence**" "is about the communicative use of silence to induce others to make decisions or actions in line with one's preferences, typically by choosing silence as a punitive sanction until others alter their behavior."
- ❖ "**Demonstrative silence**" "is about the communicative use of silence to lead others to form specific beliefs or expectations about oneself, usually as the result of a decision to remain silent in response to direct cues, questions, or promptings."

- ❖ **"Emulative silence"** "is about the communicative use of silence in compliance with formal institutions and organizations whose rules entitle some to speak instead of others in particular settings, or none at all."
- ❖ **"Facilitative silence"** "is about the communicative use of silence in conformity with informal conventions that structure social and political interaction, through norms of civility, listening, tact, and cooperative conduct" (Gray, 2014:20).

### 2.5 Theories of Silence

The renowned political scholar Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann developed the "Spiral of Silence" paradigm. From 1978 to 1980, Neumann served as President of the "World Association for Open Opinion Research," which she co-founded with her husband in 1947. Noelle-Neumann (1974) indirectly explains the Jews' state-of-affairs under Nazi rule during WWII through the Winding of Hush concept. As a result, Adolf Hitler ruled over the entire country, and the country's small Jewish population was forced to keep silent out of fear. Others faded away from the open mindfulness because their devotees were forced to be silent.

To put it differently, when people are afraid of being divided or detached from the majority, they tend to keep their views to themselves.



**"Figure (3):** Noelle Neumann's spiral of silence, as adopted from Noelle-Neumann, E. (1993)"

A good example here is the Chief Executive Officer of a company decides to increase the company's working hours from 8 to 10 and sends out an email to all employees. The majority of them are aware of the shift in time except for a small number of them dissatisfied with the fresh selection. However, they are unable or unwilling to communicate their thoughts freely. This can be ascribed to the following:

1. The workers' feeling lack of support particularly from their peers.
2. They concerns of becoming isolated or even moved elsewhere.
3. There is also a fear on their part that their personal opinion is discarded by the public.



4. There is also concern that they may risk losing their jobs if they publicly stated their views. (Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2015).

The Framework is based on a number of assumptions (Noelle-Neumann, 1991). This theory provides interpretations for a wide variety of meanings communicated by silence (Oliver et al., 2013).

1. The theory of the spiral of silence portrays a dynamic process. The prediction of almost open conclusions in mass media gives more scope to society's more significant parts and exceptionally less scope to minorities.
2. There is a fear of rejection in this social setting, and people know what acts will make distance better, much better, much stronger, much better the likelihood. "Fear of Isolation" is the term used to describe it.
3. Being a member of the underrepresented minority group. This is because of the dread of imprisonment or a sense of being alone or unsupported, people lose their self-confidence and avoid expressing their views.
4. Minorities may retract from openly debating their views so that they protect themselves from the majority.
5. Majorities gain more space in terms of voice within the society while minorities lack this space or may even be engulfed in silence.

This theory has some advantages and disadvantages such as:

1. The theory has both miniaturized scale and large scale levels of illustrative processes.
2. The theory functions appropriately in settings such campaigning, Senate and Parliamentary debates.
3. It makes a difference in raising the role and task that media perform in society.
4. The theory is not taking into account the other side of the coin in terms of explanation of silence. In a few cases, one may consider that the views of the majority as superior to his/her own ( Porten-Cheé & Eilders, 2015).

### ***3. Method and Results***

This study aims to investigate the roles that silence plays in US political discourse. In this study, the "Spiral of Silence" paradigm, created by renowned political historian Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, is used as a theoretical framework to analyze silence in selected speeches former US presidents. The data for the study were obtained from the archive of speeches given by former US presidents.

This section presents an overview of the results obtained from analysing the data prepared for this study. It first provides observations related to functional aspects of the use of silence by politicians, particularly US presidents. This section also presents results of analysis of silence employed in political speeches by former US president, George W. Bush.

### 3.1 Findings of Functions of Silence

A closer look at the literature reveals that a variety of functions can be served by employing silence in speech. Jensen (1973, Cited in Ling 2003, 138-139) provides an overview of the categories of communicative functions of silence. In what follows, evidence for a number of functions that be conveyed by the use of silence in speech in political discourse is given. Qualitative content analysis is used to analyse the data. It is one of the several qualitative methods currently available for analyzing data and interpreting its meaning. As a research method, it represents a systematic and objective means of describing and quantifying phenomena (Schreier, 2012). This is particularly crucial if the researcher chooses to examine latent material in addition to manifest content (noticing silence, sighs, laughter, posture, etc). (Catanzaro, 1988)

1. **"Face-saving"**: The expression on one's face suggests an open conception of him/herself As opposed to trying to project or preserve one's self-image or avoid confrontation on the off chance that it is even doable; as well as trying to hide things or go unnoticed during an open gathering of people. As a result, it has to do with silences brought on by external factors such as circumstance, modesty, or unfamiliarity. Bill Clinton's decision to remain silent after his scandal shows one illustration of this:



**Figure (4):** Bill Clinton after Scandal

2. **"Affecting"**: It is possible that silence can entirely heal as well as to wound. It has the power to strengthen or weaken a relationship. It can have both positive and negative effects. Humans???. An example is Trump keeps silent, but he uses the ok sign to express solidarity and to contact the audience:



**Figure (5):** Trump with OK Sign

3. "**Evaluating**": "silence" portrays judgments of people's behavior "character, motives, and personality of other participants," showing aspects such as approval or disapproval as well as contention or disagreement. "An example can be shown in the picture of Obama keeping silent":



**Figure (6):** Obama shows Disfavor

4. "**Linkage**": If silence is used to bring people together, it may also be used to separate or alienate people. It can be taken in both directions. In the following example, G.W. Bush keeps silent to bind himself with the families of victims of the 9/11 attacks.



**Figure (7):** G.W. Bush after 9\11 attacks

### *3.2 Results of Analysis of Selected Speeches*

- **Speech of G.W. Bush :**

"The speaker: George W. Bush"

"Occasion: The World Will Always Remember 9/11"

"Time: delivered December the 11th 2001"

"This republic is young, but its memory is long. Now, we have inscribed a new memory alongside those others. It is a memory of tragedy and shock, loss and mourning, not only loss and mourning. It is also a memory of bravery and self-sacrifice, and the love that lays down its life for a friend -- even a friend whose name it never knew".

"We are privileged to have with us the families of many of the heroes on September the 11th, including the family of Jeremy Glick of Flight 93. His courage and self-sacrifice may have saved the White House. It should be here we pay our respects".

"In time, perhaps, we will mark the memory of September the 11th in stone and metal-something we can show children as yet unborn to help them understand what happened on this minute and this day".

Analyzing this speech by the President of U.S.A. shows the following:

1. The speaker uses silence here to achieve equality among victims since he does not mention a name. Mentioning a particular name may have to do with ethnicity, religion, political party, etc. Also, the speaker shows that he is sad and trying not to mention the name of a certain member of a family. Consequently, that family's grief may increase.
2. For the purpose of being perceived as sad or hurt by what had happened, the speaker maintained periods of silence. He uttered two words linked with grief to show that the memory of the victims would not be vanished from their memories. This action and those victims would not be forgotten

Finally, the speaker shows how deeply hurt he is in keeping silent because people usually keep silent when they get "hurt".

### 3. Conclusion:

To sum up, it appears that silence is an effective tool for politicians to get their messages across to the audiences they address. Silence has many functions, such as face-saving, in which someone tries to avoid shyness, maintain self-image, or avoid embarrassment. Also, it has the power to influence them. In situations of evaluating others' opinions, politicians try to remain silent to maintain relationships with others and to establish linkage with them. Answering the question raised in this study, results show that types of silence vary from demonstrative, effective, to emulative. Each type has its context and uses. Silence has features that differentiate it from solitude, and it has a presumption of presence.

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