TO SPEAK OR NOT TO SPEAK. NOTES ON SILENCE AS A DIALOGIC SPEECH ACT

RĂZVAN SĂFTOIU[1]

Abstract. Silence has been discussed as an important resource of interaction, a pragmatically relevant component of interaction (Jaworski 1997), which has a specific interactional background, being more context-embedded than speech (Tannen 1985, Sifianou 1997). I start from the premise that silence and speech are not contradictory categories, but they are integrated within a *continuum*. I also consider that silence is an integrative part of human communication and I will dwell upon the idea that eloquent silence (Sifianou 1997, Ephratt 2008) can be considered a dialogic speech act (Weigand 2010) since the speaker has specific intentions, goals, purposes and interests in using silence both as *action*, to make a claim, and *reaction*, to fulfil a claim. Using examples from transcriptions of naturally-occurring conversations, I discuss silence as an intentional and purposeful action by which an individual can convey meaningful messages.

Keywords: silence, dialogic speech act, language in use.

1. INTRODUCTION

For more than a century now, researchers from various areas of study – philosophy, anthropology, education, sociology, language sciences, political sciences, literary, music and cultural studies – have been preoccupied with understanding the relationship between verbal and nonverbal behaviour in human communication. We start from the premise that humans are "persuasive beings [who] apply communicative means and techniques as far as they seem useful for [their] purposes" (Weigand 2009: 358).

In the past 50 years, studies of physical behaviour have shown that the essence of communication is not given by articulated language, but by the variety of nonverbal actions accompanying everyday speech in various settings. According to Mehrabian's "7–38–55 rule" (1971), 7% of the message is in the words that are spoken, 38% of the message is the way the words are said, i.e. the paraverbal: intonation, tone, rhythm, and 55% of the message is conveyed by means of facial expression. The fact that 93% of the meaning of a

[1] Răzvan Săftoiu is a Professor at *Transilvania* University of Braşov. He teaches courses in pragmatics, applied linguistics, communication and discourse analysis. He received national and international research grants at the University of Bucharest (2001–2003), State University of New York at Albany (2005–2006), *Transilvania* University of Braşov (2007–2010, 2015–2017) and published articles in Romanian and international peer reviewed journals and proceedings. E-mail: razvan.saftoiu@unitbv.ro.

RRL, **LXIII**, *1–2*, p. 115–131, Bucureşti, 2018

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

message is given by nonverbal elements emphasizes the need to know body language to perceive beyond what words are saying. I will not deal with this approach here, but use it as a starting point and consider that nonverbal communication is not only an attachment of communication, but a deep personal and purposeful means by which an individual can convey meaningful messages, thus becoming an integral part of action games of persuasion. An individual who has knowledge of the language of his/her body and ways to control it as well as knowledge of the way in which his/her interlocutors might react has the ability to hold control over the dialogue.

In this paper, I start from the premise that silence is an integrative part of human communication and will dwell upon the idea that eloquent silence (Sifianou 1997: 65, Ephratt 2008: 1909-1910) can be considered a dialogic speech act (Weigand 2010) since the speaker has specific intentions, goals, purposes and interests in using silence both as *action*, to make a claim, and *reaction*, to fulfil a claim. In other words, I consider silence as part of communication, i.e. when a speaker chooses, in his/her turn, to express himself/ herself by silence, either in initial, medial or final position of an utterance. This is different from stillness and pauses (Ephratt 2008), such as speakers' pauses made in order to breathe or to plan their next utterance, or for other psycholinguistic and cultural motives (see Bruneau 1973), which are non-communicative.

After presenting some of the theories on silence (Section 2) from various perspectives – social-psychological, cross-cultural and linguistic, I will move on and discuss the most influential taxonomies of speech acts in the past 60 years (Section 3) while putting forward an analysis of silence as a dialogic speech act. In Section 4, I will discuss silence as an intentional and purposeful action by which an individual can convey meaningful messages; thus, I will analyse silence as an explorative, directive and representative speech act according to Weigand's taxonomy (2010).

2. THEORIES OF SILENCE

The multiplicity of meanings that silence can have in communication is the result of various influences – cultural, individual or social. I am interested in discussing the relationship between *silence* and *dialogue*, with a view to considering silence a manifestation of the speaker's will, a speech act that varies according to the context and the speech situation.

The communicative role of silence in conversation was less analysed. Early studies of silence focused on the prosodic function or the marking of a state, but in time silence took another meaning and began to be defined as "non-speaking or non-vocalization periods in conversation" (Zuo 2002: 4).

Humans can actually communicate through silence since they act and react with one another, assigning a certain *force* (in Searle's terminology, see Section 3.2.) to such a "zero utterance" because they have various interests in so doing: "Silence can have meaning. Like the zero in mathematics, it is an absence with a function" (Samarin 1965: 115).

2.1. Social-psychological approaches

Different perspectives and approaches have been used to study silence. The first approach that I will present is the socio-psychological one, which explores the relationship between silence and social-psychological features such as class, age, gender and

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

personality. Thus, researchers found that middle class people tend to keep silent more than working class people (Scollon 1985), or that introverts tend to use more and longer silences, and talk more slowly than extroverts, contributing to the creation of a certain impression on the hearer: *positive* – talkative, participating, cheerful, socially bold, or *negative* – reserved, taciturn, sober, timid (Crown and Feldstein 1985: 39).

In numerous sketches, I. L. Caragiale – a 19th century Romanian novelist, playwright and moralist – was keen on rendering the particularities of daily communication and he illustrated the manner in which acquaintances and strangers actively engage in a conversation "after some moments of silence". Either in train (*Accelerat no. 17*, *Identitate*, *Búbico*), in paying a visit (*Vizită…*) or when having breakfast, on the grass (*Gazometru*), the characters are interested in establishing a social relationship, by adopting a social identity. In the example below, an excerpt from the sketch *Accelerat no. 17*, published in 1899, the context chosen by the writer, travelling by train, is one which favours the involvement in a "conventional conversation".

(1) The gentleman enters the cabin after the merchant who took off his coat and sits down with the sack on his hand.
– Good evening, says the gentleman.
– Good evening, answers the merchant.
And the gentleman sits down on the front seat, after having put his suitcase on the storage shelf and the plaid under his head. For about two-three kilometres there was silence.
– Are you travelling far? the gentleman asks.
– Well! Far and not so far… to Mărăşeşti…
– To Mărăşeşti?
– Yes. What about you?
– To Mărăşeşti, as well.

(I. L. Caragiale 1985: 152)

In the excerpt chosen, I notice the stage direction referring to the keeping of silence and the manner in which the conversation is initiated: a partially open question (*Are you travelling far?*), by which the speaker breaks the silence and manifests his interests for the person he travels with, in the same cabin. Caragiale succeeds in highlighting an important aspect of everyday language-in-use, *phatic communion*. The concept was introduced and defined two decades later, in 1923, by the British anthropologist Bronislaw Malinowski on the basis of investigations of some tribes in Oceania. After detailed analyses, Malinowski formulated a universal conclusion: "There can be no doubt that we have a new type of linguistic use – phatic communion" (Malinowski 1923: 314–316). Caragiale and Malinowski belong to two different directions – literature and anthropology, but their remarks lead to the same conclusion: when one individual joins another and there is no previous conflicting state between them, the two tend to interact verbally.

The comments accompanying the definition of phatic communion proposed by Malinowski highlight an important function of small talk: avoiding silence. Here is how the author expresses the relationship between small talk and silence:

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

> […] to a natural man, another man's silence is not a reassuring factor, but on the contrary, something alarming and dangerous. The stranger who cannot speak the language is to all savage tribesmen a natural enemy. To the primitive mind, whether among savages or our own uneducated classes, taciturnity means not only unfriendliness but directly a bad character. This no doubt varies greatly with the national character but remains true as a general rule. The breaking of silence, the communion of words is the first act to establish links of fellowship, which is consummated only by the breaking of bread the communion of food. The modern English expression, "Nice day to-day" or the Melanesian phrase "Whence comest thou?" are needed to get over the strange unpleasant tension which men feel when facing each other in silence. (Malinowski 1923: 314)

It is worth observing that avoiding silence is one of the main purposes for which individuals, as social actors, are using small talk. At the same time, the perspective on this particular action game (for more comments, see Săftoiu 2009, 2012) is restricted to the initial sequence. The negative evaluation of silence and, implicitly, of small talk originates in the "belief" (Jaworski 2000: 113) that language is mainly used to facilitate the exchange of information. This corresponds to the *ideological* function of language commented by Halliday (1978): language is used for referential purposes to describe people, objects, states and events, to present ideas and express opinions. However, the taxonomy proposed by Halliday is not limited to this function, but the author considers that language has two more functions: *interpersonal* and *textual*. The interpersonal function refers to how language reflects and defines interactions, while the textual function expresses the ability of the language to refer to itself (as metalanguage). Thus, individuals can appropriately fit their actions to a particular communicative event (joke, small talk, etc.). This idea is also found in Levinson (1992), who talks about *activity types*. *Communicative competence* (Hymes 1972) allows speakers to distinguish between various activity types and to realize the existence of constraints that are associated with them. For example, in the context of a party, the speakers will adjust their actions to the various types of social relationships. In other words, the main function of the language that will be updated in that context will be the interpersonal one; the participants will interact with the purpose of establishing a social bond.

Tracy and Coupland (1990) put forward the following distinction: on the one hand there are instrumental goals, on the other, relational goals. The first set refers to the referential meaning of utterances, the second set emphasizes the way in which individuals establish rapport in order to achieve an effective verbal exchange.

Schneider (1988) takes over the distinction between two attitudes that can be adopted in dialogic language use – *politesse* ("being polite") and *friendliness* ("being friendly") – and suggests two maxims:

Be polite

1. Mode of expression: *Avoid silence!*
2. Person: *Avoid curiosity!*
3. Agreement: *Avoid conflict!*
4. Emotional state: *Avoid pessimism!*

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

Be friendly

1. Mode of expression: *Say something nice!*
2. Person: *Show interest!*
3. Agreement: *Establish common points!*
4. Emotional state: *Be optimistic!*

(Schneider 1988: 158-159)

Researchers (Chafe 1985, Zuo 2002, Nakamura 2004) have also approached silence from a psycholinguistic point of view, focusing on the distribution of silence in speech sequences as well as on its role in speech planning and production. It is worth mentioning that such analyses were carried out on monologues and narratives, not on actual language in use. The results put forward the idea that silence in speech is related to "the speaker's lexical decision-making processes and his/her choice of individual words" (Lemak 2012: 7). They have also shown that silence either marks syntactic boundaries or hesitations, the speaker not knowing how to verbalize something at a given moment, due to psychological reasons. Thus, silence is attributed to the speaker who is struggling to decide or to choose the right words to express themselves clearly and correctly.

2.2. Cross-cultural approaches

The theories presented so far suggest that silence is opposed to small talk, as Malinowski has defined it. In other words, silence is the dispreferred, marked discourse. Several studies (Lehtonen and Sajavaara 1985, Tannen 1985, Lebra 1987, Blum-Kulka 1997, Sifianou 1997, Agyekum 2002, Vainiomäki 2004) have shown that there are cultural differences in how silence and talk are used. The cultural approach of silence sees this phenomenon as a universal one, characterizing every human society, but its duration and actual use can vary and be dependent on the language specific to each person. Studies in interpersonal communication are not based on the fundamental rules and functions of silence, but they show how different cultural norms emphasize and affect the interpretation of silence in actual language in use.

From a cultural point of view, there is a significant difference in the way silences are perceived. There are communities in the world that, in the absence of an instrumental conversation, prefer and value silence. In such communities, silence does not create interactive discomfort and, as a result, there is no need for the development of an interpersonal relationship through small talk. Likewise, there are communities that want to overcome the discomfort caused by silence and engage actively in conversations.

Lehtonen and Sajavaara (1985) have observed that Finnish families appeal less often to small talk than Anglo-American families. In contrast, Blum-Kulka (1997) studied the cultural distribution of small talk in Israeli and American-Israeli families. The author focused on dinner conversations and the data led her to the conclusion that Israeli families turn to small talk, thus avoiding silence, more often than American-Israeli families. After analysing New York Jewish culture, Tannen (1985) formulates the conclusion that it is one which values simultaneous talk, while silence is negatively valued and signals lack of involvement. Studying silence among the Akan, in West Africa, Agyekum (2002) formulates the conclusion that silence is "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" (2002: 49).

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

In Asian cultures (Saville-Troike 1985, Lebra 1987), people believe that speech should be used only when someone has relevant information to pass on to others. For example, the Japanese appreciate indirect, subtle and even non-verbal communication, relying on an anticipatory behaviour of the listener to fill in the meaning. Thus, one can talk about meaningful silence since language use is seen as instrumental, being employed in *relation to someone* or *something*.

2.3. Linguistic approaches

According to this approach, silence and interaction are not contradictory categories, but "overlapping forms of a continuum" (Jaworski 1993: 168). In dialogue, there are moments of silence and speech, they alternate continuously. In this line of research, Bruneau (1973) identifies forms of silence (*psychological*, *interactive*, and *sociocultural*) and focuses on the relationship between them and the perception of time, Jensen (1973) also dwells upon functions of silence (*linking*, *affecting*, *revelational*, *judgmental*, *activating*), and Jaworski (1993) carries out a pragmatic analysis of silence. From the latter's point of view, silence is significant when one expects interaction to take place. When expectations are not fulfilled and silence occurs, the role of communication changes and silence becomes more important than speech since it highly depends on the context.

When talking about silence, it is important to remember both its positive aspect and the negative one. The meaning of silence is ambiguous and can be interpreted in various ways; that is the reason why silence is "probably the most ambiguous of all linguistic forms. It is also ambiguous axiologically; it does both good and bad in communication" (Jaworski 1993: 24). For example, breaks can sometimes be beneficial to interactants, since "without pauses listeners have great difficulty in keeping up with ongoing talk and interpreting it correctly" (Nakane 2007: 8). In some cases (when delivering courses or speeches, for example), silence is a deliberate slowing of speech in order to give the interlocutor the time to understand what was communicated; this particular use of silence has a positive character. The same is valid when a speaker knows that what he/she says would cause trouble and chooses to keep silent.

Drawing on the framework of turn management described by conversation analysts Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), Carlin asserts that "silence is a social action that does interactional work" (2003: 121) and needs to be examined in context in order to determine its various meanings. He also defines silence as both a *sequential* and a *categorial* phenomenon, considering that "these aspects 'fold back' on each other" (Carlin 2003: 121): silence is related to turn-taking and it is thus important to see "where silences occur within an interactional episode" (Carlin 2003: 121), and silence is produced by various parties (incumbents of various membership categories, see Sacks 1972) involved in the interactional episode.

A taxonomy of silence has been provided by Kurzon (2007), who grounds his theory on a set of features (the number of participants in the interaction, the identity of the text left unsaid, and the intention of the silent person) and distinguishes between conversational, thematic, textual and situational silence. I will only take into account the first two types since they appear in dialogical contexts. *Conversational silence* may be equated to a speech act since it carries a propositional content (which can be inferred from the context), a truth value as well as an illocutionary force and perlocutionary effects (Saville-Troike 1985: 6).

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

This type can be either intentional or unintentional. *Thematic silence* refers to the speaker deliberately ignoring a certain topic, the content of which is presumably known; he/ she refrains from speaking either for social or for strategic reasons.

Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu (2016) analysed instances of silence in the Romanian cultural space both in everyday language in use and in literary texts. Although there appears to be a preference for speech, not for silence, the focus is on the individual, not on an ethnic group since "individual uses of silence can represent either a successful communicative strategy, or a source of pragmatic failure" (2016: 461).

In the next section, I will present some of the most influential taxonomies of speech acts – from Austin's distinction between locutionary, illocutionary and perlocutionary acts and Searle's theory of illocutionary force to Weigand's dialogic taxonomy of speech acts. In Section 4, I will consider instances of conversational silence (or eloquent silence) in various contexts (at the bus stop, in a waiting room, at a bed and breakfast, at an info kiosk) and analyse them from their potential of being dialogic speech acts.

3. TAXONOMIES OF SPEECH ACTS AND SILENCE

For almost a century now, various theories in the field of philosophy of language and later pragmatics and dialogue studies have focused on the active role of the speaker in the process of communication: Bühler (1934) talked about speech acts (*Sprechakt*) considering that speech is action, Wittgenstein (1953) emphasized the connection between "language games" and socio-cultural practices, while Benveniste (1966) focused on the relationship between language as a system and its actual use by speakers, formulating the theory of enunciation (*énonciation*).

3.1. Austin's taxonomy and silence

Aiming to analyse meaning as a complex relation between linguistic conventions (words and sentences), context of use and associated intentions of the speaker, Austin (1962) put forward the concepts of speech acts, performativity and felicity conditions for successful performance of speech acts. This means that uttering a performative sentence means evaluation from the point of view of its *conventionality* (1), *actuality* (2), and *intentionality* (3). In other words, there must be valid associated conventions (1), the speaker actually performs the act so that it requires a certain reaction from the hearer ("securing of uptake" Austin 1962: 117) (2), and the speaker has an associated intention in performing the utterance (3). In this framework, uttering is acting and utterances (the actual production of words and sentences) are speech acts (a complex "object" with three components).

Austin clarifies the concept of *performativity* by introducing the facets of a speech act – locutionary acts (Lat. *locutio* "speech"), illocutionary acts (Lat. *in* "while", and *locutio*) and perlocutionary acts (Lat. *per* "through", and *locutio*) – with a special focus on the illocutionary act. On the basis of this distinction, he put forward a preliminary taxonomy of speech acts, consisting of five types of illocutionary acts[2].

[2] (1) VERDICTIVES – acts that consist of delivering a finding;
(2) EXERCITIVES – acts of giving a decision for or against a course of action, of the type 'I urge you to do something';

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

Oishi (2006) comments on Austin's most important contribution, considering that it does not necessarily refer to a widely accepted taxonomy of speech acts, but to the development of the concept of *speech situation*. This concept is understood as "a situation which is in a particular spatiotemporal location as well as in a psychological space animated by linguistic communication and specified by linguistic devices: it exists only because *I speak to you*" (2006: 6).

I consider silence cannot be analysed following Austin's framework and taxonomy since the focus of this theory is on uttering and utterances, not on the (otherwise meaningful) lack of uttering and utterances.

3.2. Searle's taxonomy and silence

Searle (1969, 1975) continues Austin's work, focusing on the illocution, yet aiming to distinguish between the *illocutionary act* and the *illocutionary force*. In other words, *force* becomes an aspect of meaning since it is included in the illocutionary act (following Austin's terminology). Searle's taxonomy of illocutionary acts[3] (1975: 2-5, 64f) is based on pragmatic parameters that remind of the felicity conditions: point (purpose) of the act (the essential condition), direction of fit (the propositional content of the words), and expressed psychological states (i.e. speaker's attitudes with respect to the propositional content). The most important parameter seems to be *direction of fit*, which has to do with whether the words are supposed to fit the facts of the world or whether the world is supposed to come to fit the words.

In putting forward the three facets of a speech act, Austin differentiates between the act of uttering a sentence that has a certain *meaning*, the actual uttering that has a certain *force* and the achievement of certain *effects*. Thus, the focus is on the speaker who combines words according to grammatical rules and conventions of a certain language, has an intention by selecting and combining those words and hopes to achieve certain effects on the hearer.

Effects on the hearer may also be achieved by keeping silent (i.e. zero utterance), which – in Austin's line of thought – would have no meaning attached (considering that meaning is understood as word-meaning). I consider that there is a force the speaker attaches to the zero utterance as well and this particular force is meant to achieve certain effects on the hearer. This means that Searle's classical formula F (p) (the *force* of a

(3) COMMISSIVES – acts whose point is to commit the speaker to a course of action, of the type 'I promise to do something';

(4) BEHABITIVES – acts of social agreement, expressions of attitudes toward the conduct, (mis)fortunes or attitudes of others;

(5) EXPOSITIVES – acts of explaining, conducting, and clarifying of views or arguments.

[3] (1) ASSERTIVES, which are employed to form in the addressee a specific idea, proposition, or belief;

(2) DIRECTIVES, which focus on calling the addressee to action, yet do not require the sender to reciprocate any action of his own;

(3) COMMISSIVES, which relate to committing oneself to a future action;

(4) EXPRESSIVES, which are based on psychological states and relate to the expression of feelings or emotions to the receiver;

(5) DECLARATIVES, which have the purpose of the speaker bringing into existence the state of affairs described in the propositional content of the message.

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

sentence that has a *propositional content*) needs to be reviewed, adding INTEREST to it as well as changing focus from propositional content to utterance, zero utterance included, conceived as ACTION, as I will show next.

3.3. Weigand's taxonomy and silence

In the Mixed Game Model, Weigand (2010: 76–86) considers human beings at the centre of the dialogic game and puts forward a different taxonomy of speech acts, considering that Searle's classical speech act theory needs to be reformulated on the basis of a theory of competence-in-performance, i.e. individuals simultaneously integrate "human nature, culture and the external environment not created by human beings" (Weigand 2011: 546). In discussing communication as dialogic interaction, Weigand (2010) asserts that dialogic use of language means putting an emphasis on language ACTION instead of language expression. Action is the fundamental concept of the theory of dialogue and Weigand makes it clear that "verbal action is only in part realized by speaking […] dialogic interaction does not presuppose interaction exclusively by speech acts but can also rely on gestures or practical actions" (2010: 77).

Starting from the premise that "not everything is said or intended to be said explicitly" (2010: 79), Weigand puts forward a superordinate predicate, INTEREST, and the extended speech act formula is rendered as follows: INTEREST [F (p)]. Thus, focus is shifted from the function (F) of a proposition (p) to the INTEREST, which becomes "the primary force of action [that is] rooted in human beings' nature as social individuals" (Weigand 2010: 79).

One of the basic tenets of the dialogic action is the concept of *social interactive purpose*, which further leads to the idea that actions are not autonomous, but they are dialogically-oriented, speakers and hearers negotiate meanings so that they come to an understanding. This is an integrative view of language use, which can be better understood if human abilities, cultural insights and external surroundings are put together. That is why Weigand calls "speech acts" *dialogically-oriented actions* or *dialogic speech acts*.

Weigand starts from the idea that individuals do not communicate through independent acts, but speakers rely on what has been said before and, at the same time, shape what will be said next. In other words, "every communicative act is dialogically related either to a preceding or a subsequent act" (Weigand 2010: 79) – *initiative actions* (the speaker makes a dialogic claim) and *reactive actions* (the speaker fulfils a dialogic claim) – and speakers' aim is to come to an understanding.

Considering that actions are complex and they can be verbally as well as nonverbally achieved, it comes natural to consider silence a *complex dialogic speech act* and speakers use it either as an initiative or as a reactive action, depending on their communicative purposes. I will further comment on the achievement and realizations of silence in complex action games in Section 4 of this paper.

When talking about coherence, Weigand (2003) defines it as the integration of dialogic means: "coherence is to be conceived as the result of the interlocutors' joint attempt to understand the means – verbal, cognitive and perceptual ones – offered to them in the action game" (2003: 24). The core idea is integration of interrelated issues (the mind, the body, perception, emotions, feelings, thinking, reasoning, speaking, the culture and the environment) in order to come to an understanding.

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

Before putting forward a taxonomy of speech acts, Weigand first reconciles Wittgenstein's view (1953) of language games (understood as performance) and Searle's (1975) fundamental speech act types (understood as competence) considering that the two views can be resolved at the level of competence-in-performance, i.e. in the minds of human beings "who are able to mediate between order and disorder, between fundamental types of competence and countless ways of performance" (Weigand 2010: 83). Thus, the connection between mind and language is reduced at two basic claims about mental states: a *claim to truth* (belief) and a *claim to volition* (desire). On the basis of the two types of claims, correlated with the reactive act, Weigand proposes the following four basic minimal games:

1. DECLARATIVES (are based on the mental state of desire and speakers use them to create a world, a state of affairs);
2. EXPLORATIVES (are based on the mental state of desire and speakers use them to ask questions about the world);
3. DIRECTIVES (are based on the mental state of desire and speakers use them to direct the interlocutor to a future practical action, to a change of behaviour);
4. REPRESENTATIVES (are based on the mental state of belief and speakers use them to express what they hold true about the world).

4. SILENCE AS A DIALOGIC SPEECH ACT

In this section, I will adopt Weigand's taxonomy to analyse silence for two reasons: first, it is more comprehensive than other taxonomies considered in this study since it takes a holistic view of language as a complex human faculty; second, it puts action at the centre of language in use. My aim is to show that silence is a dialogic speech act that can be analysed as an explorative, directive or a representative speech act.

4.1. Silence as an explorative speech act

Initial silences precede the actual conversation and are mostly discussed as "breaking the silence", speakers showing their interest in the hearer by making a claim to volition and orienting to validity, knowledge or future behaviour of the hearer. Sometimes, it may happen that the speaker orients to the truth of the utterance, either by making a simple claim to truth or a modal claim to truth. In what follows, I will focus first on breaking the silence as a speaker's claim to hearer's volition to provide knowledge since "human beings are innately curious beings" (Weigand 2010: 147) and then discuss eloquent silences, i.e. silent sequences that appear within a dialogue, as EXPLORATIVE, DIRECTIVE or REPRESENTATIVE speech acts.

The first fragment chosen for the analysis is extracted from a dialogue that took place between a female customer (A) waiting for her turn at a dressmaker's (B). Although silence is not included in the actual transcript, I have decided to refer to it as a preceding action before the actual conversation.

(2) 1 ((tăcere))
2 **A:** şi nu eşti aglomerată la ora asta?

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

3 **B:** <OF ă:># a: aşa↑ aşa. aşa.# da' nici nu mai ştiu ce să mai zic. am fost aşa de ameţită azi toată ziua↓ n-am fost în stare să fac nimica nu ştiu de ce (naibii)
4 **A:** e şi schimbarea asta acu' de tempera[tură
5 **B:** [nu ştiu ce naiba am avut↓

(IVLRA 2001: 122)

1 ((silence))
2 **A:** so, you're not busy at this time?
3 **B:** ((sighing)) (0.4) a: so and so. (0.4) but I don't even know what to say. I have been dizzy all day long, I haven't been able to do anything, I don't know why (damn)
4 **A:** it is also the change in the tempera[ture
5 **B:** [I don't know what the hell is wrong with me

Not only the dressmaker and the female customer (A) were in the room, but also another female customer (C) whom they had not met before. There are three people in the same room, two of whom are waiting for the dressmaker to put the finishing touches on a new garment so that they could try it on. Taking into account the situation, it appears that silence in this initial position is a dispreferred action. This is further supported by the way the dialogue is initiated (*so, you're not busy at this time?*), a first verbal action by means of which the speaker orients herself to knowledge, aiming to get the information necessary for further action, thus performing an EXPLORATIVE speech act.

The dressmaker, as a service provider, can control the dialogue to a certain extent. Thus, she may decide to get involved in a phatic action game in order to "create and confirm social relationships" (Weigand 2010: 226) or in a transactional action game in order to get things done. Yet, it is one of the customers who breaks the silence and initiates a phatic action game. It is also worth noting that the topic is other-oriented, focusing on the activity of the service provider and the intensity of this activity at a particular time. Thus, the customer positions herself halfway between phatic and transactional action games. The initiative action after breaking the silence is a strategic one by means of which the customer indirectly offers the dressmaker a possible justification for the delay in finishing the garment: the customer appears sympathetic to the dressmaker, who may have been busy and did not have the necessary time to put on the finishing touches.

In the situation previously discussed, there were three people in the same room and silence could be embarrassing, generating tension. The fragment below is an extract from a dialogue recorded between two persons who were not familiar with each other – a student (A) and a pensioner (B), who were waiting for the minibus to leave from Ploieşti to Bucharest. The actual context requires the adoption of public distance and, optionally, keeping silent.

(3) 1 ((**B** se apropie de **A**))
2 **B:** şi ăsta TOT la bucureşti merge.
3 ((**A** tace))
4 **B:** TOAte care trag acolo merg la bucureşti.
5 **A:** ştiu. de un an TOT cu ele merg.

(IVLRA 2001: 27)

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

1 ((**B** comes closer to **A**))
2 **B:** this one goes to Bucharest too.
3 ((**A** keeps silent))
4 **B:** all that pull there go to Bucharest.
5 **A:** I know. I've been travelling by them for a year now.

I described the attitude towards silence as optional, because individuals can adopt various communicative behaviours in public space, and silence is one of them. In order to emphasize the pensioner's desire to establish social contact with an individual, i.e. the student, I also included a commentary about the movement of the pensioner towards the student (line 1). This comment is relevant since it shows that the first social contact is preceded by performing a physical action, i.e. coming closer to the person the pensioner intended to talk to. The pensioner's initiative action is in the form of a REPRESENTATIVE (*this one goes to Bucharest too*), but does not get any response from the student. According to Weigand (2010: 84), a follow-up reaction is necessary and one should expect ACCEPTANCE of the claim to truth (for example, *Yes, you're right.*/ *Oh, I know.*). Yet, the student kept silent. This reactive action is in accordance with Weigand's view that "the reactive speech act is not restricted to positive acceptance but can range from complete to partial acceptance and to non-acceptance" (2010: 153). Representative speech acts are dialogically-oriented speech acts, aiming at getting a reaction from the hearer, not just telling something about the world around, but speaking about the world around with a goal. In this particular case, the pensioner's goal is to establish a social relationship with another individual.

Let us consider the following situation: when one gets a call while being involved in another phone call or face-to-face dialogue, and cannot take the new call, on the screen there appears "missed call". I admit that there are situations when an individual can press the red button and "reject the call" as well as situations when the call is "put on hold".

I can put forward two explanations for the student's reactive action in the example above, line 3. On the one hand, he kept silent since he may have thought that the statement was not addressed to him, so he ignored it (like a "missed call" on the mobile when you are engaged in a face-to-face conversation with someone else); on the other hand, he kept silent as a refusal to establish social contact (like a "rejected call" you receive on the mobile). In the latter case, the student's reaction (i.e., non-acceptance of social interaction) would have been an aggressive act. Using aggressive actions to respond to the attempt to establish social contact is rude and therefore is dispreferred behaviour. As a result, the pensioner did not interpret the student's silence as an aggressive act, a refusal, but considered it a "missed call", performing again an initiative action, by reformulating his initial action (*all that pull there go to Bucharest*), relying on a basic need of human beings, that of being informed.

Taking into account the dialogical nature of human beings, I interpret silence in line 3 as non-fulfilling the speaker's claim to truth for the moment (i.e., putting the pensioner's initiative action "on hold", not necessarily rejecting it), and further framing silence as an EXPLORATIVE speech act. In interpreting silence as an EXPLORATIVE speech act, I start from the premise that the student did not know whether the statement was addressed to him or not (by keeping silent, he made a claim to knowledge in order to know) and wanted to get the information that the pensioner meant to establish social contact and start a dialogue, by exploiting one of the available conversational resources (see Săftoiu 2012). The pensioner's response came in the form of a slightly modified REPRESENTATIVE speech act (line 4).

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

4.2. Silence as a directive speech act

When discussing directive action games, Weigand considers that the speaker doing such speech acts makes "a claim to volition which is directed to a future practical action or change of behaviour" (2010: 160). In everyday private dialogues, silence may be used as a DIRECTIVE speech act as I will show below.

In a previous research (Săftoiu 2012), I have analysed how shared (spatial and weather conditions) and personal resources are activated in conversation. In example (4), the participants have minimal information about each other: Laurie is part of the staff at a bed and breakfast in Albany, NY, while Mary and John are husband and wife, coming from a city near Boston, MA. Once the spatial resource is used up, Laurie – who started the conversation – is looking for other resources so that their conversation can continue.

(4) 1 Laurie: the people (that) are also staying here are heading to Boston today=
2 John: =oh (really)
3 Laurie: they're from (.) Alaska=
4 John: =oh cool
5 Mary: oh

Laurie links the geographical information she has been provided to a new piece of information: there are other guests at the bed and breakfast who were going to Boston that day. Thus, she turns this information into a newsworthy event and expects the recipients' reaction. John is the first to self-select as next speaker and offers a news receipt (*oh*) and an opportunity for elaboration. It is Laurie's turn to offer a continuation of the newsworthy event: the other guests are from Alaska. Laurie's description is followed by both John and Mary offering news receipts (lines 4 and 5), with John also evaluating the information (*cool*). This shows that the information Laurie offered as a second increment was really news. Since Laurie identifies the other guests by a general class (*the people*) and later uses a pro-form (*they*), it appears that she is not interested in identifying the guests, but in exploiting the initial spatial resource. Once the recipients' attention was captured, Laurie continues with a description of the activities of the other guests, as in example (5):

(5) 1 Laurie: and their one son lives up on Western Avenue with his wife so
2 (0.8)
3 a:nd: uh they have a one-year old grandchild (that they are visiting).
4 (0.4)
5 they're quite nice.
6 (0.8)
7 John: (we're) actually half hour east (so) huhuh

Laurie begins her turn with *and*, showing that she wants to continue the news: not only are the other guests from another state, but they also have a son, who is married and lives in Albany, NY. Laurie displays prior knowledge of the people she is talking about (the use of a personal conversational resource is also evident in the way she limits the number of children to *one son*) and offers her recipients a list of possible topics. However, these may have been relevant if she had been talking to the person(s) who gave her all the details. In

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

that case, asking about the guest's son would have shown "other-attentiveness" (Coupland 2000), showing that interactants maintained and developed a social relationship. In the situation analysed here, Laurie is giving away some private information that she has been entrusted with during previous conversations.

In line 2, Laurie seems to draw a conclusion; she pauses for almost one second and, after elongating *and*, adds new information to her prior description (line 3) as well as an evaluation (line 5). Laurie seems to be in a continuous search for interactional resources since she does not get a verbal response from the recipients, who remain silent (lines 2, 4 and 6). These silences are eloquent and they belong to the hearers more than they belong to the current speaker, especially if one focuses on the silence in line 6. By keeping silent, both Mary and John perform a DIRECTIVE speech act, based on a claim to volition that needs to be fulfilled, yet being aware that there is no sanction involved since they are in an informal situation. In other words, they show resistance to Laurie's resources for interaction and indirectly REQUEST her to change her behaviour as they might consider the information private and do not want to get involved in a conversation that may become too personal.

4.3. Silence as a representative speech act

The final sequence can be preceded by both silence and discourse. When discussing closings, Schegloff (1973) identified a *presequence* announcing the beginning of the final sequence and the final sequence per se, which has an important component: the ritual final exchange. The example below is an excerpt from a business action game between a customer representative (A) and his supplier (B). The customer representative called the supplier in order to discuss about an offer concerning imported building materials.

(6)
1 **A:** e mult mai simplu (0.4) să: să se lucreze: (0.4) în valută.
2 **B:** <P da.> de:ci↓ haideți că eu: o: să mai studiez o dată oferta asta↓ și: vă sun:
3 (0.4) în cursul zilei de astăzi
4 (0.8) vă sun și: mai discutăm. da↑
5 **A:** /ochei/. bine. mulțumesc mult.
6 **B:** bun. săru' mâna[4].
7 **A:** o zi bună. la revedere.

1 **A:** it is much easier (0.4) to: to work with: (0.4) foreign currency.
2 **B:** yes. so: let me I: wi:ll check this offer one more time a:nd I'll give you a ca:ll
3 (0.4) later today
4 (0.8) I'll call you back a:nd we'll talk some more. yeah?
5 **A:** OK. alright. thank you so much.
6 **B:** good. my compliments.
7 **A:** have a good day. good bye.

(IV II 2007: 334)

[4] For further comments on the use of this phrase in Romanian and its translation, see Constantinescu (this issue).

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

Once the customer and the supplier have negotiated and agreed on the way to pay for the merchandise (line 1), the supplier's representative marks the beginning of the closing sequence by the conclusive conjunction "so". By doing so, the speaker implies that he has no more news and proposes to the customer representative to continue the negotiation (line 2). It is clear that the assumed task of ending this particular business action game is not easy: the speaker prolongs the words and hesitates. At the end of line 3, one can identify a transition relevant place, but the customer's representative has nothing to say about the previous issue and consequently keeps silent. Thus, A treated B's utterance as informative, news giving. In terms of dialogic speech acts, silence was used as a REPRESENTATIVE speech act, the customer representative made a simple claim to truth of the type 'that is so' (Weigand 2010: 167) that does not need to be proved. The supplier's representative repeats the information and the customer's representative takes note of it, by means of a COMMENT/ ACKNOWLEDGEMENT (*OK. alright.*), directing the dialogue to an end (line 5).

In business action games, speakers act on the basis of business interests and adopt specific identities relevant to the ongoing negotiation. Yet, business action games are not only about transactional purposes, since towards the end, speakers adopt private/ personal identities relevant to the realization of the final phatic sequence. In the beginning, there seems to be conflicting identities since the supplier representative starts from instrumental goals and keeps to his business identity (*I: wi:ll check this offer one more time*). Since the negotiation was over, maintaining a business identity is no longer relevant. It appears that A's silence was a turning point in the end of the business action game, by means of which the customer representative recognized the newly adopted identity of his interlocutor.

5. CONCLUSION

In this paper, I started from the premise that silence is an intentional and purposeful action in everyday language-in-use by means of which individuals can convey meaningful messages. The speaker has specific intentions, goals, purposes and interests in using silence both as *action*, to make a claim, and *reaction*, to fulfil a claim. Thus, I conceived silence as an integrative part of human communication and discussed it as a speech act following Weigand's taxonomy (2010) of explorative, directive and representative speech acts. Integrating silence in the framework of dialogic speech acts allowed me to analyse instances of silence in everyday language-in-use as a real speech act that is context-bound, probably more than it happens in speech.

In some of the situations I analysed, it appears that silence is treated as a threat and speakers choose to get involved in small talk in order to eliminate this "threat". In such situations, I considered that silence as a first verbal action is an EXPLORATIVE speech act by means of which the speaker orients oneself to knowledge, aiming to get the information necessary for further action, i.e. either getting involved in a phatic episode or in a transactional action game.

I have also analysed everyday private dialogues and reached the conclusion that silence may be used as a DIRECTIVE speech act by means of which the speaker makes a claim to volition so that a future practical action or change of behaviour is obtained from the interlocutor. When a simple claim to truth, that does not need to be proved, is made by the person who keeps silent, then I consider that silence is a REPRESENTATIVE speech act.

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

Silence can be considered an integrated "line" in everyday communication. As dialogic beings, the desire to establish social contact, break the silence or use it strategically is in each of us; it only depends on the context and on the individual conversational goals.

CORPUS

Caragiale, I. L., 1985, *Momente şi schiţe*, Bucureşti, Editura Eminescu.
Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L. (ed), 2002, *Interacţiunea verbală în limba română actuală. Corpus. Schiţă de tipologie* (IVLRA), Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.
Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L. (coord.), 2007, *Interacţiunea verbală II* (IV II), Bucureşti, Editura Universităţii din Bucureşti.

REFERENCES

Agyekum, K., 2002, "The communicative role of silence in Akan", *Pragmatics*, 12, 1, 31–51.
Austin, J. L., 1962, *How to Do Things with Words*, Oxford, Clarendon Press.
Benveniste, E., 1966, *Problèmes de linguistique générale*, Paris, Gallimard.
Blum-Kulka, S., 1997, *Dinner Talk: Cultural Patterns of Sociability and Socialization in Family Discourse*, Mahwah, New Jersey, Lawrence Erlbaum.
Bruneau, T., 1973, "Communicative silences: forms and functions", *The Journal of Communication*, 23, 17–46.
Bühler, K., 1934, *Sprachtheorie: die Darstellungsfunktion der Sprache*, Jena, Gustav Fischer Verlag.
Carlin, A. P., 2003, "On 'owning' silence: talk, texts, and the 'semiotics' of bibliographies", *Semiotica*, 146, 1–4, 117–138.
Chafe, W., 1985, "Some reasons for hesitating", in: D. Tannen, M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*. Norwood, Ablex Publishing, 77–111.
Coupland, J. (ed), 2000, *Small Talk*, London, Longman.
Crown, C. and Feldstein, S., 1985, "Psychological correlates of silence and sound in conversational interaction", in: D. Tannen, M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, Ablex Publishing, 31–54.
Ephratt, M., 2008, "The functions of silence", *Journal of Pragmatics*, 40, 1909–1938.
Halliday M. A. K., 1978, *Language as Social Semiotic*. London: Edward Arnold.
Hymes, D. H., 1972, "On communicative competence", in: J. B. Pride, J. Holmes (eds) *Sociolinguistics. Selected Readings*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 269–293.
Ionescu-Ruxăndoiu, L., 2016, "Keep silent or keep talking! Remarks on silence in Romanian culture", *Language and Dialogue*, 6, 3, 447–463.
Jaworski, A., 1993, *The Power of Silence: Social and pragmatic perspectives*, Newbury Park, Sage Publications.
Jaworski, A. (ed), 1997, *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Berlin, Mouton de Gruyter.
Jaworski, A., 2000, "Silence and small talk", in: J. Coupland (ed), *Small Talk*. London, Longman, 110–132.
Kurzon, D., 2007, "Towards a typology of silence", *Journal of Pragmatics* 39, 1673–1688.
Lebra, T. S., 1987, "The cultural significance of silence in Japanese communication", *Multilingua* 6, 4, 343 – 357.
Lehtonen, J. and K. Sajavaara, 1985, "The silent Finn", in: D. Tannen, M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, Ablex Publishing, 193–201.
Lemak, A., 2012, *Silence, Intercultural Conversation, and Miscommunication*, Unpublished MA thesis, University of Toronto.
Levinson, S., 1992, "Activity types and language", in: P. Drew, J. Heritage (eds), *Talk at Work: Interaction in Institutional Settings*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 66–100.

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

Malinowski, B., 1923, "The problem of meaning in primitive languages", in: C. K. Ogden, I.A. Richards (eds), *The Meaning of Meaning*, London, Routledge, 296–336.
Mehrabian, A., 1971, *Silent Messages*, Wadsworth, California, Belmont.
Nakamura, I., 2004, "Understanding a learner's responses: Uses of silence in teacher-student dialogues", *JALT 2003 at Shizouka Conference Proceedings*, 79–86.
Nakane, I., 2007, *Silence in Intercultural Communication: Perceptions and Performance*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
Oishi, E., 2006, "Austin's speech act theory and the speech situation", *Esercizi Filosofici* 1, 1–14.
Pomerantz, A., 1984, "Agreeing and disagreeing with assessments: Some features of preferred/ dispreferred turn shapes", in: J. M. Atkinson, J. C. Heritage (eds), *Structures of Social Action: Studies in Conversation Analysis*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 57 – 101.
Sacks, H., 1972, "On the analyzability of stories by children", in: J. J. Gumperz, D. Hymes (eds), *Directions in Sociolinguistics: The Ethnography of Communication*, New York, Rinehart and Winston, 325–345.
Sacks, H., E. Schegloff and G. Jefferson, 1974, "A simplest systematics for the organization of turn-taking in conversation", in: J. Schenkein (ed.), *Studies in the Organization of Conversational Interaction*, New York, Academic Press, 7–55.
Săftoiu, R., 2009, *Discursul fatic: un ritual interactional*, Bucureşti, Editura Universității din Bucureşti.
Săftoiu, R., 2012, "An exercise in the theory of conversational resources", *Language and Dialogue*, 2, 2, 244–261.
Samarin, W. S., 1965, "Language of silence", *Practical Anthropology*, 12, 115–119.
Saville-Troike, M., 1985, "The place of silence in an integrated theory of communication", in: D. Tannen, M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, Ablex Publishing, 3–18.
Schegloff, E., Sacks, H., 1973, "Opening up closings", *Semiotica*, 7, 289–327.
Schneider, K., 1988, *Small Talk. Analysing Phatic Discourse*, Marburg, Hitzeroth.
Scollon, R., 1985, "The machine stops: Silence in the metaphor of malfunction", in: D. Tannen, M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, Ablex Publishing, 21–30.
Searle, J. R., 1969, *Speech Acts. An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
Searle, J. R., 1975, "Indirect speech acts", in: P. Cole, J. L. Morgan (eds), *Syntax and Semantics*, vol. 3, New York, Academic Press, 59–82.
Searle, J. R. and D. Vanderveken, 1985, *Foundations of Illocutionary Logic*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press.
Sifianou, M., 1997, "Silence and politeness", in: A. Jaworski (ed.), *Silence: Interdisciplinary Perspectives*, Berlin. Mouton de Gruyter, 63–84.
Tannen, D., 1985, "Silence: Anything but", in: D. Tannen and M. Saville-Troike (eds), *Perspectives on Silence*, Norwood, Ablex Publishing, 93 – 111.
Tracy, K., N. Coupland (eds), 1990, *Multiple Goals in Discourse*, Clevedon, Multilingual Matters.
Vainiomäki, T., 2004, "Silence as a cultural sign", *Semiotica*, 150, 347–361.
Weigand, E., 2003, "Dialogue Analysis 2000: Towards a human linguistics", in: M. Bondi (ed.), *Dialogue Analysis 2000*, Berlin, de Gruyter, 15–28.
Weigand, E., 2009, "The argumentative power of words or how to move people's minds with words", *L'analisi linguistica e letteraria* XVI, 1, 73–92.
Weigand, E., 2010, *Dialogue: The Mixed Game*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.
Weigand, E., 2011, "Paradigm changes in linguistics: From reductionism to holism", *Language Sciences*, 33, 544–549.
Weigand, E., 2012, "Professional action games. Theory and practice", in: S. Măda, R. Săftoiu (eds), *Professional Communication across Languages and Cultures*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins, 43–60.
Wittgenstein, L., 1953, *Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, London, Routledge & Kegan Paul.
Zuo, Y., 2002, *The Golden Silence: A Pragmatic Study on Silence in Dyadic English Conversation*, München, Lincom Europa.

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)

BDD-A27739 © 2018 Editura Academiei
Provided by Diacronia.ro for IP 216.73.217.31 (2026-11-27 06:04:19 UTC)