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"...Anything Else?": An Examination of Prolonged Pauses in Classroom Discussion

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INTRODUCTION

In *The World of Silence*, author Max Picard notes, "Speech came out of silence, out of the fullness of silence…And in every silence there is something of the spoken word, as an abiding token of the power of silence to create speech" (qtd. in Shultz 5). In the linguistic field, silences are typically analyzed as units that divide utterances. However, silences can be viewed outside of this framework. In some cases, silences, particularly long silences, may be analyzed as independent utterances. The goal of this paper is to examine the role of silences as utterances within the context of a classroom discussion. Specifically, this paper will explore what role silences play in classroom discussions by examining how participants in a classroom discussion respond to silence as an utterance, what happens after said response, and what utterances initiate silence as a response.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In order to contextualize this research, one must first look at the previous scholarship on classroom structure, turn taking, and silence. Classroom discussions are a type of active learning, a learning structure designed to engage students, comprised of four basic elements: "talking and listening, writing, reading, and reflecting" (Meyers and Jones 19). Active learning heavily relies on the idea of active participation, which is traditionally defined as verbal response. However, throughout the literature, there was debate as to whether or not silence could be a form of active participation. In their book *Promoting Active Learning: Strategies for the College Classroom*, Chet Meyers and Thomas B. Jones argue that silence is not a form of participation, going so far as to say that silence can hinder the student's learning experience and the learning experiences of his or her classmates. However, in *Rethinking Classroom Participation: Listening to Silent Voices*, Katherine Shultz argues that silence is a form of engagement, specifically referring to it as a potential form of "active engagement" (Shultz 5). She suggests that silence, in addition to signaling active listening, "[signals] assent to an idea or a willingness to learn from others or through creating a space for another person to speak" (6-7). Both works state that speaking is essential to continuous discussion, though Shultz argues that silence creates a space for a variety of students to participate, while Meyers and Jones do not.

Shultz also comments on the lack of research on silence within the sociolinguistic field, noting that typically it is only examined as a boundary marker (15). However, there are some studies that examine silence outside of this definition. In particular, Shultz points to Muriel Saville-Troike's article "The place of silence in an integrated theory of communication," which suggests that

there is a clear distinction between "silence when no communication occurs and silence that is full of meaning or part of a communication" (15). Ronald Macaulay further emphasizes this significance of silence as a choice in his book, *The Social Art: Language and Its Uses*, stating, "Choice always implies meaning. Even if we choose to say nothing, our silence may be meaningful." He also notes that speakers decide whether or not to be silent based on the situation and societal expectations (Macaulay 89).

Macaulay goes on to discuss silence as a response to a turn ending, arguing that a pause longer than "a split second" may be indicative of "reluctance, opposition, or even rejection of what the previous speaker has said," as if the speaker does not wish to take his or her turn (107). Turn taking can occur in a variety of ways. In "Some signals and rules for taking speaking turns in conversations," Starkey Duncan identifies six cues that speakers may use to indicate they have completed their turn: intonation, drawl, body motion, sociocentric sequences, pitch/volume, and the completion of a grammatical clause (Duncan 286-287). In both works, the authors do not see silence as a turn taking cue; rather, they view silence as a response to a turn taking cue. However, in "Keeping the Floor in Multiparty Conversations: Intonation, Syntax, and Pause," Ann Wennerstrom and Andrew F. Siegel argue that silence is, in fact, a turn taking cue, finding a correlation between pause duration and the probability of turn shift.

The length of a pause can be indicative of a speaker's level of comfort, as explored in Jean E. Fox Tree's article, "Interpreting Pauses and *Ums* at Turn Exchanges." Fox Tree ultimately concluded that pause lengths and comfort levels were directly correlated, with shorter pause lengths indicating higher comfort levels, and longer pause lengths indicating lower comfort levels. David R. Gibson further explores this correlation in "Making the Turn: Obligation, Engagement, and Alienation in Group Discussions." His research focuses on the idea that turn taking in conversations with more than two people is complicated by participant comfort levels. In two person conversations, he argues, turns are traded back and forth between speaker and listener; however, in conversations with more than two participants, the participants who experience higher comfort levels within the setting will be "faster on their feet" than those experiencing lower comfort levels, leading to a disproportionate distribution of turns between speakers (133). If all of the participants experience low comfort levels, there will be a higher distribution of pauses.

Saville-Troike divides interactive silences into three categories: institutionally-determined, group-determined, and individually-determined/negotiated (Saville-Troike 16-17). These groups categorize silence based on the factors that initiate the silence. In "Speech as a marker of situation," Penelope Brown and Colin Frasier simplify this idea, breaking down a speaker's motivation for choosing whether or not to speak into three categories: setting (where and when the conversation takes place), relationship (how the speakers

know each other), and purpose (what the speakers wish to get out of the conversation) (Brown and Frasier 34, 44-45).

Silences initiated by classroom settings and teacher-student relationships are a popular subject to study in this field; however, as previously mentioned, linguistic studies on silence as a form of discourse are limited. Furthermore, the majority of studies on classroom silences focus on primary and secondary education. One type of classroom silence these studies analyze is "wait-time," which is divided into two sub-categories: "wait-time one," the length of a pause after a teacher's utterance, and "wait-time two," the length of a pause after a student's utterance (Li and Arshad 45). "Wait-Time and Multiple Representation Levels in Chemistry Lessons," by Winnie Sim Siew Li and Mohammad Yusof Arshad, specifically looked at the length of wait-time one and "the possible sequences of verbal interaction at multiple representation levels after wait-time one" (46). Ultimately, the researchers found that the teachers studied did not effectively utilize wait-time one, as they were not aware of the concept and regarded silence as "unusual and useless" (50).

Overall, there was debate as to what role silence plays in discourse. Although it has been traditionally viewed as just a boundary marker, more and more scholarship is looking at it outside of that realm. These works, though limited, have created a strong basis for me to build upon in my own research.

PARTICIPANTS & METHODOLOGY

This data set comes from an hour-long audio recording of an undergraduate linguistics senior seminar on discourse analysis. All of the student participants were expected to have a strong understanding of the linguistic field, as this seminar is intended to serve as the capstone course for either the Linguistics minor or the Linguistics special major. This discussion featured eleven participants: Lily, Tanner, Scarecrow, Jane Austen, Chip Skylark, Persephone, Adam Levine, Professor Oak, Rose, Dr. Lee, and myself. Of the ten undergraduate students who took part in this discussion, six are minoring in Linguistics, and four have designed special Linguistics majors. The students' professor, Dr. Lee, has both a Master's degree and a PhD in linguistics. The students range in age from 19 to 22. Eight are white, one is Asian, and one is biracial. Of the ten students, seven identify as female, two identify as male, and one identifies as agender. Dr. Lee, in comparison, is a 35-year-old Asian female.

In addition to being the researcher, I was also a participant in this conversation. As both researcher and participant, I was able to bring my own perspective into the analysis of this data, as I was in the same position as the other participants, giving me some insight into their reasons for remaining silent at certain points in the discussion. Furthermore, being a member of this group of participants has allowed me to observe their behavior within this environment

over the course of a semester, giving me further insight into their classroom behaviors.

After gathering the initial recording, I asked the participants to answer four questions, divided into two groups: "What did you feel was the point of these data analysis sessions?" and "Do you feel you successfully participated in the conversation? Why or why not? If not, why weren't you successful?" I asked these questions in order to gain a better insight into the participants' thought processes during this discussion. Interestingly, the professor's response to the second group of questions was significantly different than the students' responses to the questions; she thought the students could have done a better job of actively participating. However, seven of the students stated that they believed they successfully participated in the conversation. (Two of the students stated that they believed they did not successfully participate in the conversation, and I chose to abstain from answering my own question.)

ANALYSIS

The analysis of this data is divided into 3 sections: First Responders, Second Responders, and Initiators. Utilizing Maria Sciubba's definition of a "long silence"—8 to 9 seconds—from her article "How Transcription May Influence Analysis: The Case of Silences" as the basis for what is typically considered to be an extended period of silence, I have decided to look at pauses I define as "prolonged silences"—10 or more seconds long (Sciubba). In total, there were 33 of these extra long silences in this recording, ranging from 10.01 seconds to 92.99 seconds.

First Responders

Of the 33 utterances directly after the prolonged pauses, 13 of these responses were Dr. Lee directly speaking, six were Dr. Lee playing the audio recording being discussed, three were from me, three were from Adam Levine, two were from Jane Austen, one was from Persephone, one was from Rose, one was from Scarecrow, one was from Lily, and one was from Chip Skylark. These responses could be divided into two categories: statements and questions. The questions category was further divided into open-ended questions (questions with multiple correct answers) and direct questions (questions with one correct answer). Of the 13 student responses, 10 were statements, while the remaining three were direct questions. Most of the students' statements followed the same format, seen in the example below:

| 1 | ME: | I think it's kind of interesting that you guys refer to him as Killian |
| 2 | | instead of whatever his full name is like you're on a familiar basis |

3		with him.
4	(18.01)	
5	ADAM LEVINE:	I think it's interesting how…tweeting at Killian is a
shared		
6		memory so
7	(Students chuckle)	
8		you: start out by saying 'was it Killian' and then
your friend says 'I		
9		wanna say it was Killian'…like to confirm it and
then you		
10		reconfirm it and say 'yes it **was** Killian'…so it's
like…you're		
11		waiting for confirmation and then…you get it and
you're like		
12		'okay proceed.'
13	(23.66)	

When a student made a statement after one of these prolonged silences, the statement was typically a new observation, not a response to another student's comment. These statements support the idea that the silences in this discussion reflect the silences mentioned in Meyers and Jones' work, in that they appear to be hindering the discussion. If they were active silences like the ones mentioned in Shultz's work, the students' statements would be responses to each other instead of responses to the pauses. For example, we can tell that Adam Levine is responding to the 18.01-second pause as opposed to my statement because he introduces a new idea instead of expanding on the idea I present in lines 1-3. Similarly, the three direct question responses were reactions to the preceding pause, not the statement before the pause (the pause initiator).

This data is difficult to compare to the previous research, as none of the studies I found had an abundance of prolonged pauses; the reason I needed to create my own term for this category was because pauses of this length have not been studied. In the previous research, a speaker would typically end a pause before it reached "prolonged" status. As noted in Gibson's research, in conversations of three or more people, there is typically at least one person who "will transition from not speaking to speaking much more readily than others," thus making sure silences end relatively quickly (133). However, there did not seem to be one of these people within the student participant group; rather, most of the students seemed to be passive participants. These pauses could also indicate high levels of discomfort, because longer pauses can be indicative of higher discomfort levels, as noted in Fox Tree's research. Furthermore, the students' responses to pauses did not engage with the pause initiators.

Within Dr. Lee's 13 verbal responses, there were six direct questions, four statements, and three open-ended questions. While questions only made up 23% of student responses, they made up 69% of Dr. Lee's responses. Her responses,

unlike the student responses, also included open-ended questions, as seen in the following example:

```
14      (20.95)
15      DR. LEE:          So what's the meaning of the pause in (1.12) the
        line above 25?
16                        (1.41) That seems to be a very long pause is
        this…that she's (2.24)
17                        looking for a word? Is she like: (2.00) performing
        this silence as
18                        (1.12) meaning that well she's dumbfoun:ded like
        she doesn't
19                        understand this friend (1.71) 'cause…there isn't
        much pause: in
20                        this whole thing except for that one pause (4.36)
        and LILY finishes
21                        (1.70) ### fills in the pause (3.00) what do you guys
        think of this
22                        pause.
24      (4.94)
25      ME:               I thought she was making some kind of nonverbal
cue like a face:
                          to imitate her…um…opinion or like…how she
                reacted to what her
26                        friend was saying.
```

(Although this response includes a statement, it was categorized as an open-ended question because asking the question was the ultimate goal of the utterance.) Dr. Lee's responses, like the students' responses, were not direct replies to the pause initiator. However, unlike the students' responses, the majority of her replies were directly designed to initiate conversation. Questions are specifically constructed to provoke response, as asking a question requires at least one participant to directly answer it. This is a common technique used to get students to participate, as noted in Meyers and Jones' work. Specifically, this technique is used to strengthen the students' "positive interdependence," the idea that students must work together in order to succeed (Meyers and Jones 75-76). When students responded directly after a prolonged silence, they typically made a statement without directly attempting to engage with the other students. The majority of Dr. Lee's responses, however, were crafted to directly engage the students in the discussion.

Second Responders

To measure the success of the initial post-prolonged pause responses in initiating discussion, we must examine the responses to the initial responses. As previously mentioned, Dr. Lee asked questions in order to further the discussion. In the last example, there is a 4.94-second pause between Dr. Lee's question and

my response. This pause, unlike the prolonged pauses, is an expected pause. Here, the pause before my response can be considered "wait-time one," whereas Dr. Lee's utterance is the initiator and my response is the "student response," as seen in Li and Arshad's wait-time one/wait-time two model (Li and Arshad 45). While the wait-time one/wait-time two exchange was successfully completed, the conversation after my utterance in the previous example only continued for 39.01 seconds (including four pauses between one and four seconds and eight seconds of data being played) before the next prolonged pause occurred. In several examples throughout the data, the response to the initial response was yet another prolonged pause, as seen in the following example:

27   (13.42)
28   SCARECROW: There's a lot of vague language in this?
29   ADAM LEVINE: Yeah.
30   SCARECROW: Um: (1.16) like in the-in the first sentence 'their full culture' kind
31   of stuff like that's not really like specific
32   (class laughs)
33   and like the thing where its kind of where it's **like** and um also like
34   down where: like twenty-six Stevie's like a lot of people say that's
35   what you've to do and like the assumption it's like (trails off)
36   (15.71)

In response to the prolonged pause on line 27, Scarecrow makes a new observation about the data being discussed. (The utterance in line 28 is not a question; rather, it is an example of upspeak. Adam Levine's utterance in line 29 is an example of backchanneling). These types of responses seem to be the result of the other participants not knowing what to say. Based on my observations of the class throughout the semester, including observations of other discussions, and my own experience in this setting, the participants understood the material but were unsure how to contribute to the discussion. Scarecrow's statement is an observation that does not overtly present information that would instinctively insight discussion. When a question is asked, the asker gives the responder a guideline for crafting his or her response; the responder's utterance should relate to the question asked. However, in observational statements, no such cue is given, so the responders must craft their statements without parameters. In discussion settings, it is assumed that the participants are working towards a common goal (Brown and Frasier 34). When I asked the participants what they believed the goal of this discussion was, they all replied with the same ideas: to improve their analysis skills and have their classmates find things in the data they might have missed. The first reply is a difficult task to translate into discourse. What utterances could they contribute to the conversation that would "improve their analysis skills"? The second reply is easier to translate, but the amount of

discussion it generates is limited; once students run out of observations to make about things they found in the data, the conversation stalls. Interestingly, none of the participants mentioned discussing the "why" behind the linguistic phenomena. In this example, Scarecrow states, "there's a lot of vague language," but the participants do not go further in-depth with this idea (28). Instead of asking "why is there so much vague language in this?" or "what does the vague language say about the speakers?" the participants choose to let silence take the floor.

As mentioned in both Saville-Troike and Brown and Frasier's works, silence is the product of its environment, and as mentioned in Fox Tree's work, silence is indicative of discomfort. I believe these types of silences are signs of discomfort, caused by the environment. Although all of the students had experience studying linguistics, none of them had experience with linguistics at the seminar level. Prolonged pauses as responses seem to be a result of the students' tepidness to delve deeper into the discussion.

When the initial response was a question, an utterance was typically given as the second response, such as in the following exchange:

37   DR. LEE: What do you make of the lengthenings too, (2.95) she using
38   lengthening to express (1.80) that she doesn:'t…care? Or she's
39   hmm:
40   TANNER: She's-she's like um (1.6) kind of like derisive? a little bit?
41   DR. LEE: Or definitely distancing herself from this other friend.
42   (10.48)

By presenting a question, Dr. Lee, gave the other participants parameters in which to frame their answers. Because a question was raised, politeness within this society (the American classroom) dictates that at least one participant must answer the question. However, although this is an open-ended question, only one participant attempted to answer it. Again, this supports the idea that the student participants were uncomfortable in this setting, as they could have provided more responses to the question.

Shultz provides a list of questions to ask when situations like this occur in the classroom, including: "Were the students who chose not to speak aloud simply shy? …Were they following cultural practices that guided them to speak only when they had something significant to add to the conversation?" and "What was the role of peers in supporting one another to speak or remain silent?" (Shultz 11-12). Unfortunately, researchers have not typically looked at the relationship between these answers and silence. As previously mentioned, there is not much research on the role of silence as an utterance, and most of the research looking at

silence as an utterance focuses on the relationship between comfort and silence. However, based on my observations of this environment and my experience as a participant within this environment, I believe looking at the data with these questions in mind would be beneficial. Although discomfort does play a significant role in these silences, background also appears to be a significant factor. After seeing the participants in this setting for the past fifteen weeks, it appears majority of them seem to be naturally silent within the classroom setting, which accounts for their tendency towards silence. Furthermore, I do not know how they decide which thoughts to vocalize and which to keep silent. In future analyses, I would suggest conducting an in-depth interview with each subject after the discussion takes place in order to get a better insight into the subject's frame of mind.

Initiators

In order to fully understand these silences and the responses to these silences, we must examine what caused the silences. Of the 33 prolonged pauses, eight were initiated by data playback, while the remaining 25 were initiated by statements. Of those 25 statements, five used "I think/thought" or "I feel" as framing devices, as in the following example:

43   JANE AUSTEN: I thought the 'why did you tag me' was interesting because she
44   kind of slow:ed that part down like I guess to show that she was
45   like (1.45) surprised or like disturbed by the fact she did that so
46   like the 'why: did you: tag: me' like trying to emphasize to the girl
47   in the past that she didn't like that she tweeted him (trails off).
48   (15.72)

Here, Jane Austen used "I thought" as a hedge; in order to soften her opinion, she presents it as an idea specific to her, as opposed to absolute fact. This framing device appeared throughout the data, seemingly as a way to make statements appear less forceful. However, this could be an example of a participant attempting to deconstruct her thoughts. Meyers and Jones note that classroom discussions are a way to help students understand their own thoughts; attempting to verbalize thoughts not fully developed is a technique used to help speakers "organize and structure" their ideas (Meyers and Jones 22). Therefore, the preceding pause could possibly be a form of Shultz's "active engagement" silences. If Jane Austen was constructing her thoughts as she was speaking, perhaps the other participants spent the silence attempting to process both her new idea and their own thoughts.

However, this pause seems to closely mirror the pause in line 36, where the participants were unsure of what to say based on their level of comfort and personal background. Unlike the utterance preceding the pause in line 36, this utterance does not leave much room for discussion; a phenomena is observed, and an explanation is given for why said phenomena occurred. Though a turn taking cue is given (the lowered volume), no parameters are given for potential responders to utilize in forming their responses, resulting in the prolonged silence.

The same problem occurred in pause initiators that did not use framing devices, as displayed in this extract:

49   ROSE: Maybe it was…um (2.28) uh what are @words um (2.28) like to
50   kinda show the shock value: oh 'cause we were talking about how
51   she slowed 'why did you tag me' down drastically so maybe it was
52   to play in with the shock value
53   (22.31)

(Although this utterance refers to the previous example, likes 49-53 occurred 18 minutes and 40 seconds after lines 43-48 occurred. This also proves that some of these silences included active participation, as Rose was able to remember what Jane Austen said.) The silence in line 53 may indicate that the participants had no more to say on this subject. Rose's utterance is literally in response to a prolonged pause following data playback she requested, but in terms of content, it is more directly in response to the question Dr. Lee poses in line 15. Rose was not the first participant to answer this question, but perhaps the other participants felt that they could not add any more to this answer. However, this response ends with, "so maybe it was to play in with the shock value," which gives other participants parameters in which to respond; they could have either agreed with Rose and expanded on how the statement "play[ed] in with the shock value," or they could have disagreed with the statement and explored other potential explanations.

Though this utterance does not use a hedge as a framing device, there are signs of discomfort within it, including the use of "um," the phrase "what are words," and the nervous laughter as she said "words." These signs further support the argument that many of these prolonged pauses are the result of discomfort among the participants. Proving that a pause is a sign of discomfort is more difficult, as a pause can be interpreted in a variety of different ways (as explored in the Literature Review section of this paper). However, because this utterance precedes the prolonged pause, we can conclude that this pause is most likely the result of the participant's discomfort explored in the previous sections of this analysis.

CONCLUSION

The previous scholarship on silence can best be described as developing. Although researchers are expanding the ways in which silence is studied, the data is still very limited, as silences are still typically thought of as boundary markers instead of utterances. Furthermore, the scholarship that does look at silences as utterances is very similar; there is room for much analytical expansion.

While there is some overlap between my research and the previous work done in the field, this analysis covers an area that has seemingly yet to be explored: the prolonged pause. Most pauses that have been analyzed in the previous research have been relatively short. In fact, Sciubba's 8 to 9-second "long silence" stood out as an anomaly in the field, as her definition incorporates silences significantly longer than the other researchers' pauses. I believe this paper has laid the groundwork for future researchers to explore the prolonged pause in further depth. Though it has not been acknowledged in previous research, the prolonged pause is not a phenomena isolated to this group of participants. Most of the linguistic research I have read on classroom discussions seems to capture an idyllic classroom setting, where conversation flows back and forth between participants and pauses are minimal. While most classroom discussions are like this, not all classroom discussions are like this. The discussion analyzed in this paper was not the first classroom discussion I have been a part of that featured prolonged pauses. The factors mentioned by Saville-Troike and Brown and Frasier have a significant effect on the outcome of a classroom discussion; if one factor makes the participants feel uncomfortable in the setting, the discussion might be stalled.

My paper also highlights the fact that personal background plays a significant role in creating silence in the classroom environment. Of the previous literature I examined, Shultz was the only scholar to discuss the relationship between personal background and silence within her work. My research closely aligns with the ideas she proposed, but takes those ideas further by applying them to a data set. Because pauses are more open to interpretation than verbalized utterances, I think more information needs to be collected from participants. When people are silent, they may be exploring multitudes of ideas in their heads. In order to best interpret the data, researchers need to understand what is going on in participants heads during pauses and why the participants choose to take said pauses. As mentioned in Picard's quote at the beginning of this paper, "…in every silence there is something of the spoken word." It is our job as researchers to figure out what that something is.

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