The perception and practice of silence in Australian and Jordanian societies: a socio-pragmatic study

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Abstract
The willingness to understand the perception and practice of silence is currently receiving an increasing amount of attention in the literature on sociolinguistics and pragmatics. This study aims to investigate silence as perceived and practised by speakers of Australian English and Jordanian Arabic in casual conversation from a socio-pragmatic perspective. It also attempts to anticipate processes in which silence can be created and used in the mainstream of communication. In addition, it identifies problems in perceiving and practising silence in both cultures. The present study also looks at gender differences in both societies. Ethnographic and qualitative data were drawn from in-depth interviews, observations, and video and audio recordings. The data were collected from the North of Jordan and Western Australia. The participants of the study were 24 university students (undergraduates): twelve males and 12 females in both countries. The participants of the study were divided into two main groups: friends and people who were unacquainted. The dyadic conversations lasted for 30 minutes each. These conversations were video-taped. Ninety seconds from the beginning, 90 seconds from the middle, and 90 seconds from the end of each conversation were analysed. Praat software was used to detect the period of silence in conversations. The data analysis drew on Sacks et al’s (1974) turn-taking model, Halliday’s notion of context of situation, and Conversation Analysis. The findings of the study demonstrate that silence is significant and meaningful. It frames and structures the conversation between the interlocutors. Silence has sociolinguistic functions, and pragmatic functions which includes polite functions and discourse functions. In addition, silence is not opposite to speech. They complement each other. It has also been discovered that there are longer silences in conversations between friends rather than between people who are unacquainted. Silence is awkward in conversation between strangers, because the interlocutors are not familiar with each other. In addition, in the same–sex conversations, women practise more silences, as they feel more comfortable. There are many similarities between Jordanian and Australian speakers in perceiving and practising silence in social settings. This assumption supports the Universal Grammar of socio-pragmatic practice of silence in interpersonal communication. The results of the study contribute to an understanding of the perception and practice of silence in both societies. Practical suggestions for interpreting silence and future research are also identified.

Recommended Citation
Silence is a means of maintaining contact and alliance in the phatic function. The various roles of silence in the metalinguistic function range from its being a discourse marker to reecting the 'right to silence'. # 2008 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved. Keywords: Eloquent silence; Discourse analysis; Language and speech; Jakobson; Functions of language; Psychoanalysis. Linguistics rst became interested in silence by two different routes. The rst, inuenced by philosophy and literature, was an introductory and programmatic look at eloquent silence from a functional viewpoint (Jensen, 1973; Bruneau, 1973), but this approach exerted no direct impact on the discipline. The second was acoustics, and only by this route was silence introduced as a subject of study. Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann (1916 – 2010), Elisabeth Noelle-Neumann, the German political scientist contributes the famous model called “Spiral of Silence”. In 1947 Neumann and her husband found “Public Opinion Organization” in German and also she was a President of “World Association for Public Opinion Research” in 1978 to 1980. Through this Spiral of Silence theory Neumann indirectly explains the Jews status during World War II under Nazi’s control. Here, Adolf Hitler dominated the whole society and the minority Jews became silent due to the fear of isolation or separation. Theory: The one view Socio-Cultural Theory, based on Vygotskian thought, is a theory about the development of human cognitive and higher mental function. It is the study of what is learned of a second language and what is not learned; it is the study of why most second language learners do not achieve the same degree of knowledge and proficiency in a second language as they do in their native language; it is also the study of why only some learners appear to achieve native-like proficiency in more than one language” [11]. It presents theoretical support for teaching practices and suggests a range of useful teaching strategies that encourage learning. However, cognitive perspective’s focus on learning as an individual mental event ignores social processes and embodiment.