# IS SILENCE GOLDEN? CONVERSATIONS OF NATIVE SPEAKERS OF RIMI IN SINGIDA- TANZANIA

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**Abstract**
This paper provides an empirical examination of the perception of silence as a communicative act in a Rimi cultural context. Four casual conversations with Rimi native speakers were examined. Silence in conversation was determined using a turn-taking framework in Conversation Analysis previously described by Sacks et al. (1974) as a turn-taking organization. Native speakers of Rimi like people in other cultures have beliefs and myths regarding silence. However, these cultural artifacts are often hardly reflected in their real conversation practice. Rimi's belief regarding the value of silence dictates avoidance of silence because they consider it a danger and veiled bad intentions. Despite this cultural orientation regarding silence, in some contexts, Rimi native speakers give it a positive value. The findings show that silence can be used for terminating a topic, showing agreement, and indicating emotions such as sadness. Silence therefore can lead to either harmonious or troubled conversation at the same time. Many prolific studies have shown that Eastern cultures appreciate silence while the Western cultures silence is attributed to incompetence and lack of willingness to participate in communication. This cultural dichotomy regarding the perception of silence between Western and Eastern cultures gives an impression that cultures can either perceive silence positively or negatively. Data from this study show that this understanding is faulty. The data indicate that silence cannot be described categorically as solely positively or negatively perceived in a particular culture; instead, it should be viewed as a variable entity within a single cultural group.

**Keywords:** communication, Rimi, silence

**Introduction**
    The conception of silence in terms of what silence does in talk constitutes a previously underspecified and un-explicated component of turn-taking organization. In Previous accounts of conversations, silence was taken for granted and it was not included in the analysis probably because it lacks phonetic realization. Silence helps parties in a conversation to manage the transition from one speaker to another at the possible completion point of the first turn-

constructional unit or when the current speaker selects someone to talk to next, for instance by asking him/her a question, then the speaker should stop to allow someone who had been selected to begin a next turn. This kind of silence can have a proposition content of telling another party 'I have finished my turn; you can now start yours'. If a speaker would continue talking without incidents of silence, the conversation would be erratic. However, Jefferson (1989) stated that the maximum standard of silence is only 1 second before the speakers start feeling uncomfortable and try to terminate it; it can also be added that before the speakers find the intended meaning for those who appreciate it. It is not uncommon however during conversation to find conversation partners making silences longer than a second. Speakers opt to remain silent purposely to communicate certain intentions and convey information. Eades (2007, p. 285) observes that although silence "sounds" the same in any dialect it can have different meanings, functions, and interpretations. In subsequent years there has been a plethora of studies on silence and researchers such as Ephratt (2008), Cwodhury et al. (2017), and Tannen and Saville-Trioke (1985). They have indicated that silence has a communicative role in conversations

This paper explores the value of silence in Rimi's casual conversations in the view of the classic English aphorism - silence is golden. Gold by its nature has a shiny and lustrous surface. This makes it attractive and liked by people, meaning that silence is a virtue. Indeed, it is logically acceptable that a silent one can in no way look ugly enter into an argument with someone else, or hurt someone via his words. This saying implies that silence surpasses other discourse aspects in conveying a polite message, which helps in avoiding unpleasant situations. Silence therefore is meant to maintain, mend, and foster people's relationships. Paradoxically, this saying is a heritage of Western individualistic societies where silence is viewed more negatively as a lack of attention and initiative (Jandt, 2004, p. 116). Taciturn people are judged as incoherent, sullen, passive, unresponsive, uncooperative, lazy, stupid, and do not make sense when you interact with them (Scollon, 1985). The attitude that silence in conversation is negatively evaluated in most Western societies is alluded to in the comment of an actress about her father's silence as quoted by Tannen (1990) Pg. 2: *I can remember long car rides where not a word could be spoken, I would be so nervous that my palms would be sweaty from riding in absolute silence with my father.*

This conveys the sense that to Eurocentric Americans, silence is never golden. It has another face of graphite properties – non - lustrous, brittle, and unattractive. In this sense, a silent person risks his or her image and can break up the relationship with others. On the other hand, in Eastern societies, also referred to as collective cultures where relationship in group membership is more important than individual ability, silence is valued, and treated as a positive conversational aspect, a reflection and circumspection rather than a dissymmetry relationship. For Eastern societies, silence conveys interpersonal sensitivity, respect, truthfulness, wisdom, affirmation, and personal dignity (Jandt, 2004, p.116). The Japanese, for instance, trust people with fewer words than those who speak too much (Lebra, 1987). Some proverbs warn people against the use of words and highlight the belief that silence is beneficial and verbal expression has consequences for the speaker: *kiji mo nakazuba utaremai*, which means 'silence keeps one safe' and *mono ieba kuchibiru samushi aki no kaze* which means 'it is

better to leave many things unsaid'(Jones, 2011, p.18). The Japanese aphorisms and instructions conform to the Western adage that gives a positive appraisal to silence. The oddity is that silence for the West is disapproved although their classic aphorism instructs that it is golden. Some researchers on silence have categorized cultures into such main labels, "silent East" cultures - Asia and the Middle East and "eloquent West" – Europe and America (Nakane, 2007, p.2). The dichotomy regarding silence between Western practices and Eastern beliefs among the researchers creates a seemingly categorical statement that the Westerners dislike silence while for the Asians, silence is valued and positively appraised.

What makes silence more complex and ambiguous is that it can be interpreted differently by both outsiders and insiders. Despite the discrepancy between the beliefs and practices of silence among Western societies, the findings on silence in the West and the East suggest that cultures may be divided by this dichotomy. This paper examines silence among the native speakers of Rimi to find out whether or not silence is golden. and; hence, positively perceived and the effect that such perception may have among the group members.

*Nature of silence*

Silence is the absence of phonation or a pause occurring either between turns or within turns during a conversation. Ephratt (2008) differentiated communicative silence which is a means chosen by the speaker for particular verbal communication from the silence of a listener (when it is not their turn) or silencing of the (more powerful) speaker. In conversation, people use words or the absence of words to communicate their intentions and feelings. Lebra (2009, p.1) contends that silence is communicative in all cultures. Despite their lack of material support, and fleeting, apparent, and momentary nature, silences in conversations have communicative value. Samarin (1965, p.115) suggests that "Silence can have meaning, like the zero in mathematics; it is an absence with a function." The ability to understand the meaning of an aspect that lacks phonetic realization follows that 'people hear language but not sound' (Pinker, 1994, p.158). Tyler (in Tannen, 2007, p.38) observes that meaning is to be found, above all, "in the resonating silences of the unsaid". The stupendous reality is that language cannot be understood unless we begin by observing that speech consists above all of silences... (Becker in Tannen, 2007, p.37). All these contentions suggest that silence is perceivable in the same way as vocalized words.

In the field of scholarship, various types of silence have been offered mostly in terms of their relationship with speech. Bilma (1994, p.79) points out that conversational silence is the absence of talk where talk might relevantly occur. Sacks et al. (1974) distinguished three main types of silence in conversation: pauses (silences within turns), gaps (shorter silences between turns at Transition Relevance Place), and lapses (extended silences between turns). This categorization was based on what comes after or precedes the silence in the conversation. This paper focuses on Sacks et al. (1974) categorization, specifically in silence occurring between speakers or extended silences between turns. A good example of this kind of silence is provided by Atkinson and Drew (1979, p.52)

A: Is there something bothering you or not?
(1.0)
A: Yes or no
(1.5)
A: Eh?
B: No.

In turn-taking norms, A, by asking a direct question to B, was selecting B for the next turn and B was responsible for responding. But B does not verbally reply. A then reframes the utterance into a guiding question that needs only a yes/no response; B still does not choose any of the provided options. Finally, A uses a prompt, which succeeds in eliciting a negative answer. This kind of silence that A kept on interacting with which does not conform to the expected norms of interaction, is not a void; rather, it has communicative significance. B did not ignore this silence because he/she knew that it had contents. This study will examine this kind of silence or communicative silence in Ephratt's (2008) term in casual conversation among the native speakers of Rimi.

### *Ambiguity and polysemous silence*

In everyday conversational interaction, silence makes interaction more uncertain, thereby making it richer and more involving. Theoretically, the ambiguous and polysemous nature of silence is considered to arise from different perceptions of what silence is thought to represent in a particular situation. Silence is *golden* if it is perceived to represent something positive; for example, when interpersonal rapport is so great that people understand each other without putting their thoughts into words (Tannen, 1990, p.2). Moreover, silence is valued when it represents the avoidance of something negative; for instance, instead of saying something unpleasant, one chooses to be silent or silent when assumed to represent proper respect. However, in uncertain situations or disruptive conversations, silence is impolite and it underscores the troubled relationship. The recipient of silence may perceive the silence negatively as an intentional threat aimed at challenging him or her. However, just as one has the liberty to say anything in conversation, one uses such liberty to not say anything. Despite such right, silence poses a substantial challenge than uttered words because it is materially nothing. It was for this reason that Tannen (2007) wrote in the title of her article, *"Silence - anything but"* meaning that in conversational interaction, a person has the freedom to say anything; silence is among the 'anything' in conversation but it is nothing in terms of what can be heard. Additionally, silence in some contexts such as in unfocused encounters may not be heeded and it lacks conversational value. The complexity of silence lies in the fact that it 'sounds' the same in all cultures but it differs in the way it is perceived and interpreted in those different cultures. In any conversation silence is common but it may not be heeded when it lasts within the expected duration. But when the expected length of silence is flouted, a person's speech becomes marked and the meanings carried by silence are sought. Silence is therefore a communicative component of high uncertainty during both intra-cultural and inter-cultural exchanges; as such it requires a more scientific investigation. Also, Gundlach (2010, p.1) quotes Bonvillain (1993, p.47) stating that silence is "an act of non-verbal communication that transmits many kinds of meaning, depending on cultural

norms of interpretation". Silence is therefore both polysemous and ambiguous at the same time; hence, understanding it needs more energy than a verbal message (Jaworski, 1993, p.24). This is because the hearer needs to infer what is mediated by the absence of words as it is not explicit. This can occur regardless of whether the speaker and hearer belong to the same culture or not. Silences therefore in both intra-cultural and inter-cultural exchanges are speech segments of high uncertainty (Enninger, 1991, p.3). However the ambiguity of silence is frailer to cultural outsiders in that it can trigger an interpretation in the decoder that does not match the speaker's intentions (Basso in Enninger, 1991). Enninger (1991, p.3) states that among others, silence can signify turn-planning, turn-relinquishing, hesitation before taking a turn, ratification of the previous turn's content, disagreement, non-committal, prevarication, embarrassment, etc. (semi- or miscommunication). Gumperz (1977) posits that the absence of phonation causes initially graver problems in interethnic interaction in comparison to other components of the discourse system.

These cases therefore show that silence in interaction has two sides; the golden, lustrous side which is attractive, and the graphite side, gloomy which is disapproved as such it has the potential for both intra-cultural and cross-cultural pragmatic failures.

These diverse notions of the same concept show that silence is a complex and ambiguous linguistic phenomenon. The ambiguous nature of silence makes it a richer research area because it conveys different meanings, functions, and interpretations to different people in different cultures. This hinders generalization about silence; lack of generalizations regarding its functions and perceptions implies also that a lot can yet be done in this area. This study therefore intends to extend the existing literature by examining this blurred socio-cultural phenomenon from socio-pragmatic perspectives.

Another issue regarding silence concerns its length, it has been suggested that shorter gaps are characteristic of competitive conversations, such as talks involving arguments or talks involving intimate and embarrassing information as opposed to those in cooperative conversations, such as friendly chat (Jaffe & Feldstein, 1970; Trimboli & Walker, 1984). Gaps are said to increase with cognitive load, complex and unfamiliar tasks, references mentioned in the conversation, and eye contact between participants (Beattie & Barnard, 1979; Bull & Aylett, 1998; Cappella, 1979). However, in daily casual exchange silence is unpredictable and the interlocutors are mostly influenced by socio-cultural norms rather than other factors Saville-Troike (1994, p.3945) remarks that "The amount of talk vs. silence that is prescribed is closely tied to social values and norms". How long the silent response takes, for example, depends on the time the other part takes before he either interrupts the silence or reacts with any sort of response. Interlocutors, therefore need to understand the different manifestations of silence and how its different meanings role up in different contexts if they are to achieve successful communication. Lack of this understanding can lead to both intra-cultural and inter-cultural miscommunication and pragmatic failure. The consequences of misinterpretation of silence range from minor annoyance to ferocious life destruction; two examples of a wife and husband and the Greece-Egypt tension show the mild rage and extreme savage brought by silence respectively:

"Why do you turn on me? What did I do?" (wife)
Silence (husband)
"What did I do?"
"Look, let's just go to sleep now. Let's just forget about it "
"Forget what? "
Silent
"it was something in the movie, wasn't it? "
"…… It was a funeral scene….. The little boy looking at her dead mother. Something got you there. That is when you got depressed "
Silence
"Well, wasn't it? "
Silence
"Oh, come on. Bennett, you're making me *furious*. Please tell me. Please "

The subjugation of a wife and devastation result from the husband's silence and the failure of the wife to interpret her husband's silence. His silence worked against her wife because of her insistence that her husband talk.

Another example points to the period when there was tension between Egypt and Greece years back. Egyptian pilots radioed expressing their intention to land their plane at a Cypriot airbase; the Greek air traffic controllers responded with silence. While the Greeks intended their silent response to communicate their refusal of the permission to land, the Egyptians interpreted the silence as assent. When the plane landed, the Greeks fired on the plane, resulting in the death of several people (Saville-Troike in Krieger, 2001, p. 233). Sifianou (1997) reports that, to the Greeks, silence means unfriendliness, and bad character, and that danger lurks in the silent person. These two examples underscore the researchers' observations that silence is a vital component of conversation and there is a need to understand how it works in different cultures, including the Rimi natives.

The negative effect of communication has been referred to by scholars in different wording, such as "inter-ethnic miscommunication" (Scollon & Scollon, 1981); "cross-cultural miscommunication" (Hoffer, 1985); and "cross-cultural pragmatic failure" (Thomas, 1983, p.91). All the terms on these communication problems refer to inability to understand the meaning of what is said. In this study, however, this miscommunication includes also the potential inability to understand what is not said. Specifically, the study deals with how the native speakers of Rimi perceive communicative silence in casual conversation and the resultant intra-ethnic and probable cross-cultural pragmatic success or failure. In particular, the study focuses on the silence in conversation occurring at the next speaker's turn or in Sacks et al.'s term at TRPs, also known as *significant silences* (Knapp, 1999). Likewise, when the Rimi speaker interacts with another person whose norms do not agree, it is hypothesized that there can be greater cross-cultural communication than the interaction between the insiders. If the outsiders consider the silence of the next speaker as dis- preferred second pair part or as an omission of an obligatory second pair part the effect is that both have the potential for intra-ethnic pragmatic failure and harsh judgment of the producer of silence.

### *Silence and the context of the situation*

Conversation is the sharing and exchange of information between people in real-life concrete situations. To understand the organization of conversation and how people carry it out and encode and decode meaning in words and non-verbal cues such as silence, it is important to consider the context where a particular conversation takes place. Halliday and Hassan (1985, p.8) showed that language can (better) be understood in its context of situation for every society. This is because the meaning of the same word or other language behaviors can vary depending on the surrounding context. The surrounding discourse for instance provides the most immediate context of any utterance. This means that the position of an utterance about the preceding and the following utterance is critical in interpreting its meaning. For example, a go-ahead utterance *okay do what you like* at the end of a long conversation in which one person is trying to advise another person to abandon a certain plan but the person advised insisting on his plan is different from the *do what you like* when someone provides approval. Other features of context that are crucial in interpreting and attributing intention to any conversational aspect include physical context, previous encounters, co-text, and type of activity.

Despite this consideration, there is still the risk that some aspects may be misunderstood; silence in particular requires more effort from the hearer who should not only work out the reason why no material signal is uttered but also what is mediated by the absent phonation. The problem is graver when the conversational partners have different experiences on their cultural knowledge and if they belong to different norms; this may lead to cross-cultural pragmatic failure and personal or cultural stereotyping.

Halliday's (1978) notion of the context of a situation comprises culture and social context. This helps the addressee to anticipate what the addresser is going to say (Halliday, 1978, p.110). According to Halliday and Hassan (1985, p.12), three situational features are critical to interpreting social context, namely *field*, *Tenor*, and *Mode*.

*Field* of discourse: It refers to what is happening or the subject matter- a total event and the nature of social interaction taking place. It includes also to whom the event is happening, where, when, and why it is happening. This means that the speaker talks about something, for instance, the finals of football or camping experience. *The tenor* of discourser is the social relation between interlocutors in a speech situation. It means the participants in the interaction, and their relationships, which include their power relations, their level of formalities their social role, and status. A speaker talks about something (field) and simultaneously establishes social relationships or maintains interpersonal ties with the addressee. It affects the choices of items in the linguistic system and strategies in an exchange. *Mode* of discourse means the function of text in the event. What the participants expect the discourse to do for them in the speech event. This includes also the channel or medium through which the information is presented; it can be written or spoken- monologue or dialogue.

The knowledge of contexts helps interactants orient themselves in the context of the situation, thereby making it possible for participants to perceive and predict the meaning of what is about to be said in the conversation with a certain degree of precision. The relationship between discourse and context is therefore

binding. Eggins and Slade (2004, p.8) point out that when the language (discourse) is removed from its context, it can be ambiguous. This contention also applies to silence because it conveys meanings in the way the spoken or written words do. The removal of silence from its context leads to greater ambiguity. Pietronilla and Mocci (2005) specify that isolating silence from the environment prevents the possibility of understanding and evaluating the motivation of silence itself. The famous airplane passenger example explains this notion: *"The airplane passenger sitting with his eyes shut……….."*; it suggests that this passenger's silence shouts out that ' I don't want you to disturb me'. Among other cues that may function as vectors for clarifying this message, silence can be deprived of clarity if it is divorced from its environment. It is argued that while silence conveys the passenger's dislike of talking; the signs of context, stiffness, tension, posture, terrified gaze, some shivers, and the sweaty forehead underscore his fear in the context of the terrible experience of flying, without which it would be difficult to understand why the person is in this state. Pietronilla and Mocci (2005) conclude that this context will complete the message in its interactivity. Additionally, Jensen (1973) points out that silence is sometimes followed by other non-verbal clues, such as facial expressions which may (also) have some role in communication. Because silence has the attributes of positive and negative value, it can wound or heal the feelings of the interlocutors, which Jensen calls *affecting*. He further states that silence functions as Linkage which can help in binding or severing relationships.

Another feature is the context of culture. This refers to meanings, assumptions, and expectations shared by people in certain communities. Context of culture means culturally evolved expectations of ways of behaving. The context can therefore basically be considered as the cultural background or framework surrounding the communication situation. Hall (1959) identified the High and Low cultures dichotomy. Low cultures emphasize on individual; they value rhetoric and self-expression; they tend to be more direct and precise. Most of Western Europe and North America are categorized as Low Cultures. On the contrary, High cultures emphasize interpersonal relationships and group harmony. They therefore tend to be more indirect and formal. Silence in conversation is therefore used and interpreted by expectations shared by people in their cultural group.

### *Theoretical framework*

This paper adopted Conversation Analysis as its theoretical framework. Conversation Analysis is an Ethnomethodology frame used for studying naturally – occurring talk and talk-in-interaction. CA is premised on the notion that conversation has a natural organization that shows different features in different settings. CA theory was chosen because of its efficiency in providing an analytical description of the way people organize their interactions using spontaneous data from situated and contextualized talk. It is held that people's talk contains features that influence how subsequent speakers will react. CA therefore focuses on the relationship between the preceding utterances with the following ones and the effect they have on each other (Arminen, 1999, p.251); this means that talk is context-shaped. CA analysts indulge in coding and analyzing units of interaction seeking to understand how people interpret the

meaning of others' talk in terms that are relevant to the task they are trying to achieve (Hutchby & Woofitt, 1998, p.39). Given that silence lacks material substance, it is difficult to interpret it in isolation but through CA the interpretation is made possible because the meaning of silence is considered in terms of the preceding and subsequent units, particularly when the units are verbalized. In conversation, there can be many silences and some of these may be so common or fleeting that they scarcely justify any attention. Yet, some silences, particularly those between speakers (gap/lapses), which are the focus of this study, need attention whether they are produced intentionally or not because listeners tend to attach meaning to them.

**Method**

This paper adopted qualitative designs to understand the functions and perceptions of silence among the native speakers of Rimi. Qualitative methods help to get to the insider's perspective regarding their definition and the meanings they attach to things, situations, and events (Punch, 1998, p.243). Qualitative studies are appropriate because they allow the use of multiple methods to interpret and reflect on data; the researcher's knowledge, skills, and experience are used to explore the social context in which people practice silence (Harahsheh, 2012, p.50). Communicative silence is a complex phenomenon that needs multiple methods; 'methods of inquiry that are open, flexible, and sensitive to the complex and interconnected world of people (Punch, 1998, p.243).

The data for this study was collected through different methods, namely observation, interview, focused group discussion, and audio recording. The research used both purposive and random sampling. The study targeted 10 native Rimi participants from various social categories for both conversations and interviews. Among these, 7 females and 3 males were distributed unevenly from the five villages in the Singida Region. The researcher then upon listening to the recorded conversation and noting areas where there was silence, convened the participants for an interview session. On some occasions, I interviewed respondents with whom I did not record their conversations. I asked them questions about their use and interpretation of silence in conversations and the cultural and social connotations that silence carries in their culture.

*Data analysis procedure*

The data were transcribed both through the NVivo program and manually. I transcribed the conversations and chunked relevant places where communicative silence appeared. Several turns before and after the communicative silence were included in the description to grasp the thrust that silence had on the conversation. Praat software and mobile phone android App were used to detect and calculate the length of the silence at each of the selected portions of the conversation.

**Findings and Discussion**

This section presents the data on perceptions and attributions of silence among native speakers of Rimi within the framework of Conversation Analysis. Silence can trigger different interpretations depending on the cultural norms and the context where the conversation occurs. The Chapter also provides interpretation for each occurrence of silence in the conversation and the

subsequent interviews and Focused Group Discussion results that were conducted after the conversation events.

### Silence as an expression of politeness

Tawo women, **Beatrice** and **Emisa** are talking about a son of **Beatrice**. After her husband's death, **Beatrice** stayed with her son.  Only lately her son's paternal uncle wants to take her son with him. She complains that the son's uncle did not care about her son's welfare when he was at a tender age and only that when the boy has grown up and can take care of himself, his uncle demands responsibility for taking care of him.

After a lengthy discussion, in line 27 **Emisa** tells **Beatrice** that her son's uncle had approached her several times asking her to assist him in convincing **Beatrice** to accept his request to take his nephew with him: **ina maana into rasee rama triiko miinge agorereghetria faaka** (27) - *It was not only on that day, he has been talking about this matter for quite long.*

**Beatrice** keeps silent for 08 seconds in line 28; she then hedges before saying: **Mhuu! ne gweeso faafo no mojo fana mwaghea mojompa ochongo**- *it really pains me a lot.* She was therefore really sad. Her silence partly conveyed sadness; this was revealed in her prior silence explicit verbal expression that she was reminded of the bitter past. She also revealed that had she not considered social discretion, she could have uttered something annoying: **lakini ngojooworia tu nehaanye woore ne soko cho mwanya ndoogho ho ngotreenda woore** - *but what else should I have to say because you are my relatives; I can do nothing.* She therefore chose to respond through silence.

In other words, **Beatrice** used silence as a strategy to avoid threatening the negative face of the hearer by not saying something embarrassing or offensive. She therefore uses silence for politeness reasons. Silence, therefore, is used both as an expression of agony as well as a politeness strategy.

### Silence to express embarrassment
**Excerpt 2**

50    **Mbuguni**: Yani yani yani yani (05)
      *yani yani yani yani (05)*
51    **Juma**:  yasii itrina gefiimo mboyane
      *those don't have a scale, my friend*
52    **Mbuguni**:     Hela yayoo yoyaghaa =
      *money is just wasted=*
53    = Atree ho' ho' geendo * mokheema okoo wa wa wa, ogomedooya hela
       kono age kaaku.
      *why don't you just go and screw a woman, wa wa wa, instead of
       wasting money for nothing*
54    **Juma**: (09)
55    **Mbuguni**:    viija wang'u
       *okay fine*
56    **Juma**: Aree baba wang'u
      *Okay fine dad*

**Excerpt 1**

46 **Lily**:        (.) Okhaanyu? Nanyaanyu?
                   *from your home? By who?*

47 **Asha**:       (0.3) na baba
                   *by my father*

48 **Lily**:        aaa↑ ho moghosya?
                   aaa↑*what about your husband?*

49 **Asha**:       mmm mhuu! aghoosya agenyatrooro gweeso atrogofa motaji wala
                   ntooni. (02)
                   *mmm mhuu, the Rimi husbands, won't give you (their wives) any*
        *capital*

Communicative silence may also be used to communicate embarrassment. An embarrassing statement that was given by one participant was responded to by the next speaker with silence. During this conversation, other people who were not close friends of the interlocutors were also present. In Excerpt 2 **Juma** is talking to **Mbuguni** who he is familiar with but older than he is. The man is complaining about money that he claims is wasted for nothing. **Juma,** in line 51, tries to tell him to ignore and that he should never mind because there is no specific way to evaluate whether contributions on the issue for which someone spends money are worth a certain amount or not "yasii itrina gefiimo mboyane - *those don't have a scale my friend.* But **Mbuguni** in line 53 insists that, instead of wasting money in that way, it was better to give it to a woman (sex worker): *Atree ho' ho' geendo * mokheema okoo..;* **Juma** is embarrassed and keeps silent during his turn in line 54; **Mbuguni** waits a response from Juma for 09 seconds in line 55. When he learns that **Juma** literary through his silence is telling him that he felt embarrassed by his statement and that he is not willing to make further contributions, **Mbuguni** gives up the conversation and bids farewell to his counterpart in line 55 by uttering **viija wang'u-** *okay fine.* **Juma** accepted quickly the counterpart proposal to part. Similar findings are also reported by Saville-Troike (1982: 23) that in English, silence in conversation is an embarrassment except for special reasons. Saville-Troike (1982, p. 23) and Schnapper (1979) reported also that native English speakers have very short time frames for responses or conversational turn-taking and find silences embarrassing.

Silence in embarrassment is also shown in Extract 1 above line 44. **Lily** asked **Asha** where she got money to open her business. In line 45 **Asha** remains silent for 06 seconds indicating embarrassment. She is embarrassed because she had to ask for money from her parents. In Rimi, particularly for a married woman to ask for money from parents is embarrassing. She should not demand living expenses from other people, particularly her parents. **Asha** was aware of this Rimi norm, she was ambivalent about saying what is true but embarrassing or saving her face by saying that which she believes to be false. She was embarrassed and she was silent for 06 seconds. Her embarrassment is further highlighted by her vague statement in line 45 by that she got the money from her home. This would better perhaps be assumed that she got it from some members of her family other than her parents. But **Lily** in line 46 did not cede and wanted to know specifically a person who gave it to her. **Asha** finally mentions her father in line 47. The exchange is repeated in Extract 1 below.

The findings therefore indicate that silence is used when words cannot adequately express one's emotions or that may threaten the speaker's face or the face of the addressee. Silence in this sense is a strategy to dissolve or mitigate the risk of face loss of the speaker or the producer of silence. These findings are similar to what was observed by Hieke in Harahsheh (2012, p.184) who points out that silence can be used as a means for the speaker to produce suitable speech in both content and form. One of the assumptions by Hieke in Harahsheh (2012, p. 184) that a speaker should take into account of speaking is that his speech should be semantically, lexically, logically, stylistically, and rhetorically intelligible. **Asha** therefore during her turn kept silent to afford herself time to choose a word that would not embarrass her but which was logically appropriate and rhetorically convincing. In this assumption-making process however fast it may be, the occasions of silence are inevitable in making such conversational considerations.

### *Silence to express disagreement*

70 **Chambe:** trii nugoweya na cho wakiraa-
                *But I'm asking you; why are you silent?*
71 **Mogi:** (06)
72 **Chambe**: eooo arokiraa yioo nena dahaa nogoweya okire aree kira reoo mpaka fadio *-Eooo go on being silent (I am not scared of your silence), I was asking you, but you are silent; well! be silent today and tomorrow ((I don't care)).*

Silence is reported to be used as a politeness strategy in social interaction to avoid confrontation and disagreement (Jaworski & Stephen, 1998; Sifianou, 1997). The findings of this study show that silence was used to express disagreement. Because direct verbal disagreement may be considered rude, people would want to show their disagreement with their communication partner through silence. Silence in the context of disagreement can be meant to prepare one for a more appropriate response to his or her disagreement. The emotional effect of direct verbal disagreement is thus mitigated by delaying the response to look for a more suitable disagreement word or by expressing the disagreement through silence itself. Along the conversation alignment, FPP should be followed by either the preferred SPP or the dispreferred SPP. If the SPP is dispreferred, then, the response tends to be delayed in search of a more appropriate word. However, if the speaker fails to get a word to lessen the impact of disagreement, silence will be used instead because it goes beyond the limitation of words and allows the expression of an extreme psychological state (Jaworski, 1993). Silence signals certain emotional states of participants engaging in talk. In its negative value, silence can indicate a bad relationship and a worsening communication. The negative valuation of silence in conversation, apart from providing clues about appalling relationships, signals the same quality to the contents of talk and the agents in conversation.

The findings of the study show that silence communicates disagreement between interlocutors. When the interlocutors disagree on a particular matter, instead of communicating the disagreement verbally, one uses silence instead. For example, **Mogi** and **Chambe** are chatting over different topics. They began talking about an actor they saw in a movie. They dispute whether the actor they

are talking about is the one who also played in another movie. **Mogi** tells **Chambe** she mistook the actor in the *Murder Call movie* and tries to describe his appearance: **na mukufee majee a nkosa alafuntuuka yakwe na nyinge alafu njirotrikii** *thick black hair and fair complexion.* (Line 64). After lengthy arguments, in line 69 **Mogi** decided to end the argument through silence that ended in seven seconds.

This silence served to tell **Chambe** that the conversation was not going in the right direction and an opportunity to cancel undesirable interpretation if it appeared to be against the producer of silence. The cancellation of negative interpretation is possible because of the indirectness of silence that allows more than one interpretation. Tannen (1985) pointed out that to accomplish a speech act by the use of silence is, indeed, an extreme manifestation of indirectness. Silence can be used as a punishment to the speaker for what the producer of silence takes to be misbehavior of his or her conversation partner. **Chambe,** in line 70, took the floor again and probed **Mogi** to answer her previous question. This means that **Chambe** was interacting with the silence of **Mogi** because she interpreted it in some ways. Again, **Mogi** in her turn responded with silence, **Chambe** then reacted with indifference telling **Mogi** that if she intended to scare her with silence, she was not and that she also did not care about terminating the conversation. This means despite **Chambe**'s comments that she did not care about **Mogi**'s silence, **Chambe** was offended by **Chambe**'s silent response. it is for this reason that she decided to end the conversation.

This shows **Chambe** interpreted **Mogi's** silence negatively as an intention to threaten her and it is a reason that she terminates the conversation. This perception probably matches **Mogi'**s intention because she condones the termination of the conversation.

In **Chambe** and **Mogi's** examples, silences were triggered by disagreement between the interlocutors. The recipients of the silent responses interpreted these silences negatively resulting in disrupting the conversation although not necessarily their relationship. Examples, where silent responses result from disagreement, were also evident in another conversation where the same girls were talking about a primary school teacher who was bitten by a rabid dog. They were discussing the same event but each had a different referent person; they also disagreed on whether the person was bitten by a mad dog or not. When the speakers feel that they have failed in claiming common ground, they are likely to end the conversation by both being silent; as such, finally, **Mogi** and **Chambe** took themselves out of the conversation by both keeping silent.

### Interviewees' views on silence

During interviews and Focused Group Discussions, the respondents had the following views regarding taciturnity:

### Silence as a virtue to a woman

During the interview, one of my respondents **- Babu** stated that the silence of one conversation partner means ignoring and disregarding another partner. This means that **Babu** perceived silence as a negative conversation component, which invites negative interpretations. However, the participant revealed that silence is

not perceived the same between men and women in the Rimi culture, particularly if there is an argument between them.

**Mokhema ne wakiira wasoo mooja, ina maana wasoo namohumaa au wanjoghofaa au wayayaanja makosa lakini ne wa we dere dere reo mwagikwatra, mogombana ruuve**- *A woman who remains silent (when we argue) is the best; it means I overpowered her, she is scared of me, she has admitted her mistakes but f a talkative woman is easy to quarrel with.*

This reflects a social categorization in which masculinity is accorded a higher social status scale than femininity. This is contrary to the findings reported in a classic study of *Blue-Collar Marriage* which shows that powerful people use silence as a tool of dominance (Tannen, 2003). The findings of this study are however similar to the findings quoted by Tannen in Bratt and Tucker (2003) that powerful people do the talking and powerless ones are silenced. It is claimed that men dominate women by silencing them. Braithwaite (1990) observes that silence occurs in situations marked for significant power differentials between participants. **Babu** further added that:

**twee gwa akheema njiija sana maana vee ne omoghosya ogomosihi, maana mokhema wane ogotregheya ruuve na ogokiiri na mapema** - *Silence for women is highly desired; it means she is obedient and quickly admits her mistakes.*

This means that for the Rimi culture where males should be more powerful than women, silence is used by the less powerful sex as camouflage to signify obedience and avoid harsh treatment from males whose blatant verbal responses are a challenge to men.

*Silence as prowling danger*

Another participant- **BiBi** mentioned that a person who hardly talks even when he is being offended as **Monto wasoo ojogooragha** - *that person, shall, one day, kill someone.* The respondent's response shows that silence signals danger. She narrated a Rimi classic story of elephants that were scared by the lion's silence and quit the forest. She therefore said that a person who delays response or responds with silence: **mobee, winerwaa genkie gakhomiye njou gihaaka na? Njou ne nkoo adoywa na genkie, ne wegekii oyoo nemba akwatre ogoraagha ogogooragha**- *A bad person, didn't you hear that silence drove a giant elephant out of the deep forest? A very big beast was scared by silence. A silent person can even kill someone; he can just kill someone.* This perception of silence is similar to the Greeks where silence means unfriendliness, bad character, and that danger lurks in the silent person (Sifianou, 1997). Silence is therefore impolite and face-threatening (Jaworski, 1997). She also said that a person who does not respond when asked can be plotting something horrible. She also said that even if such a person provides an honest delayed verbal response, that does not make him a good person: **hata agosooche viija wasoo moobe soko ogihinjeya oreghetrya**" -*Yes, even if his delayed verbal response will be nice, he is still a bad person because he responds unwillingly.*

*Silence as pompousness*

During interview. **Bibi** said that a taciturn person is disrespectful to a person he is conversing with **sarau -***it means to look down on someone.* **Mosaghaa** also

said that someone who delays verbal responses during conversation is arrogant: **Mosaghaa: wegen[kie] ogereemi wasoo wegenkie, aswahiri veohaanya wege[buuri**-*That one is arrogant, in Rimi that person is conceit, and in Swahili is kiburi (bigheaded).* This perception emphasizes Jenkings (2000) observation that silences are disruptive to smooth conversation flow. The respondents' responses match with Goffman (1963) findings that Americans' rule is "someone's turn must always be in progress". It is also reported that silence in conversation causes discomfort and signals a moment of awkwardness (Knapp, 1978).

The interviewee conceptualizes the use and perception of silence not only from cultural norms influence but also as a result of individual differences. Although culture and contexts have a significant impact on the participants' perception and use of silence, an individual trait also explains intra-cultural variation regarding the perception and functions of silence in conversation. These idiosyncratic variations were also mentioned by other respondents during interviews. This shows that individual speaking style and assumptions about silence have impacts on participants' use of silence. Riazantseva (2001) and Zuo (2002) have also indicated the importance of considering individual variability in determining intra-cultural variation in the use of silence. If the subject of conversation is simple, such as greeting, the person who delays a response or who responds in silence is considered arrogant.

This part discusses the major findings along the emerging themes in this study: among others, silence indicates danger, arrogance, weird disrespect, expression of disagreement, embarrassment, sadness, politeness, and a virtue to a woman.

The study found that silence in conversations performs different functions and is perceived in different ways among the RNs. These findings are supported by Ephratt (2008) who claimed that among many functions of silence, it also expresses many emotions. Silence therefore has an important role in a talk (Cwodhury et al., 2017). Among the major empirical contributions of this study is that, although culture has a powerful influence on how people perceive silence, the current data demonstrate the phenomenon of intra-cultural silence norm variation, which means, that the variability of perceptions of silence does not only exist inter-culturally but also within the same cultural group. Members of the same group may have different cultural knowledge and are likely to grow and be socialized in different sub-cultures. The results of this study contradict the popular Western aphorism that silence is golden- meaning that it is not ugly and therefore appreciated and positively perceived. Rimi's conversations have shown that silence has a dark side that is not appreciated. Although silence in Rimi is generally not appreciated, the results have shown the possibility of having both positive and negative perceptions of silence in different contexts within the same community. This also contradicts the prolific Western versus Eastern paradigm on silence research (Jaworski, 1993; Nakane, 2007). The findings in the literature categorize cultures into the talkative and oratory West cultures and the reserved and silent Eastern cultures. Hence, attributing categorically the West to the negative valuation of silence or the East to taciturnity or any other particular culture may be flawed.

The current findings have also shown that silence is highly context-bound (Sobkowiak, 1997) which makes it a polysemous, and temporal entity of fleeting

moment. For this reason, silence has many functions and different perceptions. For instance, silence, in one context, can be a good strategy for interpersonal rapport because people use it to avoid conflicts and seek closeness (Cruz, 2008; Holmes, in Bratt &Turker, 2003; Scollon & Scollon, 1983); in this study, silence was used in the same manner - to avoid conflict between the conversation participants. However, in other contexts, silence can be a conversational entity to avoid because it poses a threat (Sifianou, 1997) that can lead to harsh judgments. This perception is corroborated by the participants' responses in this study; for example, **Bibi** said that silence scared 'elephants' forcing them to quit the jungle, meaning that silence is terrible and a silent person signals danger.

On many occasions, interlocutors perceive silence negatively resulting in problematic conversation, pragmatic failures, and communication breakdown as shown in the conversations between **Chambe** and **Mogi.** Taciturnity as described by many participants is considered a condescending behavior, pompousness, arrogance (qualities that none of the ethnic group members condone), and dangerous. These findings are supported by the findings of Sifianou (1997) who reported that, according to Greek norms, danger lurks in a silent person. This perception is also similar to that reported in literature in cultures that are considered less tolerant of silence, such as American and Western European societies, where silence is judged as a refusal and unwilling to cooperate or participate in an activity (Eggins & Slade, 1997; Jaworski, 1993; Tannen, in Bratt &Tucker, 2003).

On the contrary, the data of this study also reinforces Nakane's (2007) findings that silence is valued in Japanese and in cultures that are described as 'silent', such as the Fins, Jordanians, and Roti people (AL-Harahsheh, 2012; Coulthard, 1985; Lebra, 2007; Tannen, 1985), Likewise, silence in Rimi also have positive perceptions as illustrated during the interview with **Babu. Babu** mentioned that a woman's silence is an indication that she is obedient to her husband (or any male relative). Women therefore succumb to social pressure and expectations to be seen as polite. The silence of a woman has also been reported in other studies (Lakoff, 1975; Tannen, 1985). Silence was also used as a polite strategy to narrow the disagreement and restore the relationship.

Generally, in the Rimi community, the negative perception of silence is grounded on the Rimi adage summarized as **"twee gakhomiyee njou gihaaka"**-*Silence drove "giant" elephants out of the Jungle.* This proverbial phrase reflects a more general attitude towards the occurrence of silence during interpersonal communication. This is particularly underscored by the conversation involving differences in opinions or when there is an argument between the conversation partners. The negative and positive perception of silence makes it more prone to misinterpretation during conversation. In this sense, silence has the potential for communication breakdown, misunderstanding, negative evaluations, and stereotypes. However, silence performs a variety of functions as Bonvillain (1993, p. 47) has observed, silence as an act of non-verbal communication transmits many kinds of meanings depending on cultural norms of interpretation and the context at hand.

**Conclusion**

Most of the previous studies have emphasized the dichotomy of silence between cultures, in particular between the *silent* East and the more *talkative* West. This suggests that any particular culture may either treat silence as a virtue or as an undesirable conversational feature. Moreover, each of these cultures has instructions on the value of silence via the axioms. The English for example, have a conventional saying that *silence is golden* suggesting that silence is admirable. Rimi also has an adage translated as *silence drove off elephants from the jungle:* indicating the intimidating atmosphere created by silence. However, the findings of this study indicate that silence is both polysemous and ambiguous in that it cannot be stated in categorical and absolute terms as inducing either solely negative or positive emotions. The data of the present study show that *silence is golden* (a virtue) in some contexts, meaning that it is appreciated. But in other contexts, to a large extent, silence is never *golden*; it is graphite, non-lustrous, and unattractive because it signals danger, terror, and conceit. The occurrences of these between turns' silences, particularly where the participants have different opinions, indicated problematic conversation and a problem at the level of the participants' relationships, all of which resulted in termination of the talk or change of the topic. These findings therefore deny the possibility of absolute propositions regarding the silence and the categorical positioning of cultures into the previous dichotomous cultural labels. The findings reveal that silence in Rimi culture and probably in any culture is variable and relative, hindering absolute propositional value. The phenomenon of intra-cultural variation therefore bears a significant weight on the perception and interpretation of silence parallel to cultural norms and the context of the situation. Therefore, generalizations about perceptions of silence based on either cultural norms embedded in axioms or reports of the previous research dichotomy may be superseded and not feasible.

Lastly, from a pragmatic viewpoint, conversation partners approach the act of conversing with certain volition and objectives- temporary or long-standing, The interview conducted in this study ascertained the objectives of silence from the participants' perspective. The respondent accounts indicate that, to a large extent, silence is not appreciated in Rimi culture as provided in the Rimi aphorism of *The Silence and Elephants*. However, in some cases, the respondents attributed their silences to cognitive or politeness functions rather than to negative attributes which is alluded to in the aphorism.

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