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## **The communicative role of silence in Nzema language and culture**

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### **Abstract**

This paper looks at the role of silence within the Nzema speech community. Nzema is a Niger-Congo language of the Kwa language family spoken mainly in the South-western part of Ghana and some parts of the La Côte d'Ivoire both in West Africa. It consists of five main dialects namely; Jomoro, Ellembele, Ajomoro, Egila and Evaloe. The paper discusses linguistic and semiotic aspects of silence. It outlines the various communicative situations in Nzema society in which silence is employed, focusing cultural, social and linguistic aspects.

**Keywords:** silence, communication, interlocutors, semiotic, language

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### **1. Introduction**

In spite of the fact that the issue of language has been an important area of study by philosophers of many persuasions, this important facet of communication, namely silence, has largely gone unnoticed. Even when the phenomenon of silence has been noticed it has generally not been dealt with thematically (Dauenhauer, 1973) <sup>[2]</sup>. In their theory, "The Mathematical theory of Communication", Shannon and Weaver (1949) <sup>[10]</sup> stipulated that silence does not talk. This implies that, for some scholars of anthropology, speeches, as they come with words, are usually deemed most powerful than silence. This therefore raises questions such as; does silence show itself in technical discourse in the same way as it does in non-technical discourse? Does silence occur in questioning or commanding just as it does in declaring? These questions will be answered later with our Nzema data.

Where words do not come easily or when the speakers intentionally remain silent, silence may have different meanings to the listeners – ranging from acceptance to disapproval or scorn.

The range of the interpretations may vary from one culture to another as it is subjective and relative, which indicates that silence is both context specific and culture specific (Jaworski, 1993) <sup>[6]</sup>.

In the eastern cultures, silence is particularly appreciated and associated with several positive impressions in communication, while in the western culture, silence is usually avoided as it is regarded as a kind of social weakness or a sign of withholding and un-cooperative personality (Tannen, 1985) <sup>[11]</sup>, or as a manifestation of the speaker's lack of knowledge (Irvine, 1978, cited in Weiner et al., 2003: 29) <sup>[12]</sup>.

In most parts of Africa, the story is not different. Thus, silence though a universal phenomenon, may differ in usage from one community to another. In some societies, silence is preferred to speaking about unimportant matters. This work discusses

silence as an important facet of communication, even potent than a spoken word by outlining and discussing some communicative situations in Nzema society. It focuses on cultural, social and linguistic aspects.

### **2. Methodology**

We collected the data in this paper at two different places within the Nzema community; Dwɔmɔlɔ (Jomoro) and Evaloe (Evaloe) both in the Western Region. Most of them were collected through semi-structured interviews. Some of them were, however, collected from a variety of texts and from our own intuitive knowledge of Nzema folklore and philosophy.

### **3. Silence**

Silence can be defined as "the absence of talk" which contains communicative purposes (Sifianou, 1997: 63; Agyekum, 2002:1) <sup>[9, 1]</sup>. Agyekum (2002) describes silence as "an act of non-verbal communication that transmits many kinds of meaning, depending on cultural norms of interpretation." Ephratt (2008) <sup>[4]</sup> contends that silence must bear a communicative function, sometimes peculiar to the interlocutors and sometimes to the context and culture where it appears. Silence has been reported to have illocutionary force to perform a speech act that seems to exist universally, naturally displaying cultural variance (Sifianou, 1997, Agyekum, 2002, Nakane, 2007, Ephratt 2008) <sup>[9, 1, 8, 4]</sup>.

Silence, therefore is both communicative and functional. That is to say, silence has pragmatic uses. Perhaps the best way to approach silence is to consider some of the functions it might serve or the meanings it may communicate (De Vito, 1989) <sup>[3]</sup>.

#### **3.1 Functions / Importance of Silence**

There has been a good deal of research on functions of silence from different perspectives in intercultural communication. Nakane (2005) <sup>[8]</sup> summarizes the functions of silence under the

headings of cognitive, discursive, social, and affective functions. Gally (2014) <sup>[5]</sup> however gives the following as some importance of silence in communication:

- Leaves room in the conversation to allow others to share.
- Lets others complete their thoughts without rushing.
- Makes people feel their perspective is valued.
- Improves people's perception of you.
- Allows you to hear what others are saying.
- Allows you to actually consider and think about others perspectives.
- Allows you to observe others and catch non-verbal cues.
- Allows you to organize your thoughts and emphasize one point or another.

Gally's view actually reflects instances of silence among the Nzema. In the Nzema judicial system for instance, one does not just talk when asked a question. The jury would ask him or her to think about what he is about to say. To do this, he has to employ silence. Thus, silence gives room for self reorganization and conceptualisation.

#### 4. Parameters of silence in Nzema

In this section, we discuss two types of silence which are also discussed in Agyekum (2002).

One deals with 'giving up on words' (which is deliberate or intentional) that is, behavioural, rhetorical and performative. The other type of silence is semiotic in that words are transferred into symbols and visual icons.

As is the case of Akan, Nzema also has certain expressions used to indicate communicative silence some of which are as follows:

- Menle edweke menga, 'I have nothing to say'.
- Me kosoe, kosoe wo me ti anu, 'My intentions are in my mind'.
- Mese hmm, 'I say hmm'.
- Menrepili wo, 'I will not mind you'.
- O muala le kpale 'It is all right'.
- Me sa la me nloa, 'My finger is on my lips'.
- Meye koonwu, 'I have been quite'.

All the above expressions can be used in situations where the speaker refuses to speak. In some instances, however, silence can be seen as evidence of powerlessness. If a speaker says *menrepili wo*, 'I will not mind you', it implies that the speaker has become so fed up and powerless in the situation that s/he deems it better to keep quiet (especially during heated argument). Some instances of silence are also used to avoid expressing anger when the interlocutor feels that any "emotional" utterance would be offensive (Jaworski, 1997) <sup>[6]</sup>.

#### 4.1 Traditionally formulated silence

Among the Nzema, there are clues to culturally defined connotative meanings of silence which may be found in proverbs and common adages. Examples include:

- a. Beleka akosa beamaa wo a entafe kate nwo, 'When they are serving you porridge you do not lick the laddle'.
- b. Beleka elene bearava wo a enwudwu azule ne, 'When the canoe is coming to pick you at the bank, you need not to swim'.

- c. Beledi belahela edweke a atoafunli embua bie, 'When discussing issues relating to infidelity, the impotent keeps mute'.

These expressions emphasize that there is much in silence and that silence is the weapon to victory. Many cultures in the world deem silence as an important aspect of communication and believe that words can contaminate an experience, or that inner peace and wisdom come only through silence. Agyekum (2002) says that among the Buddhists "one of its tenets is that words are deceptive and silent intuition is a truer way to confront the world; mind-to-mind communication through words is less reliable than heart-to-heart communication through an intuitive grasp of things."

Among the Nzema, it would be impudence on the part of a child to interrupt the elderly. Children learn the essence of silence through some traditional media of education like proverbs, riddles, folktales, etc. Even though the Nzema lays much value on oratory and rhetoric, there are certain situations where they compel children to keep quiet. This normally occurs when adults are discussing issues that relate to verbal taboos or supernatural powers.

Children who are able to remain silent while adults talk, are praised but talkative children are rebuked. In fact, any parent whose children join in the conversation of adults is normally blamed as not having trained his/her children well. This implies that knowing when and where to keep silent is part of the socialisation process among the Nzema. It also shows one's level of communicative competence in the Nzema language and culture.

Among the Nzema, even when people are eating or bathing, cultural beliefs and practices require them to keep quiet. It is believed that if they talk, their fathers or mothers would die. This, scientifically, is to avoid choking on food while eating and swallowing lather while bathing.

A pregnant woman who is confronted in attempt to engage in a quarrel is bound not to even utter a word. This protects her from both physical and spiritual harm.

According to Nzema tradition, a married woman is not permitted to engage in talks with any man apart from her husband. This is done to curb issues of infidelity.

#### 4.2 Funeral and Widowhood rites

Among the Nzema, a widow is not expected to accompany her late husband to the cemetery, but if she does, she will have to be silent until she reaches home. It is believed that if she talks she would be talkative for the rest of her life. Furthermore, after observing the widowhood rite for a year, she goes to bathe herself in the sea (or any large river). On her way home, palm leaf is put in her mouth and she is to be silent until she gets home. Even at home, she will have to take her normal bathe and wash her cloths before talking to people in the house. This would mean a total separation between her and her late husband.

#### 4.3 Festivities

During Kundum festival, a week ban is put on noise and sound making. This week ban is termed 'Siedu'. It is the period during which rituals are performed and general preparation is made in wait for the grand occasion. The ancestors are believed to be in

town during this period and therefore any noise whatsoever would drive them away.

#### **4.4 Silence in times of borrowing and lending**

Among the Nzema, a person who borrows money from a money lender, normally uses persuasive language and sugar coated words in a bid to convince the rich person to consider his or her predicament and give him/her money. In most cases, the money lender would sit for a longer period without talking; only listening to the borrower. All this while, the lender would be discussing with himself in his mind whether to give or not to give out the money. After listening to the borrower, the lender may in a sentence just say s/he hasn't got money. The lender thus used silence to weigh the words of the borrower before making a decision.

Silence is also observed when a debtor has broken the contract on the repayment of a debt. In this case, the creditor may go to the debtor and compel her/him to pay back the money. Since the debtor has not got the money to pay the creditor s/he must be silent. The silence communicates that s/he cannot challenge the creditor. S/he must appeal through an intermediary to appeal on his/her behalf for a postponement or cancellation of the debt. On the other hand, if s/he has got the money ready then s/he may reply to the insults and instantly pay the debt.

#### **4.5 Silence during an emergency**

Among the Nzema, a person going to use the toilet need not to speak with anyone. He or she may disgrace his or herself in the process. To avoid such a misfortune, it is best keeping silent. The silence communicates to others the state of the person as requiring urgency.

Another occasion for silence is when a thief is spotted in the act of stealing and he is at a distance. The observer would have to employ silence in order to have the thief caught. If he tried to make a little sound, the thief would by no means run away.

#### **4.6 Silence as a medium of punishment**

It is a common practice among the Nzema to use silence as a weapon to hurt others. We often speak of giving someone "the silent treatment." After a conflict, for example, one or both individuals might remain silent as a kind of punishment. Children often imitate their parents in this and refuse to talk to playmates when they are angry with them. Silence to hurt others may also take the form of refusing to acknowledge the presence of another person as in disconfirmation; here silence is a dramatic demonstration of the total indifference one person feels toward the other. It is a refusal to recognize the person as a person, a refusal to treat the person any differently than one would treat an inanimate object.

#### **4.7 Silence as a means of escape**

Among the Nzema, especially the married men, usually use silence to prevent verbal communication of certain messages. During a quarrel, the men sometimes use silence to prevent certain topics from surfacing in order to save themselves from saying things they may later regret. The point is that verbal expressions can never be reversed; once said, something cannot be unsaid. Thus, silence often allows us time to cool off before

uttering expressions of hatred, severe criticism, or personal attacks, and here it serves us to good advantage. Silence may be used to prevent one from saying the wrong thing or from making a fool of oneself as the popular Latin proverb admonishes, "Keep quiet and people will think you a philosopher."

### **5. Semiotic silence**

This section looks at other forms of eloquent silence that are manifested in non-verbal contexts but that are symbolic. Semiotic silence is more or less an alternative language, where the message is presented in the form of a traditional symbol instead of the spoken word.

In the semiotic view, the orator does not make a speech but relies entirely on the rhetoric of the visual icon and the addressee decodes it (Agyekum, 2002). Let us examine a few of the semiotics in the context of the Nzema.

#### **5.1 Plantain sucker planted on an uncultivated land.**

A simpler means of warning people from directly or indirectly taking portions of lands belonging to others among the Nzema, is by planting a plantain sucker on the land. The landowner will not necessarily have to spend time looking for the culprit to exchange words with him or her. The planted plantain sucker communicates, 'don't come here again' to the culprit. However, if the suspected culprit feels he or she is the rightful owner of the land, then s/he has to look for the other person and sort things out with him or her. Lest s/he has to quietly and quickly leave the land. The plantain sucker signals warning to encroachers.

#### **5.2 Two sticks of broom with unequal length**

Among the Nzema, when two people say, A and B are in a struggle over something, be it a piece of land or a property of any kind over a period of time and one of the two parties, say A comes to B with two sticks of broom with unequal length, it communicates a serious warning to the other party, B. This mere icon sends a powerful message to the other contender, B. The symbol simply interprets, 'do you wish to live long or just want to die untimely?' If B feels so powerful to challenge A, s/he will present same to A and the struggle will keep on without exchange of words.

#### **5.3 A heap of sand**

Among the Nzema, when an owner of say firewood observes that his or her contemporaries are secretly taking away some of the firewood especially when they are not tied into bundles, s/he simply puts on the firewood sand. This communicates to the culprits not to come near the firewood. It deters them from stealing the firewood. The owner need not make an announcement.

#### **5.4 A mark on a wood or palm fruit**

When a farmer goes to farm and as s/he tries to cut a palm fruit, s/he sees marks on the palm fruit, s/he will have to humbly stop and go to a different tree. The marks tell him or her that someone has already identified it and would later come and cut it. The same hold for a mark on a wood. If the second farmer

refuses to comply by the message, the first can sue him or her when s/he is discovered.

### **5.5 Red and black colour**

Among the Nzema just as in Akan and some other Ghanaian cultures, colour communicates much than an open speech. Black symbolises vice, deep feelings of melancholy, and death. Red is used on occasions of melancholy, death of relatives, wars, etc. It implies that the colour of the cloth worn by a person may communicate the situation s/he finds her/himself.

### **6. Conclusion**

To answer the introductory questions, it has come to light from the discussions that indeed silence show itself in technical discourse in the same way as it does in non-technical discourse. Furthermore, silence does occur in questioning or commanding just as it does in declaring. It has also been emphasized that silence is a clear manifestation of indirection. It is a way of communicating without speaking. Like all forms of indirection it may involve a face-saving mechanism and the user is free to do so without committing crime. In a nutshell, it has been shown that in Nzema speech community, silence actually speaks and even potent than a spoken word.

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