



SILENCE AND MEANING: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL AND PHILOSOPHICAL CRITIQUE

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Silence; a Meaningful Absence

Silence is often mistaken for the mere absence of meaning. Yet, in philosophy, silence is not connected to absence at all. Instead, philosophy considers silence as a rich and contested phenomenon that not only denotes the negation but also reflects the resistance and divine existence. The philosophers inquired silence and meaning by diving them into phenomenological and analytic philosophical dimensions. The phenomenological dimension of silence reveals that silence is an active force that shapes the meaning in ways a language cannot, alone (Davies, & Turner, 2002). Whereas the analytic philosophy comes up with the stance that silence is the boundary of expressions, everything that remains unsaid may still signify.

Meaning of said and unsaid is the central component of either philosophy or language; either the human mind or AI; either of discourse or action; either of silence or words. Examining silence through the lenses of the key philosophers, such as Locke, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and Fennell, the unsaid, absence, or the silence has a signified meaning as of the spoken words or performed actions (Gabriel, 2020). Philosophers have long wondered how words, gestures and silence can hold meaning and Locke, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and Fennell all proposed unique views in this regard.

Many philosophers tend to view the speaker as a common, able-bodied person, while ignoring those who experience speech disabilities. How does meaning change when someone cannot use language properly, as when aphasia exists? What role does being silent have for a person with selective mutism? Is it possible for people who don't speak such as some autistic individuals who communicate differently, to fully take part in what Wittgenstein referred to as language-games?

Through analysis of Locke, Frege, Russell, Wittgenstein and Fennell using speech disabilities as an example, their philosophical thoughts bring out the limits of previous approaches to philosophy of language (O'Rourke, 2018). Frege used rigorous logic and Locke relied on hidden ideas, neither matched non-mainstream types of communication. Wittgenstein's framework can address many problems of everyday life, but it also stumbles with forms of talk that people in society choose to ignore. Essentially, this problem makes philosophy question existing views and lead to a more open and all-encompassing view of meaning for everyone.



Philosophical Perspectives on Silence and Meaning

John Locke: Silence as Absence or Abstention?

John Locke's philosophical thought connects meaning with the sensory experiences. In his book 'An Essay Concerning Human Understanding' (1689), John Locke suggests that through language, people can share and express ideas which are based on what the senses provide (Locke, 1800). Locke does not discuss silence explicitly in his early theories, but he gives two possible interpretations in the context of silence and meaning: first being silence as the absence of representation and the second one, silence as deliberate withholding of meaning (Ott, 2003). When discussing silence as the absence of representation, Locke argues that silence is the lack of linguistic significance. By extending his stance, Locke in his later philosophy declares silence as a strategic omission that connects silence with an idea (Dawson, 2003). Locke came up with the idea that silence at some points holds an idea; this can either be resistance or the fear of using the verbal way of communication.

For Locke, meaning comes from ideas which are mental images formed through sensory experience. A word stands for an idea and meaning is created by the relationship between the word and the thing it stands for. Locke proposed that silence could have meaning only if it was sure to remind people of a specific idea (Ott, 2003). For some people, certain types of silence might suggest things like being respectful, storing secrets or even challenging the group. If silence is not seen to represent anything specific—if it is just thought of as silence—it does not have any meaning (Gabriel, 2020). Locke hold the idea that any person may understand a silence differently, so the same silence might mean one thing to one person and something else to another (Locke, 1800).

Looking at silence from a philosophical point of view, it appears as both something missing and a way of expressing meaning. John Locke argued that language stands for what we experience through either of our senses which means silence could just mean you are not expressing yourself or that you are actively hiding your ideas (Dawson, 2003). It describes different kinds of silence, but does not deal easily with cases of silence in non-verbal individuals and people who went through traumatic situations. Empirical theory limits Locke because his model does not explain meaning outside language.

Gottlob Frege & Bertrand Russell: The Logic of the Unsaid

Frege and Russell adopted an analytical approach when discussing silence and meaning as they considered silence as a gap in logical propositions. Both of them took silence as a missing referent (Russell, 1992). For them, language is formalized through logic and they connected meaning with clear and truth-functional propositions. Coming up with a contrastive approach, they considered the absence as an incomplete argument. Unlike Locke, for Frege and Russell, silence is a mere missing response and an incomplete thought (Künne, 2007). Unfolding the philosophy of sense and reference proposed by Frege, a question arises: Can silence have a sense even if it lacks a reference or can silence hold a meaning even if it is not having any physical existence? Similarly, giving a deeper look to the theory of descriptions proposed by Russell, a question comes up: Does the Silence function like an empty name failing to do anything? Both of these questions cannot be answered only in the light of the philosophical perspective of Frege and Russell (Russell, 1992).

Cognitive science comes up with the contrastive view to logical analysis of Frege and Russell, which shows that human feels the gaps intuitively. Where logical analysis view silence as a gap, but psychology view it as interpretation. When someone omits information, the listener automatically infers the meaning. Hence, the logical analysis is challenged by their



emphasis on explicit propositions and negative the implied meanings in silence completely. Frege invites two conflicting interpretations of silence, one considering silence as a sign without reference and the other considering silence as a pure sense without reference (Künne, 2007). The former one refers to silence as an abstract idea, such as grief or happiness, whereas the latter one claims start silence can carry since even without reference (O'Rourke, 2018).

Accepting Frege's logic of silence, emoji, pauses and nonverbal signs will have no place in the language. Emoji do have a sense depending on the context, and without having any proper reference. Such as an emoji does not have any reference, but it does have a sense of conveying either love, warmth or happiness. The same is the case with the pauses, such as an ellipsis, may not have a specific reference, but it does hold a sense of hesitation or unresolved tension (Dummett, 1979). Frege's theory struggles to explain how silence or absence can have sense without having reference.

Wittgenstein: Silence as a form of meaning

Wittgenstein, in his later philosophy, stated that where one cannot speak, one must be silent. Silence was treated by him as a boundary of the language game. However his later work shifted from logical atomism to the idea of language game, where he treated meaning to be used within a form of life (Wittgenstein, 2009). Like Locke, Wittgenstein came up with the same view that some of the realities, be it ethics or metaphysics they all lie beyond language, and hence silence do lie there holding a meaning in it (Davies, & Turner, 2002). Wittgensteinianism treated silence as one of the forms of meaning. He was of the view that not all meanings are verbal, and silence does function within the language game. Language games talk about posting a black square as a sign in social activism, and this denotes silence in social media's performatives (Wittgenstein, 2009).

Silence as the Limit of Language

Wittgenstein's early philosophy took silence as the boundary of meaning. He brought meaning to his logical propositions just following the footsteps of Locke, Frege and Russell. Early philosophy of Wittgenstein recognised silence as a limit, having no meaning at all. But the later Wittgensteinian philosophy connected silence with language games (Wittgenstein, 2009). Wittgenstein modified his philosophical thought and connected meaning with the use, use of both words and silence (O'Rourke, 2018). He was also of the view that silence is not an absence but a move in communication, and these options do follow the language game rules. He stated that silence does hold a meaning depending on the context and culture. Wittgenstein named silence as a tool for communication that assists language during the whole process (Wittgenstein, 2009).

Wittgenstein: Silence, Meaning and Language-Games

Wittgenstein in his later works disagrees with Frege's notion of abstract reference and Locke's belief in mental terms, stating that meaning depends on the rules and patterns involved in language-games. For Wittgenstein, the meaning of silence in any setting is decided by how it is used, rather than by its nature (O'Rourke, 2018). A brief silence during ceremonies, during talks or when answering can tell someone something about how a person communicates. Wittgenstein, unlike Frege, does not specify that silence must be present in a logical proposition and unlike Locke, he does not think of silence as a private thought (Gabriel, 2020). Instead, social customs and day-to-day interactions give meaning to silence which makes his theory the best at handling the many ways silence appears.



Silence, Meaning and Speech Disabilities

Locke's Empiricism and Non-Verbal Communication

Locke does provide a framework for linking silence to unspoken ideas, but his theory struggles with cases where silence is not a choice but the only option left, such as speech disability (Dawson, 2003). John Locke, in his empirical view, considers language as a tool for ideas and regards silence as the lack of representation. But here arises the question: is silence truly empty? Connecting it with the modern debates of white silence that indicate the passivity of racial justice, silence is taken as an act, complicit or resistant. Locke states that silence is a lack of linguistic representation as not convey ideas in the similar way as words do (Ott, 2003). Again if linguistic representation is only connected with the words then where does the possess in the speech lies. Silence can function meaningful please to such as causes within a speech or refusal to speak or staying quiet. Non-verbal elements, such as gestures, facial expressions, and written discourse, should not be dismissed as meaningless just because silence is portrayed negatively. Additionally, a significant criticism of Locke's perspective is the lack of representation for individuals who have speech disabilities and are unable to vocalise their thoughts, and hence, their silence contains the whole meaning of their thought process and is their tool for communication (Dawson, 2003). So here the empiricist claims of Locke for silence being meaningless becomes null and void.

According to John Locke's view, language acquires meaning since its words point to ideas from our senses. But it brings up certain issues, such as when talking about autism and selective mutism, since these individuals express themselves differently from how many people communicate. For Locke, people mainly use speech to share ideas, so other methods of expression are not given much recognition. Although his main view was based on sensory experience, his idea might still apply to non-verbal expressions (Dawson, 2003). In other words, people may use gestures, facial expressions, or picture-based tools to replace language and still express their own thoughts (Gabriel, 2020). Locke believed in representation and people now use text-to-speech equipment or sign language as modern examples of AAC (Augmentative and Alternative Communication). Many cases arise in which a person has a lot to say inside but cannot express it since they have a disorder like severe apraxia or limited motor control. Such examples are not part of Locke's theory because he believes that for ideas to have value, they must first be expressed in words or actions. Philosophers today add to Locke's views by suggesting that sensory-stimulation can indeed have a communication role (Ott, 2003).

Frege's Silence as Meaningful Sense without Reference

For Frege, meanings are determined by reference and sense. Words refer to real things, but how we understand those references is the sense of those words (Künne, 2007). The way a proposition is built determines its meaning, since each part contributes to what makes it true. Since philosophy is about what goes beyond ordinary language, silence does not fit easily in this context. Frege might only see silence as a pause in conversation and thus not value it as a part of meaning (O'Rourke, 2018). People with selective mutism can express themselves by gesturing, showing emotions, or by being quiet on purpose. Because of his theory, some philosophers believe that without words, emotions are understood as having an implied meaning, for instance, fear, refusal, or attention. However, can we give a reference to silence?

While a word usually connects with an object, silence simply means there is nothing there, which goes against Frege's theory (Künne, 2007). A stroke survivor who has aphasia could struggle to finish a sentence since they have difficulty remembering the right words.



Even though the pause has its own significance like frustration or effort, it does not have a clear meaning in this domain. Often, our own actions or facial expressions can mean something else than their obvious meaning. Frege's theory assumes sentences are formed out of words that are combined. With certain disorders (apraxia), a person may produce only pieces of sounds and gestures, but these can still express meaningful ideas. Does the use of grunts or a finger as a signal really work? But it is not in line with Frege's way of organizing logic and language. A problem arises in Frege's theory, since it struggles to identify the meaning of non-propositions, such as a cry of pain (Künne, 2007). Still, it definitely manages to share a message.

Russell's Silence as a Logical Gap

Russell, in his logical atomism, argues that meaning is derived from clear and analyzable propositions (Russell, 1992). He stated that the language should reflect precise logical structures to avoid ambiguity. But where does silence fit into his Framework? Frege considered silence a gap and logical discourse where whereas Russell, in his former work, considered silence non-meaningful (Russell, 1993). But Russell in his later work acknowledges that even absence can be meaningful within a logical system. Russell argued that silence is present there in the form of a deliberate pause in logical operators. And silence is there in the form of an intentional omission during conversations. Russell's later philosophy also indicated that the absence can act as a pragmatic signal holding the implicit logical weight of the conversation (Russell, 1992). Russell's later philosophical thoughts. Though the reference would not work for Russell, many times people subconsciously link the sentence to its intended meaning (Russell, 1993). When someone stutters by saying "the... the... cat," do the words cancel out the whole reference? Russell could answer yes, even so, the idea of meaning is still found in practice. do these ideas count as actual meanings?

Wittgenstein's Silence as a Language-Game

Wittgenstein in his 'Philosophical Investigations' shows that the idea of fixed meaning is replaced by a view that they are formed in social activities (Wittgenstein, 2009). Whereas before, silence simply did not occur, now it actively takes part in helping us make meaning in different situations (O'Rourke, 2018). This development is likely to change people's understanding of speech disabilities. Instead of adding nothing, a stutterer's repeated phrases play an important role in the communicative exchange that everyone can understand. Those unusual behaviours, like gestures, echolalia, or stimming, are no longer seen as mistakes but as real elements of an autistic person's way of communicating. The frequent silences in dysarthria or with selective mutism help shape how people interact during their conversations. His approach shows that sign language and AAC devices are distinctive ways of communicating that are not less than speech.

Tension Between the Two Wittgensteinianism

There are similar issues between these two Wittgenstein as in disability studies: is using language in unconventional ways wrong, or is it simply a variation in human ways of sharing meaning? At the beginning, Wittgenstein may regard pauses in AI speech as slips, while later he would ask about their role in a conversation. Just like Wittgenstein's later stance, the social model looks not at how people with speech disorders should act, but at how everyone can see communication differently. Wittgenstein's work progressed from 'The Tractatus' to 'The Investigations', and with this came an important change: silence was once considered failure, later silence was considered powerful and influential (Wittgenstein, 2009).



Early Wittgenstein	Later Wittgenstein
Silence = failure of language	Silence = a communicative tool
Speech disabilities disrupt logical form	Speech disabilities introduce <i>new</i> forms of meaning
Meaning requires precise reference	Meaning requires shared practice

John Fennell's Critical Engagement with Locke, Frege, Russell, and Wittgenstein: A Disability-Informed Perspective on Meaning, Silence, and Speech Disorders

Fennell presents a bold critique of traditional philosophy of language using cases of speech disabilities and differences in communication patterns. He points out that even though Locke's, Frege's, Russell's and Wittgenstein's arguments form the main basis of analytic philosophy, their theories are not inclusive of all types of meaning-making. According to Fennell, Frege's view does not explain how people with aphasia and autism can still share messages in unusual forms of speaking (O'Rourke, 2018). Locke's philosophy doesn't work when faced with people who have motor troubles, making it hard to guide their communication, and those who use communication facilitators. Russell's stance on the subject is very exclusionary, for it treats dysarthria speech and Tourette's tics as simply noise instead of genuine forms of communication.

In Wittgenstein's more flexible view of language games, which Fennell favours most, there is still a problem explaining how dysfluent people make sense when others do not join their 'language games' (Wittgenstein, 2009). The key idea of Fennell is that the commonly accepted systems all view disability as a minor case that requires an explanation, whereas neurotypical patterns are their main model. Because of this bias, AAC users are still marginalized and autistic communication styles are considered by many as disorders.

Fennell suggests a way of thinking that uses disability justice ideas, meaning that meaning is experienced as a part of a living body, happens around us, and is changed by social and political forces. This perspective respects both the creative ways stutterers speak, the extended silence of survivors of trauma, and the unusual patterns in the language of psychotic people as correct forms of communication. By considering speech-disabled people as the experts, Fennell is able to critique the field of philosophy of language and to transform it as well. He proves that the strongest findings in language often come from those who are most exposed to its boundaries, pushing us to change how we see what is significant when it comes to language. Fennell states that philosophy should leave behind abstract discussions on language and focus on how lack of communication access is a serious issue of justice.

Fennell's Critique of Locke: The Myth of Mentalism

According to Locke, mentalism has a problem with words meaning slightly differently for each person (Locke, 1800). Fennell states that the concept of meaning comprises many things beyond just reference, such as actions, setting, and non-spoken expressions. People with aphasia, autism, or speech motor disorders tend to convey meaning by using gestures, augmentative and alternative communication (AAC), and even by being silent at the right time. His approach has difficulties covering these ways of speaking, since it mostly supports the use of neurotypical speech. His argument that words point to personal ideas does not explain how different people, especially those who use non-standard ways of communication, can understand each other. For people who cannot speak or choose not to speak, the meaning they want to show is usually expressed by writing, typing, or by their behaviour. With Locke's



model, these phrases may become useless if they are not spoken like traditional words. Fennell observes that according to Locke, the meaning we share is reduced to what individuals produce rather than what people share.

Fennell's Critique of Frege and Russell: The Tyranny of Reference and Logic

In Fennell's view, Frege's theory strongly relies on being able to refer to things. He asserts that Frege's separation between sense and reference leaves limited space for people who do not fit into normative norms of communication. Frege wanted any meaningful communication to connect to propositions that are logically true or false (Künne, 2007). This excludes where someone has trouble making sentences but not expressing meaning, it is known as agrammatic aphasia. Also autistic scripting is when someone with autism repeats words that have personal value. There are problems with Frege's logic because it leaves out silence. Not speaking intentionally in selective mutism has a definite meaning. Various studies have proved that people with locked-in syndrome use their eyes to communicate deep thoughts, which Frege's system considers non-propositional (Dummett, 1979).

Fennell's Wittgenstein Critique: The Limits of Language-Games

From Wittgenstein's ideas, we can examine speech and silence disabilities and see how his thinking changed from rigid rules in language to flexible ways we give meaning through social practice (Wittgenstein, 2009). He points out that Wittgenstein gets further than Frege and Locke by connecting meaning with the practical use of language in various activities. Because of this, people with disabilities have the option to use nonverbal and adjustable ways to communicate like sign language and AAC devices. At the same time, he says Wittgenstein's emphasis on mutual understanding can leave out those whose language or speech is viewed negatively as in these cases: echolalia in autism and dysfluent speech in stuttering. Fennell's main criticism is that when understanding is set by mainstream opinion, the voices of the powerful get preference. So, the result is that disabled communicators often do not find meaning because society will not modify their ways of talking or writing.

Conclusion

Locke, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein have distinct views on what meaning is and this becomes obvious when we look at their accounts of silence. When silence is absent speech or is used intentionally, it becomes a question: does it have meaning and if so, in what way? Viewing Frege's and Russell's ideas about reference and sense, Locke's views on empiricism and Wittgenstein's definition of meaning-as-use, we get a sense of how each philosopher might or might not include silent communication in their ideas (Künne, 2007). Despite being important in philosophy, the theories of Locke, Frege, Russell and Wittgenstein have many limitations when it comes to speech disorders and disabilities. Because Frege wants language to be exact, people with irregular language are not included and meanings with Locke may stay in their minds which makes shared sense difficult. Although the use-theory can change with time, it still needs people to agree on its meaning which leads to the question of whether something loses its meaning if society does not accept it. Such shortcomings point to a larger issue: that most theories about the meaning of language assume a typical neurotypical person.

Silence shows that meaning can exist independently of clear representation. It appears in the gaps of language, showing that philosophies that focus more on logic and explanation may miss important parts of personal experience. More theorists need to link different fields such as linguistics, cognitive science and media studies, to understand the role of silence in the interactions of humans and other creatures. There is still no agreement: Is it possible for philosophy to unite its view of silence or do we have to accept that silence is an undefined



border concept? Both Frege's referentialism and Locke's mentalism do not address how to include people who cannot use language, because speech is important for Frege as words for meaning and private ideas are key for Locke. Use-theory in Wittgenstein's philosophy gets the closest to fitting people with disabilities, but it remains influenced by whether society accepts them which can lead to exclusion.

An inclusive philosophy of language has to go beyond recording existing practices and strive to widen what people consider as meaningful forms of expression. In other words, AAC devices, resorts to nonverbal methods and alternative ways to speak should be regarded as parts of language, not something different from the usual. When philosophy pays attention to individuals who are speech-disabled, it can explore a larger and more morally sound account of what language means for all of us. The in-depth analysis of silence in philosophy of language brings out different views between analytic philosophy and phenomenology. Both Locke and Frege treat language as a way to represent, but they both have problems handling silence that does not fall under usual linguistic rules. These theories do not consider the body and culture enough in their description of silence. Wittgenstein was among the later thinkers who well described how silence interacts with the situation around it. Nowadays, with advances in AI, neurodiversity and technology, it is clearer that silence does not just mean no speech, but plays an active part in making meaning.

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