

# The Use of Strategic Silence in Interpersonal Communication

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## Abstract

For over a century now, the attention of communication scholars has shifted from strategic communication to strategic silence with an open invitation for experts to investigate the potency of the latter in the line of communication. As an honour to this invitation, this study investigates the use of strategic silence in interpersonal communication among residents of Enugu Metropolis in Enugu State Nigeria. In conducting this survey, explanatory mixed method research design was used to generate both qualitative and quantitative data using questionnaire and interview. After a thorough analysis, both quantitative and qualitative data revealed that residents of Enugu metropolis use strategic silence in interpersonal communication. Finding also revealed that the respondents use strategic silence both negatively and positively to influence others in the line of communication. Based on these findings, it is recommended that users of strategic silence should always deploy it for positive reasons.

## 1. Introduction

Silence is, incontrovertibly, one of the strongest instruments in human communication. For speech communication experts, silence remains golden in the line of communication. It is even more golden when it is strategically employed in communication. No doubt, if it is strategically used, it means that it has the potency to speak more than words. Silence speaks volume. According to Billings cited in Olaolu (2012, p.39), “the most profound statements are often said in silence.” This effectively corrects the notion that multitude of words must precede making sense.

Unarguably, silence Just like speech, is also one of the channels of human communication. According to Umeh (2010, p.3), silence and speech are both signs in interpersonal communication that have almost the same potency except for the fact that the former is more powerful. To buttress this fact, Publilius Syrus cited in Umeh (2010, p.4) posits that, “I have often regretted my speech, but never my silence.” However, silence has traditionally long stayed out-of-awareness and been defined negatively—as merely the absence of speech, thus as absence of communication.

It is the combination of silence and speech that realizes the human communication. Little wonder, Wilson (2005,p.42), writes that “it is generally agreed among communication scholars that whether a man talks or refuses to talk, he is communicating some message to those expectant communicants who are in some form of interaction with him”. The point still remains that not saying anything is saying so much. A whole lot of times, we find ourselves in situations where our partners are not saying anything in the line of communication; this does not, however, mean that they have not communicated. In fact, they have, especially when their silence is deliberate and strategic. What then is strategic silence?

Wilson (2005, p.43) defined strategic silence to mean “the deliberate use of silence to communicate certain feelings, like anger, distancing, rejection, etc., in order to achieve a set of personal objectives.” Umeh (2010,p.4) adds that it is a conscious insertion of muteness in the line of communication in order to take the temperature of others or achieve an aim. From the two definitions offered above, one clear point made is that silence is strategic when a communicant decides to maintain quietness in order to achieve some results or to prove a point. When one decides to keep quiet, he is trying to understand something, express something or the both. In our ever dynamic world, one of the key tactics used by people in interpersonal or public communication is not what gets said, but the silences that a savvy person will insert into a dialogue.

In interpersonal communication, one is therefore concerned with the impact strategic silence has. Since the first phase of human interaction starts with interpersonal communication, it will be pertinent to find out what happens when there is silence. Does it mean that the silent party has nothing to say or what? This is why this subject has started to attract the attention of linguists and communication experts, whereas it has been a concern of sociologists, anthropologist, psychologist and philosophers for much longer.

## 2. Statement of Research Problem

Since the fall of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the attention of scholars in the field of communication has shifted from non verbal communication strategies to the effectiveness of strategic silence in communication. However, a review of most studies carried out so far on the latter suggests that attention has been only on the aspect of political communication. Not so much has been written on interpersonal communication which is the engine house of other forms of communications.

Owing to the fact that our interactions at interpersonal levels affect the things we say or do at other levels, special attention ought to be given to the role strategic silence play in interpersonal communication. Hence, this study will evaluate the role of strategic silence in interpersonal communication.

## 3. Objectives of the Study

The general objective of the study is to find out the role strategic silence plays in interpersonal communication. Specifically, the study sought:

1. To find out the extent to which strategic silence is used in interpersonal communication.
2. To ascertain whether strategic silence is used intentionally by individuals in their interpersonal communications.
3. To examine the kind of role strategic silence plays in interpersonal communication
4. To find out the influence strategic silence has in interpersonal communication.

## 4 Research Questions

From the research objectives above, the following research questions were asked:

1. To what extent is strategic silence used in interpersonal communication?
2. Is strategic silence employed intentionally by individuals in their interpersonal communications?
3. What kind of role does strategic silence play in interpersonal communication?
4. What influence does strategic silence have in interpersonal communication?

## 5 Literature Review

There are avalanche of studies to suggest that strategic silence has effect in communication irrespective of contentions on the subject by some leftist scholars. Wang (2009) studied the effect of non verbal communication in interpersonal communication and concluded that "It is evident that nonverbal communication and silence are important to interpersonal communication" Wang who used descriptive method of analysis also concluded that "Silence is also speech." According to him:

We contend that silence sends us nonverbal cues concerning the communication situations in which we participate. Silent cues affect interpersonal communication by providing an interval in an ongoing interaction during which the participants have time to think, check or suppress an emotion, encode a lengthy response, or inaugurate another line of thought (Wang 2009,p.4).

Swee Hoon Ang, Siew Meng Leong and Wendy Yeo of the National University of Singapore conducted a study in 1999 on the effectiveness of silence as an executional cue in enhancing consumer advertisement response and found that "a silent segment in a television commercial increased attention and recall". Using 76 undergraduate students in a survey, they concluded that:

Several interesting insights on the impact of silence in television commercials were obtained. First, our study empirically verified the views of ad creative (Olsen 1994) as it found that greater attention was paid to an ad with a silent segment than one without. We also found that silence enhanced the recall of television commercials. This extends the results of Olsen (1997) who documented the recall effects of silence in the context of radio ads. However, our findings were obtained with a longer ISI that was used to manipulate the silence condition. The added visual information in TV but not radio commercials during the silence period may contribute to the need for a longer ISI to observe the effects of silence (Ang, Leong and Yeo, 1999, p.304).

The result of Ang et al. (1999, p.304) shows that silence is not just important in interpersonal communication alone but in every human endeavor

In another study conducted 2011, William Harlow of University of Texas exemplified the use of strategic silence by President George W Bush after the 2007 general election held in Nigerian. Shortly after the said election which the whole world believed was flawed by gross irregularities, everyone had expected the

President Bush through the State Department to issue a statement considering the strategic nature of Nigeria in Africa but got silence instead. Harlow (2011, p. 11) concluded that the silence maintained by President Bush had far reaching implication on the world view of the U S – Nigeria relations.

### Theoretical Framework

This work is anchored on Interpersonal Deception Theory (IDT). IDT is a contemporary communication theory put up by David Buller and Judee K. Burgoon to predict and explain deception in the context of interpersonal interactions. One of the major assumptions of this theory is that deception entails three classes of strategic, or deliberate, activity—information, behavior, and image management (Littlejohn and Foss, 2009,p.551). According to Littlejohn and Foss “*Strategic* actions are motivated and deliberate, whether for self-benefit or for the benefit of another person However, Buller and Burgoon subscribe to the view that deception, as with other planned and overlearned behavior, can be strategic without being highly conscious.” *Information management* refers to efforts to control the verbal contents of a message. *Behavior management* refers to efforts to control accompanying nonverbal behaviors or communications to suppress any telltale signs of deceit and to appear normal.

The main assumption under *Behaviour Management* strategic strategy is that individuals can decide to be silent in the line of communication to mislead others or communicate a more powerful action. This theory, therefore, help one to understand that most times, people use strategic silence in communication lines to achieve some results.

### 6 Research Method

This study adopted the explanatory mixed method design, which Creswell (2002, p. 566) noted “consists of first collecting quantitative data and then collecting qualitative data to help explain or elaborate on the quantitative results. The rationale for this approach is that the quantitative data and result provide a general picture of the research problem; more analysis, specifically through qualitative data collection is needed to refine, extend or explain the general picture”. This method allowed the researcher to gather quantitative data through questionnaire and qualitative data through interview.

For the quantitative analysis, opinions of Enugu metropolis residents were sampled. Questionnaire containing both open and close-ended questions was used to generate quantitative data. For the qualitative analysis, selected respondents with special knowledge about the subject matter were interviewed. This enabled the researchers to generate qualitative data for the study.

### 7 Population and Sample Size

The population of this study covers the residents of Enugu metropolis. From the figure released by the National Population Commission based on the 2006 census, the Population of Enugu Metropolis is 722,664. Using Taro Yamami formular a sample of 400 was drawn from the total population of 722,664.

### 8 Sampling Procedure

The simple random sampling technique was chosen for this work. In this sort of sampling, all elements in the population have equal chance of being selected into the sample. After the sample was determined, 400 copies of the questionnaire were administered. 7 copies out of the 400 were not returned while 4 copies were not properly filled. So, the researcher used the remaining 389 copies for the study. For the qualitative analysis, purposive sampling method was used to select six people with special interest and understanding on the subject matter.

### 9. Data Presentation and Results

**Table 1: On the Extent Strategic Silence is Used in Interpersonal Communication**

To what extent do you use strategic silence in interpersonal communication?	Frequency	Percentage
Large extent	92	23.7%
Minimal extent	256	65.8%
Does not know	34	8.7%
Can't say	7	1.8%
<b>Total</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>100%</b>

Data in table one above show that 92 respondents representing 23.7% of the total respondents indicated that strategic silence is used to a large extent in interpersonal communication, 256 respondents constituting 65.8% of the total respondents said that strategic silence is used only to a minimal extent in interpersonal communication. The table further revealed that 34 respondents representing 8.7% of the total respondents indicated the “Does not know” option while 7 respondents constituting 1.8% of the whole respondents couldn't say the extent to which they use strategic silence in interpersonal communication.

**Table 2: On whether strategic silence is employed intentionally by individuals in their interpersonal communications**

Do you employ strategic silence intentionally when engaged in an interpersonal communication?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	341	87.7%
No	46	11.8%
Can't say	2	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table two above indicates that 341 respondents representing 87.7% of the total respondents said they intentionally employ strategic silence when engaged in interpersonal communication, 46 respondents constituting 11.8% of the total respondents indicated that they do not intentionally employ strategic silence in interpersonal communication while 2 respondents indicated that they can't say anything in this regard.

**Table 3: On the kind of role strategic silence plays in interpersonal communication**

What kind of role do you think strategic silence plays in interpersonal communication?	Frequency	Percentage
Positive	58	14.9%
Negative	31	8%
Both negative and positive	298	76.6%
Can't say	2	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table three above shows the responses of respondents on the kind of role strategic silence plays in interpersonal communication. 58 respondents representing 14.9% said that strategic silence plays positive role in interpersonal communication, 31 respondents representing 8% indicated that strategic silence plays negative role in interpersonal communication, 298 respondents constituting 76.6% were of the opinion that strategic silence can play both positive and negative role while 2 respondents went for the "can't say" option which means that they couldn't say anything in response to the question.

#### Qualitative analysis

To ascertain the kind of role strategic silence plays in interpersonal communication, responses obtained from the six people interviewed were collated. All of them said that strategic silence plays both negative and positive roles. A further probe showed that they believed that strategic silence plays the two roles effectively depending on how it is employed in interpersonal communication.

**Table 4: On whether strategic silence has any influence in interpersonal communication**

Do you think strategic silence has influence in interpersonal communication?	Frequency	Percentage
Yes	380	97.7%
No	7	1.8%
Can't say	2	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>100%</b>

Data in table four show that 380 respondents constituting 97.7% said strategic silence has influence in interpersonal communication, 7 respondents representing 1.8% indicated that it does not have any influence in interpersonal communication while 2 respondents constituting 0.5% indicated the "can't say option" meaning they cannot say anything in that regard.

**Table 5: On the level of influence strategic silence has in interpersonal communication**

What level of influence do you think strategic silence has in interpersonal communication?	Frequency	Percentage
Much influence	309	79.4%
Little influence	71	18.3%
No influence	7	1.8%
Can't say	2	0.5%
<b>Total</b>	<b>389</b>	<b>100%</b>

Table five shows the responses of the respondents on the level of influence strategic silence has in interpersonal communication. 309 respondents representing 79.4% said it has much influence in interpersonal communication, 71 respondents constituting 18.3% said it has little influence, 7 respondents representing 1.8% indicated that strategic silence has no influence in interpersonal communication while 2 respondents went for the "can't say" option.

## 10. Discussion of Findings

The first objective was to find out the extent to which strategic silence is used in interpersonal communication. Data in table one above show that 92 respondents representing 23.7% of the total respondents indicated that strategic silence is used to a large extent in interpersonal communication, 256 respondents constituting 65.8% of the total respondents said that strategic silence is used only to a minimal extent in interpersonal communication. The table further revealed that 34 respondents representing 8.7% of the total respondents indicated the “Does not know” option while 7 respondents constituting 1.8% of the whole respondents couldn’t say the extent to which they use strategic silence in interpersonal communication.

From the above, it was obvious that strategic silence is used in interpersonal communication to a minimal extent. This finding is in line with that of Ang, Leong and Yeo, (1999).

The second objective was to find out whether strategic silence is intentionally employed in interpersonal communication. Data presented in table two above indicate that 341 respondents representing 87.7% of the total respondents said they intentionally employ strategic silence when engaged in interpersonal communication, 46 respondents constituting 11.8% of the total respondents indicated that they do not intentionally employed strategic silence in interpersonal communication while 2 respondents indicated that they can’t say anything in this regard. The implication of the above is that strategic silence is intentionally employed in interpersonal communication. The argument made by Umeh (2010) supports this finding. According to her, people intentionally maintain silence in the line of communication to achieve some results.

The third objective was advanced to ascertain the nature of the role played by strategic silence in interpersonal communication. Table three above shows the responses of respondents on the kind of role strategic silence play in interpersonal communication. 58 respondents representing 14.9% said that strategic silence plays positive role in interpersonal communication, 31 respondents representing 8% indicated that strategic silence plays negative role in interpersonal communication, 298 respondents constituting 76.6% were of the opinion that strategic silence play both positive and negative roles while 2 respondents went for the “can’t say” option which means that they cannot say anything in response to the question. Based on the data, it was clear that strategic silence play both positive and negative role in interpersonal communication. The findings of Umeh (2010) equally give credence to this result. Umeh found that, “depending on the objective, silence can be used for both negative and positive reasons”

The qualitative analysis made under this objective equally shows that all the people interviewed held that strategic silence plays both negative and positive roles in interpersonal communication depending on how it was used and the objective.

The intention of the fourth objective was to unravel the influence of strategic silence in interpersonal communication. Data in table four show that 380 respondents constituting 97.7% said strategic silence has influence in interpersonal communication, 7 respondents representing 1.8% indicated that it does not have any influence in interpersonal communication while 2 respondents constituting 0.5% indicated the “can’t say option” meaning they cannot say anything in that regard. Data here, obviously point to the fact that strategic silence has influence in interpersonal communication. Supporting the this finding, Umeh (2010) argued that, “there is no questions as to whether silence has influence in communication, because it does”

In addition, table five shows the responses of the respondents on the level of influence strategic communication has in interpersonal communication. 309 respondents representing 79.4% said it has much influence in interpersonal communication, 71 respondents constituting 18.3% said it has little influence, 7 respondents representing 1.8% indicated that strategic silence has no influence in interpersonal communication while 2 respondents went for the “can’t say” option. This indicates that strategic silence has much influence in interpersonal communication.

## 11. Conclusion

As earlier highlighted, strategic silence is indeed a very potent force in communication, including interpersonal communication. Therefore, its potential should be properly harnessed to enhance interpersonal relationships. When one is strategically silent on an issue that is very fundamental, such a person is no doubt sending a very strong message that is often taken very seriously.

## 12 Recommendations

In line with the findings of the study, the following recommendations were advanced:

- Though it was revealed that strategic silence plays both positive and negative roles, it is however recommended that its users should always deploy it for positive reasons.
- Strategic silence should be engaged to send non-verbal messages that will help aid interpersonal relationships.
- Future researchers should expand the scope beyond Enugu metropolis for an all encompassing result.
- Most importantly, researchers should explore the use of President Goodluck Jonathan’s use of strategic silence

in Nigerian political space. This, perhaps, will give the world a clue as to why he chooses silence during serious political issues.

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