THE COMMUNICATIVE ROLE OF SILENCE IN AKAN

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Abstract

This paper looks at the meaning of silence within the Akan speech community. It discusses two types of silence (1) *performative silence* and (2) *semiotic silence*. The positive attributes of silence as a communicative strategy will be explored.

The paper outlines the various communicative situations in Akan society in which silence is employed, highlighting religious, social and linguistic aspects. Attention is drawn to indigenous expressions to describe silence. In passing, I will also compare the Akan data with other African societies and cultures outside Africa. The paper finally discusses silence vs. talk, silence and gender, and the acquisition of silence as a form of socialisation and communicative competence.

Keywords: Silence, Communicative interaction, Interlocutors, Indirection

0. Introduction

Though silence could simply be defined as the absence of talk/speech, it constitutes a whole realm of communication with its own features, components and variety of forms. Using examples from Akan, I will be looking at silence from a socio-pragmatic point of view where silence has social and rhetorical effect, carries meaning, and has communicative functions. Bonvillain (1993: 47) rightly defines silence as “an act of non-verbal communication that transmits many kinds of meaning, depending on cultural norms of interpretation.” Silence conveys meanings just like other forms of communication. This conflict may arise whenever silence is misunderstood.

Silence can indeed be a powerful message and can send non-verbal cues about the communicative situations in which participants operate.¹ Since the addressee has

¹ In depicting the co-operative aspect of silence, Wardhaugh (1985: 51) states that one can generally exercise the right to speak or to be silent. Even when two or more people are gathered in a situation in which communication seems necessary and one person attempts to initiate a conversation but the others refuse, you cannot say that there was absolutely no communication. The refusal to converse is itself a form of communication. Somebody who refuses to participate or who withdraws after initial participation is, consciously or unconsciously, making a statement.

a choice between speech and silence, silence has meaning and it is also functional (see Kurzon 1995: 56; Nida 1984: 3-4; Samovar and Porter 1995: 210-212). Its meaning is interpreted according to the situation, cultural norms, the participants involved, their individual traits, and the bystanders. It is created and used by interlocutors in a speech community. Silence has functions and there are causes of silence.² It is not a passive element in communication: A participant in a communicative situation who refuses to talk must not generally be considered a passive participant. S/he may decide to “give up on words” in a conscious attempt to communicate indirectly.

Silence as part of communicative interaction can occur before, during or after a chunk of discourse. Sifianou (1997: 64) identifies two main types of silence in communication. The first is in the form of pauses and hesitations which occur within and between verbal turns, which may give the interlocutors time to think before their next contribution. The second consists of longer silences which acquire their meaning from their particular positions, length, etc. These are communicative silences that carry meaning and illocutionary force. This type of silence is usually produced consciously and may produce either positive or negative results. This is the type the Greeks describe as *evyloti slopi* “eloquent silence” (see Sifianou 1997: 65). This paper concentrates on such *eloquent silence*.

Tannen (1985: 97) considers that “Silence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness. If indirectness is a matter of saying one thing and meaning another, silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something.” Like all forms of indirection, silence may be a face-saving mechanism and it may be non-committal on the part of its user. Lebra (1987) explains that the Japanese hold in high regard those who communicate indirectly, implicitly, subtly and even non-verbally, trusting the listener’s empathy to fill in their meaning. They believe that only an insensitive and uncouth person needs a direct, verbal, complete language (see Tannen 1995: 96).

All cultures in the world practice some form of silence in their communicative interaction. It is a universal phenomenon, but its usage may differ from one community to another. In some societies silence is preferred to what is considered to be idle chatter. In others such idle chatter is positively evaluated as “phatic communion”, as communication for social interaction.³ According to Saville-Troike (1989: 146) “Silence as a communicative interaction can be one of the forms a ‘speech’ act may take: -filling many of the same functions and discourse slots [...] as a basic formational unit of linguistic communication.” Thus silence is communicative and functional. It carries illocutionary force and perlocutionary force and has pragmatic uses, meanings and

² Verschueren (1985) identifies eight causes of silence, as reflected in English and Dutch vocabulary to talk about silence.

³ Nida (1984) for example, states that in the Philippines, if a person telephones a television or radio repair establishment and asks for a tradesman to come out to make repairs, a hesitation of four to five seconds before responding means that the individual will not come, even though after the pause he may insist that he will come as soon as possible. Filipinos understand such communication perfectly well and simply proceed to call up someone else, who, if one responds immediately, will normally arrive as promised.

impact.

This paper discusses two types of silence. One deals with ‘giving up on words’ and is **behavioural, rhetorical and performative**. The other type of silence (dealt with briefly in section 4.) is **semiotic** in that words are transferred into symbols and visual icons.

I collected the data in this paper at different places within the Akan community, generally from the Ashanti Region. Most of them were collected in natural encounters by participant observation. Some of them were, however, collected from newspapers. In the data, I describe the setting of the encounter in terms of time and space, present the participants and give the background of the encounter. I also collected some maxims on silence from a variety of texts and from my own intuitive knowledge of Akan folklore and philosophy.

1. Indigenous Akan concepts of silence

Among the Akan, there are certain expressions that are used to indicate communicative silence. We will meet some of them in the communicative encounters later in this paper. They include the following;

- (1) *Menka hwee/menni hwee ka*, ‘I will not utter a word’,
- (2) *Menni asɛm biara meka*, ‘I have nothing to say’,
- (3) *Menni ho bi*, ‘I have no response or explanation to this’,
- (4) *Memmuwa wo*, ‘I will not mind you’
- (5) *Memmue m’ano*, ‘I will not open my mouth’,
- (6) *Mente ntasuo*, ‘I will not even spit’,
- (7) *Mese hmm* ‘I say hmm’.
- (8) *Me kosɛkosɛ wɔ me tirim* ‘My intentions are in my mind’,
- (9) *Mayɛ komm*, ‘I have been quiet’,
- (10) *Mede me nsa bɛto m’ano na mayɛ dinn*. ‘I will keep mute with my fingers on my lips’.

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 (see also Tannen 1994). If a speaker says *memmue m’ano*, ‘I will not open my mouth’, then s/he has become so fed up and powerless in the situation that s/he deems it better to keep quiet. Some of the above expressions are also used to avoid expressing anger when the interlocutor feels that any “emotional” utterance would be offensive (see also Jaworski 1997: 391)

2. The communicative role of silence in Akan: Eloquent silence

This section explores the major functions of silence in communication. The next section outlines the various situations where silence is used among the Akan. Silence has two

major roles in Akan namely (i) *an eloquent role* and (ii) *a negative role*, but the focus of this paper is on eloquent silence.

Silence not only structures communication but acts as an integral part of the cultural framework. It serves to organise and regulate the social relationships among members of the Akan speech community with regards to position, status, gender, and age. (see also Saville-Troike 1985: 4).⁴ Thus one of the most common uses of silence is to express reverence, love, or awe (Maltz 1985). Silence may also serve as a feedback mechanism to inform both the speaker and the addressee about the clarity of an idea or the overall significance of an interpersonal encounter. Silence may be used to check or suppress pent-up emotions. As a feedback mechanism, silence may indicate agreement in an ongoing encounter, a lack of interest, or a manifestation of injured feelings or contempt.

Though silence is considered negative in certain situations, it happens that in societies like Akan, Igbo, Western Apache, Hebrew, Greek and many others, the ideal thing to be done by a communicative participant is to keep quiet and silence is rather the norm. Basso (1972: 71-79) states that “among the Western Apache, silence is the norm in situations of ambiguity or uncertainty in relations. They are silent on meeting strangers, whether these are fellow Western Apaches or complete outsiders; and strangers, too, are expected to be silent.”⁵ Among the Akan, social values and norms and people’s attitudes are in some cases tied to the amount of talk vs. silence that is prescribed according to who is speaking, to whom, when, where and for what purpose. Such situations include encounters between strangers, initial courtship, borrowing, greeting people who have been away for an extended period, and reactions to anger. (We shall review these factors later in this paper.)

In the theory of politeness, to remain silent is the most polite strategy for handling face-threatening acts. If the speaker remains silent the potentially threatening act is not just mitigated but avoided altogether. In a certain context it may be appropriate to remain silent instead of saying something negative which might hurt the interlocutor and which might be very difficult to retract. The only problem with silence in such an encounter is that since silence carries a high degree of indirection and ambiguity, it becomes very difficult for the other participant to know what is going on in the interlocutor’s mind. Notwithstanding, many Native American groups believe that silence, not speaking, is a sign of a great person. Johansen (1974) notes that some Native Americans believe that “one derives from silence the cornerstone of character, the virtues of self-control, courage, patience, and dignity.” They believe further that

⁴ Samovar and Porter (1995: 210-212) outline some of the important aspects of silence in communication and point out that “Silence 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.”

⁵ Similarly, Wardhaugh (1922) records that the Danes appreciate silence. They are able to sit in each other’s presence for long periods of time without feeling any need to talk and they find visitors who insist on talking constantly too demanding. They feel no urge to fill up silence with idle chatter.

silence, not speaking, is a sign of a great person. This implies that silence is cherished in a communicative encounter. The example in Case 1 below highlights such a situation.

Case 1.

Venue: Assisiriwa (Ashanti Region)

Date: October 1998

Participants: A 33 year old woman and her sister.

Background of the case

A woman aged 33 from Assisiriwa in the Ashanti Region of Ghana went to the street one day and heard that some other women of her age were saying nasty things about her. According to her she became tongue-tied and could not speak. The following indicates how she reacted to the situation when she came home and had a chat with her sister. I was fortunate to be in the house so I recorded the encounter.

T1: A: *Metee asɛm no me bo fui yie.* 'When I heard the news I was furious.'

T 2: B: *Woyɛɛ deɛn?* 'What did you do?'

T 3: A: *Asɛm no mee me nti na menhunu nea menka.* 'My belly was filled by the matter so I did not know what to say.'

T 4: B: *Enti deɛn pa ara na woyɛɛ?* 'What did you actually do?'

T 5: A: *Megyee ahomekoko guu so sei ara hmm!* 'I sighed over it and just responded hmm!'

The first sentence (T1) indicates a natural response and reaction to a provocative stimulus. It is natural for one to become angry when certain invectives have been hurled at her to denigrate her. In T3, the statements from the perpetrators are conceptualised as some sort of food that has the ability to fill the stomach. This implies that like food there is a satisfaction or dissatisfaction in the outcome of an utterance. The perlocutionary effect of an utterance may be a psychological impact on the addressee. In the present situation, it was a negative 'filled-up' and she was so provoked that she could not utter a word. She was in actual fact baffled. The point is why should those women goad her? Why should that happen on the street where other people could hear about it?

The last sentence (T5) indicates the reaction to the illocutionary force of the utterance and this was done by sighing over the issue and saying *hmm*. It is this last sentence that incorporates the silence that averted the trouble or conflict that could have ensued.

Among the Akan, silence is also deemed effective and eloquent if it is used in place of a disharmonious utterance which can provoke anger, confusion, or lead to a disaster or even to an arrest or killing (see Tannen 1985).

Silence may be effectively used as a gesture of respect and deference to persons of authority, age or wisdom as in the dialogue below between two peer group members.

Case 2:

Venue: Kokofu Edwinase (Ashanti Region)

Date: 25th of September 1999

Participants: A 28 year old man and his friend

Background of the case:

A 28 year old man from Kokofu Edwinase in Ashanti Region attended a funeral of a citizen from the same village. The funeral was held in Kumasi, the capital of the Ashanti region, on the 25th of September 1999. An old man of about 65 also from the same village got drunk at the funeral and in an encounter insulted this young man without any reason. The people around did not understand the behaviour of the old man and accused him for the misdemeanour. After the funeral, a friend of the 28 year old man who was not at the funeral to witness all that went on and rather heard it from others was amazed about the whole incident. The following dialogue ensued between them.

T1 A: *Kwame na wo ampa ara na eɔda no wammue w'ano yi?*

'Kwame, how come you of all people did not utter a word that day'.

T2: B: *Hmm! Mese Kwadwo! eɔda no sɛnea na asɛm no amee me no...*

'Hmm! I tell you on that day, how I was dumbfounded by the issue...

T3: A: *Na asɛm bɛn nko ara? 'But what was really the matter?'*

T4: B: *Mekaa sɛ anka merebue m'ano a anka nea ebɛba nyɛ.*

'If I had attempted to utter a word, the result would have been very terrible.'

T5: A: *Enti woyɛɛ dɛn? 'So what did you do?'*

T6: B: *Mante ntasuo koraa anto fam. Na mebu papa no ɛ; enti na mempɛ sɛ m'ano bɛɛn'anom. 'I did not even spit on the ground. I respected the man so much that I did not want to exchange words with him.'*

T7: A: *Wo ampa ara na wotumi yɛɛkoma wankasa? 'Were you of all people able to keep mute without talking?'*

T8: B: *Mese wo. Saa da no Onyame maa me aboter ɛ sɛ. Mankasa koraa. Mebuee m'ano a anka nsɛm a ebɛfiri m'anom aba no nyɛ.*

'I tell you! That day God gave me extra patience. I did not talk at all. If I had opened my mouth what would have come out would not have been good.'

In T1, A's statement implies that B is not a person who is so tolerant as to keep quiet on such an occasion. This is inferred from the statement "*how come you of all people did not utter a word that day*". It implies that A would have expected B to react. In T2 and T4, B explains why he did not react on that occasion since that would have brought conflict between them. When A wants to find out what B exactly did, B comes out with T6 and T8 which indicate forms of silence. In T6 we meet the hyperbole *Mante ntasuo koraa anto fam* "I did not even spit on the ground" to indicate the nature of the silence. In Akan, people feel that talking is accompanied by some saliva. If one refuses to spit it means one did not utter a word.

In T8, B attributes the patience and the tolerance which led to the silence to some divine intervention. T6 and T8 portray the cultural respect for old age. The last

expression by B confirms the old maxim in English which Tannen (1985: 94) reminds us of, that “if you cannot say something nice, don’t say anything”.

Silence can also be considered effective if it represents something positive which shows that people understand each other without putting their thoughts into words. In such a situation, the contextual background is so obvious to the listener that the meaning can be implicitly inferred even from the silence.

Case 3:

Venue: Kumase: Dompouse

Date: November 1997

Participants: Akua and Ama

Background of the case

In November 1997, a woman bought bags of maize from two friends, Akua and Ama. The woman failed to pay back the money for the maize. Akua went on a trip and asked Ama to try to collect the money. Ama hunted for the debtor several times but all to no avail. Akua came back from her trip and realised that the money had not been paid yet. The two ladies did not understand why, as veterans in the trade, they had let themselves be defrauded in such a manner. In February 1998, the money had not yet been paid. The following dialogue ensued between them about the trickster.

T1 Akua: *Na asɛm no baa no sɛn?* ‘How did it happen at all?’

T2 Ama: *Wo nua gye w’ahome. Nyɛ me a, na asɛm no o ...*

‘My sister, you just relax. Akua it was really not my fault o, but the issue itself...’

T3 Akua: *Mese nha wo ho nkasa pii na me ara menim nea woreka no nyinaa.*

Nyɛ me ade foforɔ. ‘You need not worry talking about the issue. I know all that you are talking about. It is not new to me.’

T4 Ama: *’ɔbaa no atɔ aburoo no de adwane o. Mese mente asɛ koraa*

‘The woman has bought the maize and has run off with the money. I just do not understand.’

T5: *Akua: Adɛn na woreha wo ho ama w’anom ntasuo nyinaa awe yi? Mate*

ne nka dada. ‘Why are you worrying yourself to dry up all the saliva in your mouth. I have heard about the woman already.’

T6: *Ama: —ɛbɛyɛ sɛ ɔde aduro bi na ayɛ yɛn.* ‘I am sure she has charmed us with magic.’

T7 Akua : *Saa na ɛteɛ deɛ a ɛnneɛ mmɔ so koraa.,* ‘If that is the case then do not utter a word at all.’

In T2, Ama is dumbfounded by the situation and could not finish her statement and remarked that “Akua it was really not my fault o, but the issue itself ...” The ellipsis indicated by the dots can be filled with any issue related to the purchase of the maize and the fraud. Since Akua was very much aware of the fact, she consoled her by coming out with T3, T5, and T7. The persuasive expressions by Akua admonish Ama not to worry herself by narrating the whole incident. Silence in this encounter,

therefore, saves the reminiscence of the nasty incident which has now become more or less a taboo for Ama. The silence also shows the positive interpersonal relationship between the two. Akua's expressions in her last three turns (T 3, T5, and T 7) also show she cares for Ama. The expressions also avoid a face threat and provide relief from psychological pain. Ama would have been in distress if Akua had decided to blame her for not trying to get the money back.

Silence can also be used in situations where the event is delicate but so obvious to all participants that if one starts talking and then keeps mute, the others are able to understand the rest. Let us consider an example in one of the private newspapers in Ghana.

Case 4

Source: *The Ghanaian Chronicle* (Page 3)

Date: 2nd-8th May 1997

Steve Biko, a columnist of *The Ghanaian Chronicle* (2nd-8th May 1997 Page 3) reports as follows "Ghana as a nation finds itself in a situation where the political wounds among the people seem to be healed. The wounds are not healed. People have kept mute for obvious reasons, but they have not forgotten. Like a mound of cow-dung, the top is dry but beneath this pleasant dryness, *hmm*."

In this issue, the paper was referring to the Provisional National Defence Council (PNDC) government of 1979, 1981-1992, which executed many army officers and civilians without trial, and also confiscated people's goods and properties. These victims were charged with corruption, embezzlement of state funds, and the illegal acquisition of wealth, but the then National Democratic Congress (NDC) government officials were doing worse things. Interestingly, It was the same leader of the PNDC military government who had metamorphosed himself to be the elected head of state in the NDC (1992-2000) civilian government. The writer proposes that the people have not forgotten these events and are eager to retaliate anytime the opportunity arises. Since every adult Ghanaian is familiar with these events the writer just used the expression "the top is dry but beneath this pleasant dryness, *hmm*." The expression *hmm*, representing silence, can mean a lot; what it represents is too obvious to be narrated. Here, the event is too delicate for the writer to narrate all the incidents that would criticise the then ruling government.

3. Situations demanding eloquent silence

This section discusses the various kinds of situations that demand the use of silence in communicative acts among the Akan. The need for silence in these communicative encounters implies that silence is effective. We are dealing with eloquent silence since each instance has a communicative function (see Kurzon 1995: 58-65). I will consider some Akan expressions that indicate the need for silence.

3.1. *Silence as social control*

In Akan, positive silence can be employed as an agent for social and moral control. It may be used as a form of punishment for people who violate socio-cultural norms. It is considered effective because it serves as a deterrent for future violators. One of the most uncomfortable situations for any Akan is everybody refusing to talk to her/him. Punishment of a miscreant is achieved by group silence. It is possible for all members of a household to refuse to talk to a person who has shown some aspects of immorality, misconduct or disrespect.

In the traditional Akan set-up, a young lady who is pregnant before her puberty rites is punished by a ritual called *kyiribra* (lit) 'one who taboos life'. As part of the *kyiribra* ritual the man who impregnated her and the lady herself are ostracised into a forest. They have to stay there alone till the woman gives birth. During this period of banishment, their clan members are requested by Akan law to refrain from talking to them.

We can see, therefore, that in the traditional life of communal interdependence, such reactions which isolate people from communicating with other members of the society lead quickly to corrections and restitutions. In this vein silence was enshrined in the Akan traditional codes of morality and values.

Silence, moreover, is the communicative marker of some types of relationship within Akan society. These include one's mother-in-law or father-in-law. Scarcely does one party talk to the other. The wife or husband feels shy in talking to *nsew* 'the in-laws', i. e. the parents of one's partner. These categories of people normally prefer to remain silent during communicative encounters (cf Agyekum 1996: 145-151).

3.2. *Institutionally determined silence*

In this section, we discuss some types of silence which are institutionalised in Akan culture. Within these institutions, there are specific areas where silence rather than speech is the norm and carries a communicative function.

3.2.1. Death and bereavement

In Akan, when there is bereavement or when a very grievous mishap hits a family, people are overpowered and almost physically weighed down by the event. To this effect, people who come to sympathise or mourn with the bereaved are not supposed to increase or sharpen the grief of the bereaved by any verbal reference to the event.

Mourners can stay for hours without talking to the bereaved. The Akans believe that in narrating the incident the mental and psychological pain would be evoked. In most cases the bereaved is so shocked by the event that any attempt to narrate it might bring about tears. In situations where the mourner wants to enquire about the incident s/he would have to preface it with a toning-down expression *menkae wo yaw* 'I do not seek to evoke pains in you'.

Nwoye (1985: 186) cites a very extreme example among the Igbos of Nigeria where four days after death in a household, villagers show sympathy by entering the house, standing in silence in front of bereaved family members, sitting silently for a period and again presenting themselves to mourners before departing. Apart from registering their physical presence the sympathisers have further shown that they had no hand in the death of the person.

In actual fact, one's physical presence at the funeral indicates grief and sympathy. It communicates that one shares the loss of the beloved or the agony of the person who is in trouble. Furthermore, since the community is a small one it is assumed that everyone knows what has happened. It would, therefore, be superfluous to talk about it.

Silence also manifests itself in widowhood rites. If a woman accompanies her late husband to the cemetery she is not allowed to talk when returning from the cemetery. It is believed that if she talks she would be talkative for the rest of her life. A woman who talks too much is referred to as *ɔbaa akok inini* 'a woman-cock'. (See details below of a talkative woman under silence and gender in section 1.7.)

3.2.2. Religion and rituals

In Akan, silence is the norm in ritual endeavours, including sacrifices and consultation with ancestral spirits and supernaturals. Silence is used in many ritual practices and contexts to express reverence, awe, or respect. In these contexts, silence marks the occasion's solemnity and signals the detachment of participants from normal routines. In these ritual contexts, silence may be considered as the conventional mode for achieving the communicative goals and accomplishing the objectives of aspects of the ritual.⁶

During the pouring of libation in Akan as a form of prayer, the audience is supposed to keep quiet and observe some amount and degree of silence. It is only the *ɔkyeame* 'the chief's spokesman' who talks as he pours down the liquor. He is supported by the epicentre, who comes with supportives *wiɛ, wiɛ* while the others just keep mute while still participating in the communicative event.

In puberty rites, when all the rituals have been performed, a day is set aside where the lady comes out publicly with her entourage of ladies to greet all the people in the village and to render her gratitude for their services and gifts to her. The lady puts a chewing stick in her mouth but she is not supposed to bite it. At the same time she is prevented from talking to anybody. It is the other ladies who do the talking and respond on her behalf.

At the Akan shrines of worship, attendants and worshippers must be silent. It is believed (among all religious sectors) that the spirit of God and the deities can normally

⁶ Bauman (1983: 23) notes that in Quaker worship silence is not merely a passive act marked by the absence of other verbal activity, but rather is a highly symbolic communicative act performed in a manner comparable to other speech acts. Similar instances have been recorded by Saville-Troike (1989: 148) and Nwoye (1985).

descend in the period of quietness. In ritual contexts, silence may be the utmost medium that can be used to achieve the communicative goal. Szuchewycz (1997: 241) in dealing with silence and ritual communications states that “silence has come to play a crucial role in the realisation of the charismatic model of communication, for it is in silence that members experience ‘the presence of God’ and are able to listen to what it is that God wishes to communicate.” This particular role is underscored throughout the paper. The type of spiritual communicative goal must be differentiated from cases where noise is expected to invoke the spirit which is deemed to have been sleeping, hence the beating of drums and the ringing of bells, the playing of trumpets, etc. (as happens in some shrines and mostly among Pentecostals).

The silence at the traditional shrines is similar to invocation in the Christian liturgy “The Lord is in His holy temple; let all the earth keep silence before Him.” It happens that in most Akan shrines, the traditional priest, when possessed, speaks a spiritual language which can only be interpreted by his spokesman. The worshiper not being able to communicate with the priest would normally have to keep quiet. Neither can he pose any questions to the priest. Deliberations are, therefore, postponed until the end of the rituals.

Silence is also observed during certain prayers and divinations. The speaker may only mumble and add some gesticulations and not a single word is heard. In one type called water-gazing in parts of the Akan community, the sorcerer only looks at the water in a calabash and then interprets the symbols that come out without talking himself. The same thing goes with the tossing of cowry shells and kola as forms of divination. Absolute silence is a prerequisite for the efficacy of rituals and sacrifices and when silence is violated, the sacrifice is repeated and the offender has to make an additional sacrifice.

During certain festivals, a ban is put on noise and sound making. At Ajumako in the Fante land, a day is set aside during the Ahobaa festival and people are banned from playing music, using drums and singing. The *Ahobaa* festival is one earmarked to remember the dead ones so it is solemn and devoid of noise. In much the same way, a month before the *Homowo* festival of the Gas of Accra, the Ga Traditional Council places a ban on drumming in the Accra Metropolitan. Opoku (1970: 14) also records that “On the eighth *Awukudae* or Wednesday Aday, which is forty days before the Odwira festival, a ban is placed on all noise-making, singing, drumming and dancing, wailing and all noisy funerals and processions.” In much the same way, upon the death of the Asantehene, there is a ban on funerals and drumming and dancing for forty days. It is when the fortieth day anniversary of his death has been celebrated, that other people would get the opportunity to perform their funerals. The Asantehene Otumfo Opoku Ware died on the 25th of February 1999 and the fortieth day of his death was celebrated on the 5th of April. In between these two days there was a ban on noise making. The whole of the Asante state was in a solemn mood, hence the need for silence.

In some other festivals people carrying sacrifices to shrines may never speak or be spoken to. The idea is that the carrier is engaged in a spiritual talk and must be allowed to concentrate and meditate on that. S/he should, therefore, not be disturbed with any form of talk.

3.2.3. Silence at the palace

At the palace, silence is observed as a form of respect and reverence to the chief and the council of elders. People should show a greater amount of humility and one of the major manifestations of humility and reverence to traditional authorities is silence. Most of the talking at the palace is done by the *akyeame*, ‘the chiefs’ spokesmen’. As they talk all participants are to keep quiet. At the chiefs’ courts, litigants can be reprimanded, embarrassed or even insulted, but as custom demands, they have to keep silent as a sign of respect for the authority of the king and his elders. This situation of silence is very profound at the Asantehene’s and Asantehemma’s court in Kumasi. The other paramountcies in the Akan states like Akyem, Kwahu, Bono, Denkyira, Fante, etc. also do the same.

Silence should not be observed only by the subjects. The chief or the king himself may exercise a great amount of silence during deliberations and proceedings at the court. The king scarcely talks and his word is final. The king is the judge and he can only give fair judgement if and only if he has concentrated on the deliberations. There is, therefore, the expression *ɔhene nkasakasa basabasa* ‘the king does not talk at random’. At times the court crier called *ɔsen* instructs people to keep silent at the court.

It is also against Akan traditional norms for a king to reply to every statement made by his subjects. Some such statements, however, can be very provocative, but the king must be able to accommodate them. The king loses respect and is labelled as a talkative person if he responds to every statement. There is the expression *ɔpanin tirim na yɛhɔn akuma* ‘it is the elder’s head where the axe is disentangled’, and again *ɔpanin due mantemante* ‘the elder should presume not to have heard’. These expressions denote that silence is a form of communication within certain situations in Akan. Even though the elder might not talk, s/he is still considered part of the ongoing events. We must not assume that people are only communicating when they talk.

In all the situations cited above, including the initiation during puberty, chiefs and queen mothers speaking through Okyeame, silence has pragmatic implications, meanings and social roles, and marks the identity and personalities involved. Silence is used here as an index of power, authority, rank and status. The initiated, for example, is powerless. She is now initiated into adulthood and must therefore keep silent. If a king keeps quiet and does not respond directly to any utterance from his subjects he is using silence to distance himself. He does this to maintain his reverence and power and to avoid familiarity since familiarity breeds contempt.

3.2.4. Silence during courting in Akan

Among the Akan, it is very difficult to enter the house of one’s lover during the initial stages of courting, much less talk to her/him in the presence of her/his parents. It appears however, that in the Akan community, custom demands that it is the man who seeks the hand of the woman in marriage. In most cases, lovers would pretend to be very sober, modest and reticent in their behaviour and to be regarded garrulous is not a good thing. Initially, there seems to be shyness between the two lovers and this may even extend to their families. Lovers employ intermediaries locally parlanced as *mpenatamfo*

“betweeners” who do all the talking and carry messages on their behalf. It is only when the marriage has been contracted that formal talking begins. This practice of silence in courting is fast disappearing in modern-day Akan society.

4.2.5. Silence in times of borrowing

Among the Akan, a person who borrows money from a money lender, normally uses persuasive language in an attempt to woo and convince the rich person to see his/her plight and give him/her money. In most cases, the money lender would sit for a longer period without talking, only listening to the borrower. After listening to the poor, the rich person may in one sentence just say s/he hasn't got money.

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

4. Semiotic silence

This section looks at other forms of eloquent silence that are manifested in non-verbal contexts but that are found in Akan symbols. This is what I refer to as semiotic silence. Semiotic silence is a surrogate language, where the message is presented in the form of a traditional symbol in lieu of the spoken word (see Yankah 1995: 33). 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.

Speaker -----> Visual Icon -----> Addressee

Silence is thus placed in relation to communicative mediation where a message is passed from the speaker to the addressee through a third party. It is mediation and indirection meant to avoid face-to-face conflict and face-threatening acts.

Among the Akan, semiotic silence is embodied in artistic artefacts like wooden staffs, stools, cloth, and gold weights. These objects may advocate and comment on general perceptions, principles of behaviour, co-operation, an initiative, historical events and allusions, societal and religious norms, political and judicial elements of the Akan state quite clearly without words. They also represent popular proverbs, idioms, maxims and phrases. Proverbs are important ingredients of Akan oratory and indirection. There are non-verbal proverbs. These would be referred to in this paper as silent proverbs. These proverbs are represented in material forms of linguistic staffs, stools, jewellery, gold weights, traditional cloths, umbrella tops, modern wax prints, etc.

Like in all forms of indirection, there is a degree of ambiguity. Therefore some of the semiotic silence represented by symbols may represent more than one proverb

or interpretation. For example, the staff symbol of a thumb pointing upwards may mean one does not dispense with the thumb in tying a knot to refer to the indispensability of a chief or it may refer to the omnipotence of God through the Akan saying *gye Nyame* 'except God' (see Yankah 1995).

People well versed in the language and culture of Akan can however decode the message. These types of proverbs form one of the four types of Akan proverbs and they are called *abebude* (lit.) proverb things' to imply proverbs represented by objects. Let us look at the following.

(a) *Textiles*

Let us first look at the textile semiotics. Akan women use garments as a channel for the silent projection of arguments. Yankah (1995: 81) records that the use of garments as a mode of argument by women exists in most African cultures. It is found not only in Ghana, but also in Nigeria, Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania, Zaire and other African countries. It is also found in the Caribbean among the Paramaribo of Surinam (see Amory 1985).

Some of the modern Ghanaian cloths have the proverbs represented in design. There is a direct link between design and the associated names of the cloths, as found in a cloth with gravels which represent the proverb ' *Efie abosea twa wo a ɛsene abɔntene so de*. 'When the gravels from the house cut you it is more painful than gravels from outside'. The cloth is simply called *efie abosea* 'home gravels.' The proverb implies that people should be cautious even of close relatives and privy members. Your worst enemies are often your closest friends and relatives who know your vulnerable points and weaknesses.

There is another cloth with a staircase and it is called *owuo atwede* 'death's ladder'. The full proverb is *owuo atwede ɛ ɔbaako mforo* 'Death's ladder is not climbed by one person'. The proverb implies that death is there for everybody. Other cloths get their names from popular phrases, idioms, innuendoes, slogans, and satirical statements. They include *akyekyede ɛ akyi* 'shell of a tortoise'. The full proverbs, phrases and idioms are truncated and the key words are used as names for the cloths to help customers and salespersons to remember them well.

The silent codes in cloths are used mostly among rivals and they are used to negotiate conflicts between co-wives. It could be seen that silence is an effective mode of rhetoric among the Akan. Yankah (1995: 83), therefore claims that, "non-verbal channel like the cloth is a strategy in indirection, through the use of verbal metaphor-proverb." It is very effective because it is a non-violent and peaceful means of crisis management.

In the case of a popular traditional cloth called **adinkra** cloth, the designs are stamped whilst in **kente** the designs are woven or knitted. Apart from the designs, the colours of the cloth also communicate. The colour **yellow** represents royalty, continuous life, prosperity, warmth, glory, maturity, prime of life and the presence of God. The colour **white** represents purity, virtue, virginity, and joy. **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 in.

(b) Stools

Other non-verbal proverbs, phrases, idioms and innuendoes are found in stool carvings. They include examples like *obi-te –obi-so* ‘someone is sitting on another’. This stool is carved with the seat in the shape of a crescent and with one stool standing on top of the other. This implies the notion of hierarchy in Akan society among people, chiefs, towns and villages (see Sarpong 1971: 23-25).

In one of the stools used by the king of Asante, there is a middle portion with a circular rainbow which represents the proverb *kontonkurowi; Eda amansan kɔn mu* ‘the rainbow is around the neck of every nation’. It reminds the king that death is there for everybody. It also means that the king has power over everybody. The same emblem is seen on the staff of the Asantehene’s *okyeame* ‘spokesperson’.

There is another Asante stool with the symbol of the porcupine which shows the invincibility of the porcupine. This has been the national motto of the Asante state from time immemorial. The emblem represents the slogan Asante *Kɔtɔkɔ wokum apem a apem bɛba*. ‘Asante the porcupine, if you kill a thousand, a thousand more will come.’

Finally, there are the *ɛsono* ‘elephant’ and *ɔsebɔ* ‘leopard’ stools of the Asante King with a symbol of either the elephant or the leopard in the middle to symbolise the great powers of the king of Asante. These animals are the strongest and the most feared in Asante.

(c) Akyeamepoma ‘linguistic staffs’

The linguistic staffs are also embodied with gold or other precious metals with proverbial designs that convey a message. In Asante, there is one staff with the symbol *asɛmpa yɛtia* ‘a good case is argued in brief’ (see Yankah 1989: 99-100). It is a black staff covered with the skin of the monitor lizard and carrying no finial. According to Yankah (1989), this is reminiscent of the communicative principle of 18th century Quakers. It advocates brevity in speech and deliberations.

There is another staff with a man holding an egg and the interpretation is *ahennie te sɛkosua* ‘chieftancy is like an egg.’ It is fragile and should be taken with all the delicacy it deserves. The owner of the staff indicates that he wants peace with everybody. The owner is patient and a prudent person. The chief’s power is not absolute and should not lead to tyranny.

(d) Gold weights

There are silent proverbs and popular maxims on gold weights. They are meant to speak and remind people of some of the important principles and values of the society. For example, on a gold weight, there is a man with a pot in his hand while he smokes a pipe. It refers to the proverb, *yɛso atuduro koraa a yɛnom tawa* ‘we may smoke the pipe even while we carry gunpowder.’ It means that sometimes even in crisis one should still enjoy life and make fun.

A gold weight in the shape of two crocodiles with two heads and two tails but a single belly reminds the Akans that although they are one people, conflicts will never end. This is indicated by the two crocodiles who, even though they eat into the same belly, fight over the food, because each wants a taste. The weight symbolises **unity in**

diversity in every home, district, region, or nation. This indicates the structure of the Asante kingdom which is made up of different states coming together as a union (see Sarpong 1974: 101-104).

A careful look at the designs discussed above gives a better insight into the Akan philosophy, patterns of thought and behaviour. They are all forms of silence represented by visual icons. Their interpretation demands insight into the socio-cultural knowledge of the Akans.

6. Silence vs. talk

Among the Akan, there are clues to culturally defined connotative meanings of silence which may be found in proverbs and common adages. These expressions emphasize that there is much in silence. 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. Barnlund (1989) 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.” Irvine (1989: 169) records that among the Wolof, in an encounter people may omit other people on grounds of social status. A lower ranking person may not be greeted until more important people have been greeted. Communicative silence indicating the person’s status is manifested here. The Wolof also have a notion that the low-ranking person travels about more and talks more than the high-status person. The following are proverbs among the Japanese that underscore the essence of silence.

(11) *Out of the mouth comes evil.*

(12) *A flower does not speak.*

(13) *The mouth is to eat with, not to speak.* (see Samovar and Porter 1995: 211)

For the Japanese “silence is considered a virtue as well as a sign of respectability and trustworthiness.” The Japanese say, “*The nail that sticks out gets hammered back in.*”. It is therefore best to remain silent if you do not want to be hit on the head (see Tannen 1995: 96). Among the Greeks, even though rhetoric and oratory are cherished, people feel that talkativeness must be used in moderation. Similar proverbs prevail in the English language.

(14) *Silence is golden,*

(15) *Silence is consent,*

(16) *Too much talking indicates poverty of mind.* (See Sifianou 1997: 77)

We also find the essence of silence as recorded in the Bible.

(17) *He who guards his lips guards his life, but he who speaks rashly will come to ruin* (Proverbs 13: 3)

18) *When words are many, sin is not absent, he who holds his tongue is wise.*
(Proverbs 10: 19)

The Akans also have maxims that tally with the above in Japanese. They include

- (19) *Ahwenepa nkasa.* 'Precious beads do not jingle.'
- (20) *Anomaa kyɛkyɛwa na gye boɔ* 'It is the noisy bird that is hit by a stone.'
- (21) *Anobrɛbrɛ ma abaa tɔ.* 'Smooth mouth keeps the stick at bay'

In the above maxims, example (19) implies that any reasonable, honourable and dignified person does not talk nor brag too much. Example (20) implies that in keeping silent one saves himself and saves also precarious situations. The noisy bird will definitely be heard by the hunter and the result is very obvious. Example (21) implies that at a point when someone is very angry, it is better for the other party to meet her/him with silence and soft speech

6. Silence and gender

Among the Akan, formal and public speech is normally the prerogative of men. In many traditional Akan communicative encounters women scarcely talked; they were only expected to listen but not to talk. In the traditional vein, most decisions were taken by men and they affect the entire society. Sometimes at gatherings women had to appeal in order to be allowed to talk. In this context, silence is observed on the part of the women as part of the enactment of their subordinate status. Along these same gender roles in talking, wives in Akan are to keep mute before their husbands. A loquacious woman is not admired by Akan society. A woman who talks too much is referred to as *ɔbaa akokɔnini* 'a woman cock' and sometimes said to be a witch, and also disrespectful. There is the Akan adage *akokɔbereɛ nim adekyeɛ nso ɔhwɛ akokɔnini ano* 'the hen knows that it is dawn but it looks up to the mouth of the rooster to crow.' This implies that the talking should be done by the male (rooster). Reticence on the part of Akan women is highly admired and garrulous women are normally reproached. The culture of silence on the part of Akan women is fast changing with the advent of western education, politics, democracy and Christianity. The traditional view on women keeping silent before men recognized as sexist. These days Akan women are rubbing shoulders with men and in fact, some women are more loquacious than men.

The culture of women keeping quiet before men is not peculiar to only Akans; it happens in some cultures like the Birifor of Northern Ghana where the lips of women were perforated to prevent them from talking. Among the Auaracanian of Chile an ideal woman is supposed to keep quiet in the presence of the husband. The new bride entering the husband's house is supposed to face the wall and can only talk after several months. In Akan society, just as in the Christian doctrine, women are supposed to listen rather than being heard. The Apostle Paul wrote 'Let a woman learn silence with all submissiveness. I will permit no woman to teach or to have authority over man, she is to keep silent' (1 Timothy 2: 11-12).

Among the Akan, if the woman is bathing, she is not allowed to talk to a man. It is feared that in her nakedness in the bathroom the man may draw near to her in an attempt to hear what is being said and in the attempt may see her naked.

Although women are to keep quiet, there are avenues through which they can make their voices heard. They can do this through women's folk songs, other forms of indirection like folktales, proverbs, etc. Again in arbitration, when there is a stalemate and the jury goes into consultation behind closed doors they are said to go and consult *Aberewa* 'The Old Woman'. This reveals that the act of fair judgement resides in women. I see this aspect as a compensatory mechanism for the way Akan women are made to keep silent in certain social encounters.

7. The acquisition of silence as a form of socialisation and language training

Since silence is communicative and has its roles, its appropriate uses must be learned (see Wardhaugh 1992). The acquisition of silence is part of the Akan child's developing communicative competence. Among the Akan, children are given the necessary training on the use of silence in everyday encounters. It must be used to communicate respect, comfort, bereavement, support, disagreement, or uncertainty. The children are prohibited from saying or doing certain things, especially before adults. In certain situations, children are not allowed to express their views. Everything is decided for them by their parents. During certain conversations, the children may not even be in the vicinity, let alone participate in the conversation by talking. There is the Akan term *akokoa-gyae-ma-menka* (lit.) 'the conversational-monopolist little child/the talkative'. There is also the expression *abofra nyɛ peterepetere* 'the child should not be loquacious'. Children learn the essence of silence through some traditional media of education like proverbs, riddles, folktales, etc.

Although the Akan put much emphasis on oratory and rhetoric, there are certain situations where they compel children to keep quiet. These normally occur 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 and talkative children are scolded. 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 Akan. It also shows one's level of communicative competence in the Akan language and culture.

Among the Akan, even when children are eating, cultural beliefs and practices require them to keep quiet. It is believed that if they talk while eating, their fathers would die. This is to avoid choking on food while eating.

8. Conclusion

In this paper, we have looked at silence as a communicative channel among the Akan of Ghana. We concentrated on eloquent silence. Akan indigenous expressions and categories of silence portray the Akan concepts and uses of silence. They indicate that

silence is a communicative act: The speaker makes some reservations by withholding words.

The paper made some comparative comments on the use of eloquent silence, relating the uses and meanings of silence in Akan society to silence in other societies. We mentioned silence among the Wolofs, Igbos, Gas, Greeks, Jews, English, Japanese, Western Apache, Danes, Philippines, and among religious worshipers. In all mentioned societies, silence is meaningful and employed effectively in communication.

The meaning of silence is interpreted according to the socio-cultural norms of the society, the situation and the participants around. We have underscored that silence is a clear manifestation of indirection. It is a strategy for communicating without speaking. Like all forms of indirection it may involve a face-saving mechanism and it is non-committal on the part of its user.

The paper considered the communicative role of silence and concentrated on *eloquent silence*. In its effective role in communication, silence is rather the norm and the ideal tool to be employed in certain communicative situations among the Akan. Silence is effectively employed when the topic is particularly delicate, a taboo, or when the situation is emotionally loaded and the speaker is 'at a loss' for words. Silence is also used with regard to reverence, awe, bereavement and the expressions of extreme emotions.

Silence is employed in multi-institutionalised situations among the Akan as a form of social and moral control. It may be used as a form of punishment to some recalcitrant people who have violated certain traditional norms and traditions.

Both talk and silence have merits and demerits. We agree with Sifianou (1997: 77) that "it is not talk or silence as abstract entities which are valued, but the *amount*, the *content*, the *timing* and the *manner* in which talk and silence is produced." This implies that silence or talk is based on the ethnographic components of speaking and the degree and scale of their usage will make them eloquent or negative

Silence is so important that its acquisition is part of an Akan child's development of communicative competence, socialisation and acculturation. It could be gainfully said that silence is a form of communication which functions just like speech itself and which is thus something worth studying in ethnography and pragmatics.

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