DIPLOMARBEIT

Titel der Diplomarbeit

“Communicating with and understanding silence: Some pragmatic functions”

Verfasser

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angestrebter akademischer Grad

Magister der Philosophie (Mag.phil.)

Wien, 2012

Studienkennzahl lt. Studienblatt: A 343
Studienrichtung lt. Studienblatt: Diplomstudium Anglistik und Amerikanistik
Betreuerin: Ao. Univ. Prof. Dr. Mag. Ute Smit
To those who have never been good with words
Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my supervisor Ao. Univ. Prof. Dr. Mag. Ute Smit for her patience, support, guidance, and encouraging feedback. I also want to thank my dear friend and colleague Erika Groh for her constant encouragement, mental support, and for hours of discussions and proofreading. Finally and foremost, I would like to thank my mother without whom none of this would have been possible.

Declaration of authenticity

I confirm to have conceived and written this thesis in English all by myself. Quotations from other authors and any ideas borrowed and/or paraphrased from the work of other authors are all clearly marked within the text and acknowledged in the bibliographical references.

Vienna, November 2012

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1. Introduction

Despite its crucial role in communication, silence has often been a neglected topic in linguistics and has frequently been reduced to the existence of (silent) pauses. It has been suggested that one of the reasons for this neglect lies in the fact that silence is an “out-of-awareness phenomenon” (Tannen & Saville-Troike 1985: xi). Consequently, only a handful of studies have investigated the communicative value of silence by observing its role in human face-to-face interactions. Given the focus on the enumeration of the various functions silence can fulfill in communications, it is surprising that only little research has been conducted on its pragmatic aspects that enable interlocutors to transmit meaning via silence.

Outside of the realm of linguistics, everyday perceptions of silence in Western cultures are characterized by a great amount of negativity. Silence is often thought of as being uncomfortable, awkward, or threatening. Hence, it is commonly perceived as an unpleasant void that has to be evaded at all costs. The concept of small talk, for instance, appears to be a communicative strategy that has evolved from the need of avoiding such uncomfortable silences.

Considering these dominant perceptions and conceptions, my personal motivation for this thesis is twofold. On the one hand, I want to offer a deeper understanding of the pragmatic aspects of silence by showing how it can be used to communicate meaning and how this meaning can be successfully comprehended. Therefore, focus will be given to the role of silence in connection with speech act theory and politeness theory. On the other hand, building on the understanding thus gained, I would like to argue for a relativization of the negative connotations of silence as it functions as a productive, efficient, and sufficient communicative tool.

In the course of this thesis, I will therefore try to answer the following questions: What is silence? How is it possible that a semantically empty linguistic form can be used to express so many different meanings, i.e. how does one communicate with silence and how does one make sense of it? Can silence be treated within speech act theory? Can silence be used to perform different kinds of speech acts – and if so which? Does silence suffice as an answer to a question? How can silence be used in relation to politeness?
It should be noted that this thesis does not aim at providing a quantitatively substantiated overview of possible communicative functions of silences and their frequencies in face-to-face interactions. Instead, instances of intentional silence (Kurzon 1995; 1998) will be selected in order to illustrate how silence can be used in various contexts. This will be achieved by a selection of movie sequences that exemplify some communicative successful instances of employments of silence as an interactional tool. Due to the focus on intentionality, the speaker’s choices, wants, and aims are at the center of interest in the discussion of silent speech acts and silent means of politeness.

Chapter 2 aims to establish a theoretical framework for an analysis of silence in communication. First, different perceptions of silence as well as cultural aspects will be discussed, before the focus shifts toward the recognition of silence within the field of linguistics. In a next step, a linguistic definition of silence will be provided and various types of silence will be considered. Finally, it will be claimed that due to the unlimited functions of silence, simple enumerations of these functions provide little insights into how silence works as a communicative tool. Therefore, it will be proposed that an in-depth investigation of its role in pragmatics is better suited in order to gain a better understanding of the phenomenon.

Consequently, chapter 3 intends to define the relationship between silence and pragmatics, before focusing on how silent utterances can be disambiguated and understood. Attention will be drawn to the importance of contextual and shared knowledge between interlocutors. Moreover, it will be claimed that due to the multimodal nature of face-to-face communication, different communicative modes contribute to the creation of meaning. It will be argued that this extra-linguistic and nonverbal behavior is of special importance when communicating with silence. Since previous research has given little consideration to multimodally constructed meaning in connection with silence, the function of complementary gestures, gaze, facial expressions, body movement and posture, as well as touch are considered in greater detail.

Chapter 4 briefly discusses the choice of data and the procedure of the practical aspect of this thesis. It will be argued that movie language is a powerful source for illustrative examples of silent means of communicating, as it offers both the ability to
analyze silence in its entire context and the ability to observe other communicative modes that are employed in conjunction with silent utterances.

On the basis of the theoretical framework provided by Austin (1962) and Searle (1969; 1975; 1976), chapter 5 considers silence as a speech act. Most notably, it is claimed that silence is essentially an indirect speech act. Moreover, with the help of illustrative excerpts, the various kinds of speech acts a speaker can perform with silence are discussed. Additionally, due to the fact that silent speech acts often occur in the form of the answer in the question-answer adjacency pair, a special focus is given to silent responses.

Chapter 6 discusses the function of silence as a politeness device. Despite what one might expect, silence is a rarely discussed aspect in politeness theories. Therefore, both traditional and postmodern approaches to politeness are considered in order to establish a theoretical background for the investigation of polite and impolite uses of silence. With the support of illustrative extracts, various strategic possibilities of how silence can function as a politeness device will be proposed.
2. Perceptions of silence

“He who does not understand your silence will probably not understand your words.” – Elbert Hubbard  
(http://quotationsbook.com/quote/40192/, 10 July 2012)

The American writer and philosopher Elbert Hubbard implies with this quote that silence carries meaning and that it can be used effectively in order to communicate. However, in everyday life silence appears to be perceived rather negatively as it is treated as an indication for non-communication. Johannesen (1974: 27) even goes as far as to claim that it is regarded to be “worthless” by our Western cultures. Although this statement appears to be rather harsh, our general conceptions of silence do not lie far from it.

2.1. General conceptions of silence

When looking for a definition of the concept of silence, dictionaries and encyclopedias show a clearly negatively defined picture. The Longman dictionary of contemporary English (2009: 1632), for instance, defines silence as

1. No noise [U] complete absence of sound or noise […]
2. No talking [C, U] complete quiet because nobody is talking […]
3. No discussion/answer [U] failure or refusal to discuss something or answer questions about something […]
4. No communication [U] failure to write a letter to someone, telephone them etc. […]

These definitions propose that silence is either an absence of noise or talk, or at least a failure of communication. Both concepts appear to be contradictory to Hubbard’s quote as they focus on the non-presence of any type of sound or speech. Saville-Troike (1985: 3) remarks in this respect that it has been the “tradition” to define silence “negatively – as merely the absence of speech”. Judging from the dictionary entry quoted above, this tradition still seems to be in place today. Therefore, the question arises why silence is thought of and depicted so negatively.

A possible answer can be found by looking at the predominantly shared views of silence in our Western cultures and societies. Scollon (1985: 26) outlines these perceptions by comparing communication to a machine. This appears to be a suitable
metaphor, as it captures our societies’ compulsion for functionality, effectuality and productivity. He states that “[i]f one assumes the engine should be running, the silences will indicate failures” (ibid.). This comparison proves to be valid in two ways. First, as further discussed below, silence is often more difficult to interpret than speech, because usually more contextual knowledge is required on the part of the listener and it consequently might take longer to decipher its meaning. Therefore, silence might be seen to waste precious time in our hectic lives. In addition, it is also a dangerous source for miscommunication as a result of misinterpretations. Second, and more importantly, however, silence in the form of pauses often appears to be undesired and consequently dreaded, as it is usually considered to be a sign of disfluency and lack of understanding between two speakers. In this respect, Jaworski (1993: 6) argues that

we accelerate our conversations with others and avoid pauses at all costs, because we think that whatever silences occur in discourse they inevitably indicate lack of mutual rapport between the interlocutors.

Pursuing this idea, Zerubavel (2006: 8) notes that silence indeed seems to have an “unmistakable sound”, which “often speaks louder than words”. This notion also seems to be manifested in our language. By looking at common collocations of silence, it can be seen that silence is thought of as being “lengthy” “unpleasant”, “thick”, “deafening”, “threatening”, “heavy”, “eerie”, “forbidding”, “deadly”, “awkward”, “uncomfortable”, “tense”, “oppressive”, etc. (Oxford collocations dictionary 2009: 764; Saville-Troike 1985: 10; Zerubavel 2006: 8). In addition to referring to the sound of silence, some of these adjectives also portray silence as unpleasant and dreaded. Moreover, when used as a verb in the phrase to silence someone, silence is connoted negatively. Furthermore, people engaging in silent behavior are often attributed to be “reserved”, “secretive” (Saville-Troike 1985: 10), introverted, unsociable, distant, withdrawn, etc. While it goes without saying that these attributes are merely based on negative stereotypes, Feldstein et al. (1979) conducted a study which showed that women who took longer pauses in conversations described themselves more likely as “reserved”, “shy”, or “frustrated” than women who took shorter pauses and who in turn were more likely to describe themselves as “warm hearted”, “easy going”, or “adventurous” (quoted in Scollon 1985: 25). As these self-descriptions are in accord with the cultural stereotypes, and as the
positive/negative attributions seem to be clearly assigned between the two groups, the tendency to make more silent pauses does appear to be considered a negative quality throughout our culture (Scollon 1985: 25).\(^1\)

Despite this predominant tendency to perceive silence as undesirable, some positive associations can also be found in expressions like *silence is golden* (The Second Foundation\(^2\) 1981: 355; Saville-Troike 1985: 10) or in connotations such as *awed* and *thoughtful* (Oxford collocations dictionary 2009: 764). Someone is only seen to be able to *awe in silence* when he or she is witnessing something phenomenal or beautiful, and hence his or her silence loses its negative status.

Moreover, silence is valued in the context of being in mutual understanding when communicating with someone without words. The Second Foundation (1981: 355-356) notes in this respect that

> [t]here is a special sort of silence which can obtain between friends who have a long history of shared experiences. This silence is beyond negotiations, dominance and submission, punishment and reward. It is rather a silence of mutual admiration, respect, and joy.

Tannen (1985: 97) elaborates on the mechanism that lies behind the desired silence in such intimate relationships:

> The rapport benefit comes from being understood without putting one’s meaning on record, so that understanding is seen not as the result of putting meaning into words […] but rather as the greater understanding of shared perspective, experience, and intimacy, the deeper sense of ‘speaking the same language’. (Tannen 1985: 97)

But even in the context of marriage or close relationships the positive perception of this mutual silence can easily tilt into negativity. Especially in longer relationships, silence often becomes a sign for its disintegration (Jaworski 1993: 69) and the state of understanding each other without words can quickly be replaced by the state of not having to say anything to each other anymore.

Despite some positively valued applications of silence, the negative picture seems to be pre-dominant. Ghita (1994: 378-379) provides an accurate summary of the reasons for our fear of silence in Western societies:

\(^1\) For more detailed accounts on the perception of silent pauses in continuous speech and on attributed personality characteristics based on the use of silent pauses cf. Duez (1985) and Crown & Feldstein (1985) respectively.

\(^2\) *The Second Foundation* is the pen name of the two scholars Michael Eric Bennett and Dr. Elizabeth W. Nall.
Silence is conventionally understood as a disturbance phenomenon with a negative import, probably because its abstention from speech, from articulateness [...] the turn-taking mechanism is momentarily disrupted and it can quickly lead to a breakdown in communication if repair does not come up. Starting from the acoustic contour of a conversation, we must admit that, when silence occurs, it produces a disjointed effect which does not reflect the general (expected, wished for) auditory impression of smoothness and regularity.

As has been emphasized above, these conceptions of silence are only accurate in Western societies and cultures. However, research has shown that silence is perceived quite differently in other cultures, as will be touched upon in the next section.

2.2. A note on cultural perspectives on silence

Giles et al. (1992: 219-220) claim that differences between Eastern and Western cultures concerning “traditional values, beliefs and behavioral patterns” are well documented and have led to “cultural differences in communication”. This also affects the use of silence, as it plays a vital part in human interaction. Consequently, the Western “aversion” to silence and our tendency to “celebrate talk” (ibid.) can be seen in contrast to the Eastern appreciation for silence:

[E]astern tradition appears to value preserving the harmony of the social group more highly than individual expression of one’s inner thoughts and (particularly negative) feelings. (Giles et al. 1992: 220)

Thus, in total opposition to Western norms, talkative persons in Eastern cultures are often stereotyped to be “insincere” (ibid.). This fundamental difference in the perception, valuation, and ultimately usage and application of silence leads to cross-cultural miscommunication (Scollon 1985: 24; Jaworski 1993: 22-24) and limits the researchability of silence in terms of its universality.

Therefore, in addition to a variety of studies that aimed to investigate these cross-cultural differences and their impact on cross-cultural communication (e.g. Bruneau 1982; Enninger 1987; 1991; Giles et al. 1992; Nakane 2006; Philips 1976) a number of scholars have investigated particular (sub-)cultures and speech communities for their individual use of silence. Some of the more prominently cited studies include Basso (1970), who investigated the highly eminent use of silence of Native-Americans, Nwoye (1985), who studied the use of eloquent silence among the Igbo of Nigeria, O’Kelly (1982) and Lebra (1987), who were concerned with the role
of silence in Japanese culture, Agyekum (2002), who looked at the communicative role of silence among the Akan in Ghana, and Mushin and Gardner (2009), who examined silence in Australian Aboriginal conversations. What appears to be striking about these studies is that all of them found that silence is more prominent and also more tolerated among the members of these cultures than it is by the members of our Westernized societies. For instance, due to the more frequent, longer and tolerated gaps in the Australian Aboriginal conversation style, Mushin and Gardner (2009: 2049) observed that “there is less pressure to immediately take the floor as soon as it is available.”

As already stated above, in-depth research on silence in terms of a universal conversational routine would go far beyond the scope of this thesis. Therefore, the focus remains on the Western perception and usage. However, it should be noted that differences exist even within what is usually labeled as Western – namely Western Europe and North America. For instance, as studies have shown, silence is perceived rather differently by “The silent Finn” (Lehtonen & Sajavaara 1985: 193) than by the stereotypically labeled “noisy” Italian (Saunders 1985: 165). Therefore, the findings, assumptions, and interpretations in this thesis are largely restricted to the Anglo-American world.

After having outlined some of the predominant conceptions of silence in the context of culture and after having indicated some cross-cultural differences in its valuation and use, the next section is concerned with the perception of silence within linguistics.

2.3. Silence in linguistics

For a long time, silence has been a neglected and often overlooked subject in the study of language. According to Saville-Troike (1985: 3) it “has traditionally been ignored except for its boundary-marking function”. Despite the increasing interest in the subject in the study of communication, this claim still appears to be accurate today. When consulting an encyclopedia of linguistics (Crystal 2008: 436), silence is only mentioned in connection with “silent pauses” and “silent stress”. There hardly is any sign of recognizing the active role of silence in communication, leaving alone the fact that it can be used to express meaning. Although there has been a variety of studies on
silence since linguistics first became interested in the subject in the 1970s (Ephratt 2008: 1910), silence still appears to be a rather marginalized field of interest in comparison to vocalized and verbalized means of communication. Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985: xi) attempt to explain this research bias by suggesting that silence is an “out-of-awareness phenomenon”. Yet, considering that vocalized communication could not function without the silence of at least one of the interactants, this neglect is also an adequate representation of the Western valuation of the phenomenon.

According to Johannesen (1974: 25) much of the early research on silence has been done inside the “field of psychotherapy”. Linguistics, in turn, first became interested in the subject via two branches: chronometrical analysis of speech and discourse analysis (Ephratt 2008: 1910). The attention to silence from the chronometrical analysis of speech was of a psycholinguistic nature, as “speech rates were collected” and the “nothing (the spaces, the silences, between words) were counted” (ibid.). Discourse analysis, on the other hand, developed a curiosity for silence as it was regarded to be the “interactive locus of turn-taking” (ibid.).

In the 1970s, when the first studies solely concerned with silence appeared, the topic eventually started to attract greater interest. Bruneau (1973), Jensen (1973), and Johannesen (1974) were among the first who began to recognize its functions and importance in communication. Before examining these, however, it is first necessary to have a look at linguistic definitions of the concept.

2.3.1. Toward a linguistic definition of silence

Although the physicality of silence, similar to stillness, can be perceived as a “break of the acoustic signal” (Ghita 1994: 378), it is nevertheless essential to distinguish between the two concepts (Ephratt 2008: 1911). In contrast to silence in the linguistic sense, stillness is considered to be the mere “absence of sound” and only occurs “exterior to the communicative interaction” (ibid.). Thus, stillness must be disregarded in a linguistic definition of silence.

Not unlike the dictionary definition in section 2.1, studies of communication first regarded silence as a mere “absence of sound and therefore as absence of communication” (Scollon 1985: 21). More elaborately,
The notion of silence that crept into speech studies and linguistics in the 1970s was closely associated with negativity, passiveness, impotence and death. It was treated as absence: absence of speech and absence of meaning and intention. (Ephratt 2008: 1910)

Due to the variety of communicative functions that silence can fulfill, such ill-fated definitions must be excoriated and consequently disregarded. Finding a useful definition, however, appears to be quite a difficult task, as the relation of silence to speech can be interpreted in many different ways.

One popular way of characterizing this relationship is to consider silence as the fundamental background on which speech is built: “[s]ilence is to speech as the white of this paper is to this print” (Bruneau 1973: 18). This approach appears to be quite useful at first sight, as it would not only be possible to incorporate the existence of silent pauses into this comparison, but it also could explain the turn-taking regulating functions that silence can fulfill. However, it still appears to be a rather narrow view, as this understanding of silence would continue to imply that speech is needed in order to produce meaning and that silence in itself is meaningless (cf. Jaworski 1993: 12).

Therefore, one could take a step further and define the relation of speech and silence as a continuum with speech on the one and silence on the other end as opposites. Such “a continuum of noisiness” could be drawn “from zero (silence) to infinity (absolute noisiness)” (Maltz 1985: 130). Although such a definition would allow silence to be seen as meaningful, the complete opposition of speech and silence still appears to be static and flawed. Especially informal and unplanned speech, for instance, is always accompanied by silence in the form of disfluency, silent pauses, silent hesitation etc. Therefore, a more flexible approach is needed.

Jaworski (1993: 44) convincingly offers a more usable definition of the relation between speech and silence. Instead of seeing them as opposites he proposes that they complement each other:

I will argue that although in their most prototypical meanings the concepts silence and speech can be treated as formal opposites they both cover a multitude of less clear-cut forms that emerge from situations in which they intersect one with another, and thus the opposition between them is not entirely straightforward. Although it is true that one may be more inclined to describe silence as the lack of speech but not vice versa (i.e., speech as the lack of silence), this is not a sufficient argument to treat silence as a derivative concept. (Jaworski 1993: 44, original emphasis)
This proposal appears to be very persuasive from the point of view of pragmatics. By referring to the work of Tyler (1978), Jaworski (1993: 44) explains further that every “act of saying” consists of a “said” and an “unsaid” component. This means that although communication in the form of speech might take place, the intended message might not necessarily be vocalized and might be hidden in the unsaid. Therefore, speech and silence can be seen as being complimentary as they both can be used to contribute to the meaning of an utterance. Schmitz (1990: sections 2.8-2.9) notes in this respect that

[t]here are subtexts to every text: presuppositions, implications, connotations, references. To some extent these are clear, they can be understood or expected in context; but they can also unwittingly give rise to misunderstandings, or be used as a deliberate element of strategy (e.g. in gossip, jokes, essays, and contracts). […] There is no clear border between that which one says and that which one does not say […] words can be left out in the hope that they will be implicitly understood

Therefore, Jaworski’s (1993) approach to treat the relation between speech and silence as complementary and to look at instances of silence in the light of prototype theory (Rosch 1978) appears to be the most useful and accurate one. Additionally, this way of seeing silence could also account for what is probably one of the least prototypical manifestations of silence. As outlined in more detail in section 6.2.10, one form of silence often occurs hidden within speech in the case of taboos and uncomfortable topics. Although this form of silence can only be observed on the level of meaning, i.e. not on the level of locution, its existence and function cannot be denied either.

Nevertheless, despite this possibility of extending the conceptualization of silence from its prototype in the form of an observable entity on the level of locution to less prototypical manifestations that appear to be disguised in speech, it should be noted that this thesis is mainly concerned with the role of the former, i.e. silence that is perceptible on the level of locution, as a communicative tool. Before considering various types of silence and after having defined the relationship between speech and silence, a final attempt toward a linguistic definition of silence should be made: Silence can thus be described as a non-vocalized means of communication that holds an essential part in interaction, and which can bear meaning both in the presence and absence of speech.
2.3.2. Types of silence

Due to the multiple ways silence can be used and interpreted in communication, a variety of scholars have attempted to classify silence. Some of the more useful classification efforts are discussed below. It should be noted, however, that many of them overlap and do not necessarily exclude each other.

The first attempt to distinguish between different types of silence was made by Bruneau (1973). As has been summarized by Kurzon (1998: 19-20; 2007: 1673) as well as by Muñoz-Duston and Kaplan (1985: 238-239), he identified psycholinguistic silence, interactive silence and sociocultural silence according to their individual length. Psycholinguistic silence, which can take the form of hesitations and sentence corrections, is very short and used to help the addressee to comprehend the uttered message as well as to give the addressee time to formulate and plan his or her utterance. Next, interactive silence, which is longer than psycholinguistic silence, appears in the form of intentional pauses in communication and plays a crucial role in the turn-taking regulation. Finally, sociocultural silences are “those related to the characteristic manner in which entire social and cultural orders refrain from speech and manipulate both psycholinguistic and interactive silences” (Bruneau 1973: 36). One of the flaws of this classification is that it is often difficult to distinguish between psycholinguistic and interactive silence (Kurzon 2007: 1673).

A common classification scheme of silence is found in the distinction between within-turn and between-turn silence (Zuo 2002: 48). This categorization can be seen more or less in accord with Scollon’s (1985: 23) differentiation between switching and in-turn pauses. This, however, causes a problem in that it consequently limits the importance of silence too closely to its occurrence in the form of pauses and neglects other important functions.

Kurzon (1998: 18) convincingly argues for differentiating intentional from unintentional silence. Unintentional silence occurs, as “people are sometimes silent without meaning anything specific by their silence” (ibid.). In this context, it should also be noted that unintentional silence can often be the product of psychological non-presence (Kurzon 2007: 1676). Therefore, in some cases a silent answer to a question could simply communicate that one is lost in thoughts.
A very useful distinction between different types of silences has been adopted by Ephratt (2008: 190ff.). She characterizes silence as either non-communicative or communicative. The latter, labeled eloquent silence, is presented as an active performance in communication:

This notion of silence as part of communication, as the speaker choosing, when it is his or her turn, to express himself or herself by silence, should be clearly distinguished from other notions such as stillness and pauses. (Ephratt 2008: 1911)

What appears to be troublesome with this distinction, however, is the neglect of the possibility that pauses can communicate meaning as well. Especially from a psychological and psycholinguistic point of view, pauses can, deliberately or not, communicate meaning by revealing the speaker’s attitudes, thoughts, insecurities etc. Therefore, a more fine-grained classification is needed.

One of the most comprehensive attempts to classify silence has been made by Saville-Troike (1985: 16-17). She distinguishes between three superordinate forms of silence and subdivides each category further. The superordinate forms are institutionally-determined silence (cf. The Second Foundation 1981), group-determined silence and individually-determined/negotiated silence. While the first two classify for externally motivated silence, the third, which is of greater interest here, can be compared to internally motivated silence (cf. Kurzon 2007: 1676). Saville-Troike (1985: 16-17) additionally divides individually-determined/negotiated silence into interactive and non-interactive. Interactive silence is then, in turn, further sorted into socio-contextually, linguistically and psychologically motivated subcategories.

Despite its comprehensiveness, Saville-Troike’s taxonomy has been criticized for its focus on functionality and has been called “over-ambitious” since “too many variables are indiscriminately taken into consideration all at once” (Zuo 2002: 43). Consequently, the individual “categories are far from [being] mutually exclusive” (ibid.). While this might be true and the classification system might not be flawless, the consideration of multiple factors makes it more convincing than most of the other categorizations.

Although none of the above enumerated and discussed classifications may be fully able to account for the complexity of silence, each one of them holds at least one important distinction criteria that proves to be useful for the interpretation and understanding of performative acts of silence. Before investigating the role of silence
within pragmatics, it is, however, essential to discuss the range of functions that silence can fulfill.

2.3.3. Functions of silence

Since the 1970s, after silence has become a subject of interest in linguistics, a series of scholars have tried to investigate, enumerate, and discuss the functions silence can fulfill in communication. According to Oduro-Frimpong (2011: 2331) this vast body of research can be divided into two phases. While the aim of the early phase was to craft a complete picture of functions (Bruneau 1973; Jensen 1973; Johannesen 1974; Meerloo 1975; The Second Foundation 1982), more contemporary research on silence is twofold. Although it continues to undertake theoretical investigations of the phenomenon (e.g. Scollon 1985; Saville-Troike 1985; Schmitz 1990; Jaworski 1993; 1997; Ghita 1994; Kurzon 1998; 2007; 2011; Zuo 2002; Ephratt 2008), it largely focuses on case studies that explore the usage and functions of silence in specific contexts (e.g. Gilmore 1985; Saunders 1985; Tannen 1985; Jaworski & Stephens 1998; Jaworski et al. 2005; Mushin & Gardner 2009; Oduro-Frimpong 2011). A reason for this shift of interest from the theoretical framework to individualized situations might lie in the quantity of identified functions. For instance, we see that whereas Jensen (1973) lists five basic roles, Johannesen’s (1974) incomplete attempt already includes twenty different functions.

In order to account for the apparently unlimited number of functions Jaworski (1993: 69ff.) alludes to the ambiguous nature of silence and its strong context-dependency. He concludes that since

silence and speech complement each other in the linguistic universe […] they are capable of performing similar functions and expressing similar meanings. (Jaworksi 1993: 47)

Provided the appropriate context and/or co-text, there indeed seem to be only few things one cannot express with silence. Ghita (1994: 386) even proposes that silence is “more powerful than words themselves” as it also “can express what cannot be verbalized”. This seems to be especially true when dealing with strong emotions (cf. Berger 2004).
Therefore, it appears to be pointless to compile extensive lists of functions of silence. Instead, the questions of how silence can be used to communicate and how it can be interpreted appear to be of more importance. Hence, the next chapter focuses on the role of silence in pragmatics. Furthermore, the process of interpreting silence will be looked at in the light of multimodality, before two pragmatic functions of silence, namely silence as a speech act and silence as a politeness device, will be explored and exemplified in greater depth.
3. **Silence and pragmatics**

After having illustrated some of the general, cross-cultural, and linguistic perceptions of silence in the previous chapter, the objective of this chapter is to define its role within pragmatics and to show how its meaning, as communicated by a speaker, can be interpreted by a listener. At this point it should be noted that the terms *speaker* and *listener* are used throughout this thesis despite their association with sound. Since eloquent and intentional silence “is an active human performance” (Dauenhauer 1979: 437) and it can thus be treated similar to an utterance, the terms continue to be suitable.

Levinson (1983: 5) defines pragmatics in contrast to syntax and semantics as “the study of language in use”. Yule (1996: 3) elaborates that it is more concerned with “what people mean by their utterances than what the words or phrases in those utterances might mean by themselves.” Consequently, he defines pragmatics as the study of “speaker meaning”, “contextual meaning”, and “of how more gets communicated than is said” (ibid.). In other words, it can be asserted that pragmatics is concerned with how meaning is communicated on a level that goes beyond the semantic meaning of individual words or utterances.

Considering these rather simple and broad definitions, it is not surprising that silence holds a vital part within this field of linguistics. Although silence appears to be void of meaning on a semantic level, it can nevertheless be effectively used to communicate with other interactants. Therefore, it is the responsibility of pragmatics to investigate the mechanism that lies behind this phenomenon. Ghita (1994: 380) elaborates:

Silence is a purely pragmatic subject. It is meaningless apart from its interpretation which is found in people and from action among people. In order to understand or to activate its interpersonal value it needs people’s ability to contextualize this […] information (dead spaces) during conversations (within the preceding and following sequences of conversation). Only conversational partners can decide on the particular meaning of silence in a situated [sic] discourse.

This quote shows that although Ghita (1994: 380ff.) argues for the pragmatic usefulness of silence, she does not completely reject the view of silence as a sign of disfluency. As she offers a list of various pragmatic functions of silence and hence
successfully illustrates its conveyance of meaning, her conceptualization of pauses as “dead spaces” appears to be rather incomprehensible. Moreover, her interest in the study of silence seems to be based solely on its understanding as a “disturbance phenomenon” (Ghita 1994: 378). By referring to the rising interest in “postmodern” pragmatic subjects like conflict talks, improvisation, lying, pretending, verbal abuse, miscommunication, etc., which were considered to be “unsafe” territory for the “traditional academic pragmatics”, Ghita (1994: 377) claims that our image of dialogues is a rather “disturbed” and “muddled” one. She consequently includes silence in the list of postmodern pragmatic subjects that deal with phenomena that are not part of an “ideal model of conversation” (ibid.).

Within what Ghita (1994: 377) calls traditional academic pragmatics, there are at least four prominent subject areas that appear to be interested in silence. These include conversation analysis, conversational implicatures, speech act theory and politeness. Due to the scope of this thesis, however, it is not possible to examine silence in each of these contexts in greater detail. Therefore, brief introductory discussions of the former two fields must suffice at this point. The role of silence in speech act theory and politeness will be outlined in great depth in chapters 5 and 6 respectively.

Conversation analysis is mainly interested in conversation structure, conversational style, and preference structure (Yule 1996: 71ff.). Since these include the subjects turn-taking and pauses, a vast amount of the research concerning silence has been conducted in this field (e.g. Sacks et al. 1974; Feldstein et al. 1979; Duez 1985; Scollon 1985; Tannen 1985; Knapp 2000; Zuo 2002). Correspondingly, Levinson (1983: 321ff.) thoroughly surveys the role of silence in the turn-taking mechanism. He concludes that silence is remarkable as it

has no features of its own: all the different significances attributed to it must have their sources in the structural expectations engendered by the surrounding talk. So […] conversational organization can map ‘meaning’ onto silence (Levinson 1983: 329)

Silence as a means of communication is also very interesting to observe in the light of Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle, maxims and implicatures (Ephratt 2012). The basic question within this framework is
whether silence is a case of the addresser’s failure to satisfy the cooperative principle and is resolved as meaningful by implicatures, or whether such cases comply with the cooperative principle. (Ephratt 2012: 63)

Grice’s (1975: 45) maxim of quantity states that one should make his or her contribution not more or less informative than is required. This appears to be very interesting as far as silence is concerned. In this respect, Ghita (1994: 380) claims that silence violates this maxim and hence triggers an implicature. While this certainly holds true for a variety of communicative situations, this is not necessarily always the case. As a matter of fact, there certainly are situations in which silence is perceived as the appropriate amount of talk and where being silent does not violate the maxim of quantity (Ephratt 2012: 72). These situations may occur in connection with face-saving strategies, emotionality, or culturally and contextually defined circumstances. For instance, Saville-Troike (1989: 147) notes in this respect that there is a “belief in Japanese that as soon as an experience is expressed in words (written or oral), the real essence disappears”. Moreover, Ghita (1994: 386) notes that there are situations that involve a call for silence which is often expressed by phrases such as Shut up or Don’t say a word. Ephratt (2012: 72ff.) shows that also the maxim of quality, which states that one should refrain from saying what one “believe[s] to be false” (Grice 1975: 46), can be violated as “one can lie by being silent” (cf. Verschueren 1985: 104). The maxim of relation, “be relevant” (Grice 1975: 46), has notably been developed by Sperber and Wilson (1986) in their relevance theory, which appears to be more suited for an analysis of silence. A detailed discussion of silence in the light of relevance theory can be found in Jaworski (1993: 84ff.). Beside the maxim of quantity, the maxim of manner appears to be the most interesting one with respect to silence. It states (Grice 1975: 46) that one should

1. Avoid obscurity of expression.
2. Avoid ambiguity.
3. Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)
4. Be orderly.

As “Grice defines the category of manner not with regard to the content of the utterance, but to its form” (Ephratt 2012: 77), silence should be considered as a linguistic form in this context. Thus, Ephratt (2012: 77) focuses on the fact that silence often complies with the cooperative principle in regard to being brief. While it is true that one cannot make a statement with less words than pure silence, Ephratt neglects
the fact that one of the most elemental characteristics of eloquent silence is that it can be both ambiguous (Jaworski 1993: 69) and obscure, i.e. sometimes difficult to decipher. Therefore, the use of silence does violate the maxim of manner regularly and triggers an implicature (Ghita 1994: 380). The ambiguous and obscure nature of silence is further discussed in section 3.1.1 below. Summarizing the role of silence in connection with Grice’s cooperative principle Ephratt (2012: 63) concludes that verbal silence, just like speech, may sometimes serve the purposes of communication and interaction, thereby complying with the cooperative principle, and sometimes counter them.

After having outlined the pragmatic nature of silence and after having briefly observed the interest in the phenomenon of some of the broader subject areas within traditional pragmatics, the following section focuses on how meaning is communicated with silence. Therefore, the emphasis lies on what a speaker presupposes and on how his or her silence is consequently understood by a listener.

3.1. Making sense of silence

This section investigates how silence acquires meaning by focusing on how an addressee can make sense of it. Therefore, the ambiguous and obscure nature of silence is discussed first. In a next step, it is observed how this ambiguity and obscurity can be resolved by contextual and shared knowledge between the communicators.

Before going further, however, it is necessary to make another distinction between interactions that involve two people and those that involve a group of people (Kurzon 2007: 1675):

Where there are many people involved, and all or most are silent, we are dealing with a different context, and perhaps a different type of silence. (ibid.)

In consideration of Kurzon’s (2007) distinction, it should be noted that this thesis focuses on dyadic situations, i.e. situations where only two people are involved. The reason behind this choice lies in the objective of this thesis, which is to investigate the communicative functionality of silence in very basic interpersonal situations.
3.1.1. **The ambiguity and obscurity of silence**

As outlined in section 2.3.3, an almost unlimited number of communicative functions can be assigned to silence and hence it is “able to express a variety of meanings” (Jaworski 1993: 66). Some scholars, including Jensen (1973) and Jaworski (1993), consequently observed that silence is generally seen to have either a positive or a negative value. Jaworski (1993: 67) exemplifies this point by illustrating how Jensen (1973) assigns these values to each of his proposed functions:

A. *A linkage function*: Silence may bond two (or more) people or it may separate them.
B. *An affecting function*: Silence may heal (over time) or wound.
C. *A revelation function*: Silence may make something known to a person (self-exploration) or it may hide information from others.
D. *A judgmental function*: Silence may signal assent and favor or it may signal dissent and disfavor.
E. *An activating function*: Silence may signal deep thoughtfulness (work) or it may signal mental inactivity.

(Jensen 1973 as quoted in Jaworski 1993: 67, original emphasis)

After a careful observation of these functions, this “ambivalence of silence” (Jaworski 1993: 67) appears to be undeniable. Bearing in mind that silence can be used in order to express almost everything that can be articulated with speech, it is indeed not surprising that silence can be used to express opposing meanings as well. Analogously, Ghita (1994: 387) also notes this ambivalence:

Silence displays a paradoxical, contradictory nature: it may express agreement or disagreement; it may be protective or aggressive. People seem to generally reject it, but sometimes they call for it; it can smooth out a conflict or it can bring about a breakdown, a failure during the conversation.

Naturally, however, not all instances of eloquent silence can be characterized by this “bipolar valuation” (Jaworski 1993: 69). Moreover, in addition to being ambiguous silence can also be seen as being obscure. While it will be argued in the sections 3.1.2 and 3.2 that silence is interpreted correctly by the hearer most of the time, it has to be acknowledged that there are situations in which an expression of silence might prove to be more difficult to understand than spoken words. Thus, silence can sometimes be considered to be a more vague and obscure way of communicating meaning in contrast to speech.
Considering this ambiguity, ambivalence, and obscurity of silence, it is a natural consequence that silent means of communication often lead to misunderstandings (ibid.). Jaworski (1993: 68) elaborates by referring to Thomas (1983):

When the pragmatic force of the utterance, in this case silence, attributed by the hearer is different from that intended by the speaker, “pragmatic failure” takes place.

As has been outlined in section 2.2, these pragmatic failures are especially common in cross-cultural interactions. However, that does not mean that speakers of the same language never experience such pragmatic misunderstandings (ibid.).

However, if silence is as ambiguous, ambivalent, vague, and obscure as illustrated above, the question arises how a listener is able to correctly interpret silence as intended by a speaker at all. The answer can be found in the shared contextual knowledge between the interactants.

### 3.1.2. Silence in the light of contextual and shared knowledge

Widdowson (2007: 128) defines context as “[a]pects of extra-linguistic reality that are taken to be relevant to communication”. In other words, context enables us to understand utterances by relating them to the concrete or abstract circumstances in which they are produced. Conceptual knowledge, however, does not just refer to the direct circumstances of the situations, but might also include common knowledge which has been established between the interactants in preceding conversations (Widdowson 2007: 20). Therefore, Widdowson (2007: 21, original emphasis) concludes that “[c]ontext […] is not what is perceived in a particular situation, but what is conceived as relevant”.

As context can also “be thought of as knowledge […] of the world as it is known by particular groups of people” (Widdowson 2007: 25), effective communication is often based on mutual worldviews and shared values. Consequently, the reason why silence causes more misunderstandings in cross-cultural than in intracultural communication can be found in the different cultural values and habits (cf. Basso 1970; Enninger 1987; 1991).
According to Kurzon (1998: 50), the “contextualization of the silence is the best aid in interpreting it”. As a matter of fact, the view that the meaning assigned to a particular instance of silence always seems to depend “upon the backgrounds of the participants, the occasion, and the verbal and nonverbal contexts surrounding the silence” (Johannesen 1974: 29) appears to be widely agreed upon (e.g. Jensen 1973; Philips 1985; Saville-Troike 1985; Tannen 1985; Jaworski 1993; Ghita 1994). Therefore, the ambiguous and obscure nature of silence can be resolved by considering the conversational context. The fact that the meaning of silence always depends on the context also accounts for the unlimited number of functions that silence can fulfill in conversations. Ghita (1994: 387) elaborates that

> [s]ince silence is open to limitless contextualized interpretations, we cannot decide upon a definite meaning of silence in use. Even the fact that in interpretation it can be taken to extremes, changing pollarity [sic], shows that silence is primarily interactive. Its significance, contextually exploited out of nothing, needs to be negotiated or pragmatically processed between the participants to the conversation.

This quote successfully demonstrates the active and communicative essence of silence by referring to it as being interactive. Therefore, similarly as with speech, one has to consider communicative silence in relation to its context in order to fully understand and comprehend its meaning. However, as has been demonstrated in section 2.3.2 silence does not always convey meaning. Hence, the question arises that if silence indeed functions as means of communication, whether we would inconclusively try to search for meaning in such situations. According to Jaworski (1993: 91), people only look for a “context in which it [silence] would have any contextual effects” when it is assumed that communication is taking place. He adds that communication has to be assumed to be taking place for a given stretch of silence to be perceived as meaningful. If the communication process is not believed to be taking place, no instance of silence will be able to make any assumption manifest enough to draw anyone’s attention. (Jaworski 1993: 85)

Although, the reasoning behind Jaworski’s (1993) theory appears to be persuasive and conclusive, the question of how we distinguish between non-communicative and communicative situations remains unanswered. In the light of the assumption that “one cannot not communicate” (Watzlawick et al. 1967: 51), Johannesen (1974: 29) notes that “silence communicates because listeners and observers will attach meaning to the silence whether the sender wishes so or not.” Consequently, the question arises
whether non-communicative situations even exist. In order to resolve this issue for the study of silence, Philips (1985: 205) distinguishes between “interaction structured through talk and interaction structured through ‘silence’”.

Interaction structured through talk consists of “relatively long chunks of talk” with silence occurring as “gaps in speech” which normally are not longer “than a few seconds” (Philips 1985: 206). Although these interactions are often accompanied by nonverbal expressions, they are not required in order for the conversation to be comprehensible: “A given utterance is understood through reference to the utterances around it”, which “provide a context of interpretability for the utterance in question” (ibid.).

Interaction structured through silence, on the other hand, “refers to those activities for which the focus of attention is in the visual rather than the auditory channel” (Philips 1985: 209). Therefore, talk occurring during these interactions accompanies physical behavior and activities. Consequently, one needs “access to the nonverbal context” in order to be able to comprehend the conversation (Philips 1985: 210). Ultimately, interaction structured through silence consists of more silence than talk and the speech that does occur appears to be less planned than in interactions which are structured through talk (ibid.).

By incorporating Philips’s (1985) theory into the discussion of the relevance of contextual and shared knowledge when interpreting silence, two conclusions can be drawn. First, the issue of defining non-communicative situations in which meaning cannot be attributed to silence can be disregarded as they are part of interaction structured through silence. Although communication takes place to a certain degree in these circumstances, stretches of silence do not need to be contextualized and made sense of, as the focus in such situations lies on physical events or activities. For instance, two players in a chess game do not need to interpret each other’s silence, as they are both focused on the game. At the same time, however, the silence between them does not appear to be meaningless, as it suggests that they are thinking. Yet, visual cues like a triumphant smile of a player after a move would indicate an active means of communicating and would hence be interpreted by the opponent as a sign of confidence.

The second conclusion that can be drawn as a result from Philip’s (1985) claims involves a specification of contextual and situational knowledge. Moreover,
apart from the above outlined components of context, silence almost never occurs without any visual cues in the form of nonverbal behavior. For example, an expression of silence accompanied by a smile will most likely be differently interpreted than an instance of silence accompanied by a grim face in the same situation. Therefore, Philips (1985: 205) concludes that wherever and whenever people have visual access to one another, they acquire information from one another’s nonverbal behavior. Thus whenever there is silence in such circumstances, there will still always be nonverbal behavior that constitutes the organization of face-to-face interaction.

The aim of this section has been to investigate the mechanisms that lie behind the successful interpretation of silence in communication. As has been shown, “silence (like all nonverbal communication) is more context-embedded than speech” and is consequently also “more dependent on context for its interpretation” (Saville-Troike 1985: 11). It has also been suggested that silence is usually accompanied by visual cues which help the listener with his or her interpretation of a particular instance of silence. Therefore, the aim of the next section is to observe these visual cues by looking at silence in the context of multimodality.

3.2. Silence and multimodality

Crystal (2008: 89) defines communication as the “transmission and reception of information (a ‘message’) between a source and a receiver using a signaling system”. In other words, human communication is concerned with expressing and transmitting meaning. Despite the widespread focus of considering language to be the main or even sole meaning-making component, “human social interaction involves the intertwined cooperation of different modalities” (Stivers & Sidnell 2005: 1). Consequently, communication should be regarded as multimodal (Kress 2010: 32). In order to fully grasp the implication of this assertion, it is first necessary to define what is understood by a mode:

\[ A \text{mode} \text{ is a socially shaped and culturally given semiotic resource for making meaning. Image, writing, layout, music, gesture, speech, moving image, soundtrack and 3D objects are examples of modes used in representation and communication.} \] (Kress 2010: 79, original emphasis)
Since a mode can therefore be seen as a channel or medium of communication, it can be concluded that meaning in social interactions is not solely transmitted via language. Hence, Stivers and Sidnell (2005: 2) argue that

> [f]ace-to-face interaction is, by definition, multimodal interaction in which participants encounter a steady stream of meaningful facial expressions, gestures, body postures, head movements, words, grammatical constructions, and prosodic contours.

Consequently, in order to obtain the full meaning of a communicative act, multiple modes of communication have to be considered. According to Kress (2010: 79), the concept of multimodality, i.e. the construction of meaning by more than one mode, can function in two different ways. On the one hand, different modes can be used to express the same meaning and consequently duplicate each other or, on the other hand, they can add a different layer of meaning (ibid.). In regard to the latter, Kress (2010: 79) argues that language can consequently “no longer [be seen] as central and dominant, fully capable of expressing all meanings, but as one means among others for making meaning”. Consequently, he concludes that “[d]ifferent modes offer different potentials for making meaning” (ibid.).

In contrast to Kress’s (2010: 57) social-semiotic approach, which centers on factors such as socio-cultural environment, agency, power and distance, a pragmatic approach (ibid.) to multimodality is favored for this thesis. Therefore, the focus lies on the use of different modes, the investigation of the conditions under which they are applied, and the observation of their effects.

Stivers and Sidnell (2005: 2) generally distinguish between vocal/aural and visuospatial modalities. While the former include all aspects of spoken language, the latter include gestures, facial expressions, gaze and body postures (ibid.). Although of marginal importance for the study of communication, Kwiatkowska (1997: 335) and Ephratt (2011: 2289) additionally mention tactile, olfactory, and gustatory modalities in order to account for all our five senses.

As outlined above, face-to-face interactions are always accompanied by “extralinguistic” (Ephratt 2011: 2287) modes. According to Kwiatkowska (1997: 329) these are mostly part of the visuospatial modalities as she notes that “[t]here is an obvious connection between language and perception”. She justifies the importance of visual perception in communication as follows:
Language is dependent on perception in most fundamental ways, and since human perception is visually oriented, there is an intimate connection between the visual and the verbal. (ibid.)

Furthermore, in reference to Marks (1978), Kwiatkowska (1997: 329) claims that visual perception even overwrites semantic contents when “discrepant information” is communicated. In other words, “we tend to believe our eyes” rather than verbalized statements (ibid.). Therefore, it can be concluded that these modes of communication are of crucial importance when decoding a communicative act. Accordantly, Stivers and Sidnell (2005: 6) summarize:

Face-to-face social interaction is necessarily multimodal and typically involves the cooperation of vocal and visuospatial modalities. There are many ways in which these modalities work together. The communicative work that is performed by one modality may be supported or extended by the work of another modality. […] However, it is also possible for work by one modality to be modified by work of a different modality.

After having outlined the functions and importance of visuospatial modes in face-to-face interactions, it does not appear to be surprising that they are of utmost significance in connection with silence. Philips (1985: 205), Saville-Troike (1985: 11), and Kurzon (2011: 2276) note that silence is usually accompanied by other modes of nonverbal communication. These modes contribute substantially to the human ability to create meaning via silence on the part of the addressee and to interpret and understand it at the end of the addressee. The greatest impact, thereby, seems to be achieved by the use of gestures, gaze, facial expression, body movement and posture, as well as tactile actions such as touch. As the analysis of the use of silence in connection with speech act theory and politeness will draw from the information gained by these modes, they are briefly discussed in the following subsections. It should be noted, however, that the research on these individual modes has started before the concept of multimodality has been developed. Therefore, the below presented findings and research assumptions within these individual modes were not necessarily obtained in the light of a multimodal view of communication. Nevertheless, several connections between the different modes have already been suggested from the beginning.
3.2.1. **Gestures**

According to Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 586), gestures were one of the earliest communicative tools used by Homo sapiens and gained importance when our ancestors stood up to walk and their “hands were no longer instruments of locomotion”. Kendon (1985: 215) defines gestures as “distinct bodily action[s] that [are] regarded by participants as being directly involved in the process of deliberate utterance”. This concept of gestures also includes facial expressions, head movements, body postures etc. However, due to the special importance of their individual roles (cf. Ephratt 2011: 2288), they are considered separately here and the concept of gestures is mainly used to refer to manual gestures.

Kendon (1985: 216) tries to distinguish deliberate communicative gestures from unintentional and/or unconsciously performed gesticulations. However, he admits that a clear boundary between them cannot be drawn. Although it is possible to take over all functions of verbal communication with gestures, they are often used additionally in order to perform a different communicative task (ibid.):

> [G]esture is employed, not as a substitute or alternative to speech, but as an additional component of the utterance in which aspects of what they are referring to are represented, which are not represented in the words that are being used. (Kendon 1985: 226)

Kress (2010: 84) indicates that one of the characteristic attributes of gestures is that once “a gesture has been made and it has been interpreted, its meaning for the interpreter is ‘there’ but no material trace remains”. Although this holds true for all means of nonverbal communication, it marks an important difference to the use of spoken language. Although uttered words do not leave any physical traces either, it appears to be easier to remember and reproduce them precisely. Kendon (1985: 223) notes in this respect that

> gesture is often adopted as a medium of utterance where the utterer seeks to be less fully bound or officially committed to what he or she has to say. Thus it is that we find gesture being adopted as a substitute for speech, where speech might be regarded as too explicit or indelicate.

In such situations meaning is communicated silently with the help of gestures. In this matter, referring to the delicacy of such a context, Jaworski (1993: 25) adds that it is “easier to undo silence than it is to undo words”.
Apart from their use with silence in order to avoid speech, gestures have a variety of functions in interpersonal communications. They can be incorporated into an utterance to replace unspoken content (Slama-Cazacu 1976), they can be applied to “overcome the momentary blocking of the speech channel” (Kendon 1985: 221), they can be used to point toward something, thus fulfilling a deictic function (Kendon 1985), they can be employed in order to clarify ambiguity (ibid.; Holler & Beattie 2003), they can add additional information to what is said (Kendon 1985), they can simply be used to illustrate the verbal content of an utterance (ibid.), and they can also be employed to overcome language barriers when “communicating with someone who speaks a different language” (Hogg & Vaughan 2008: 586). In the context of silence, the function of gestures to convey meaning without words appears to be the most interesting one.

3.2.2. Gaze

According to Kleinke (1986: 78), gaze is one of the most vital and significant means of nonverbal communication. In reference to Argyle and Ingham (1972), Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 579) note that “[i]n two-person settings, people spend 61 per cent of the time gazing, and [that] a gaze lasts about three seconds”. Furthermore, they distinguish between gaze, i.e. “looking at someone’s eyes” and mutual gaze which can described as eye contact (Hogg & Vaughan 2008: 579). The average duration of mutual gazes is less than a second and “people in dyads [tend to] spend on average 31 per cent of the time engaging in mutual gaze” (ibid.).

Kleinke (1986: 78) observes five basic communicative functions of gaze. Gaze is shown to provide information, regulate interaction, express intimacy, exercise social control, and facilitate service and task goals. Gaze can provide information in the form of signaling liking and attraction, attentiveness, competence, social skills and mental health, credibility, dominance, and is also able to communicate feelings (Kleinke 1986: 80-81). In its interaction regulation function, gaze has been observed to be more prominent while listening than speaking (ibid.). Additionally, Kendon (1967) found that speakers tend to end their turn by looking at the listener in order to signal that he or she is at the end of his or her turn. Gaze, especially in the form of mutual gaze, often expresses intimacy when people share feelings of liking and warmth (Kleinke
In this respect, Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 579) point out that we experience it to be uncomfortable to share eye contact with strangers on a street. At the same time, however, they also note that the absence of gaze can be “equally unnerving” (ibid.). Moreover, gaze can be used in connection with social control. Therefore, Kleinke (1986: 82-83) outlines that people tend to gaze more when they try to be persuasive or deceptive, when they try to ingratiate themselves, when making threats or displaying dominance or when wanting to avoid or escape from something. Finally, in what Kleinke (1986: 83-85) labels as service tasks, gaze has shown to be employed when seeking information, in teaching-learning situations, while cooperating or bargaining, and during interpersonal interactions.

Furthermore, it has also been shown that gaze is of central importance in connection with other communicative modes. Streeck (1988; 1993), for instance, observes that when making gestures speakers shift their gaze toward the gesture in order to draw attention to it. Thus, gazing also “functions like pointing” (Streeck 1988: 63). He concludes that even though there are otherwise many intimate and direct connections between speech and gesture, in some ways these two modalities of communication are linked together by yet another modality, gaze (and perhaps others). (Streeck 1993: 296)

When observing the multiple communicative functions of gaze, it is not surprising that gaze also has an important role in the interpretation of silence. As stressed by Stivers and Sidnell (2005: 5), gaze not only marks the ending of a turn and assigns a new speaker, but also shows that an interactant is “attending to the talk of the moment”. In relation to silence, gaze can therefore be seen as an indicator that communication indeed takes place. Moreover, the silent person might express with such a gaze that he or she expects the other participant of the conversation to say something or press him or her to interpret the silence as intentional and meaningful.

### 3.2.3. Facial Expressions

According to Wagner et al. (1986: 737) there is a “widespread assumption that facial expressions can be used by individuals to infer the emotional experience of others”. Gerrig and Zimbardo (2008: 456) claim that there is proof that the facial expressions of the seven basic emotions happiness, surprise, anger, disgust, fear, sadness, and
contempt are universal. These basic emotions are “associated with quite distinctive patterns of facial muscle activity” (Hogg & Vaughan 2008: 582). However, facial expressions are capable of expressing much more than just these seven basic emotions. Birdwhistell (1970) found that people can produce up to 20 000 different facial expressions. Therefore, it is not surprising that they are not always easy to interpret.

Facial expressions appear useful for understanding silence, as they can give information about the speakers’ moods and emotional states. This holds especially true for emotionally loaded silences that result out of one of these seven basic emotions. Thus, whenever a speaker is at a loss of words due to happiness, for instance, the listener can interpret the silence with the help of the speaker’s facial expression.

However, facial expressions do not only provide emotional information. For example, Kurzon (1998: 11) observes that “when someone raises his or her eyebrows without saying anything” it can have the same meaning and effect as a verbal expression of doubt. Accordingly, Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 585) note:

[F]acial movements are more than cues to our emotions; they are also used deliberately to support or even to replace spoken language. […] We raise our eyebrows to emphasise a question, or furrow our brows and squint our eyes to reflect doubt or scorn.

3.2.4. Body movement and posture

In addition to the above observed modes, also body movements and postures can be used to communicate. In reference to Schegloff (1998), Stivers and Sidnell (2005: 5), for instance, point out that “participants may display, through their body posture, whether they are in a stable or unstable position relative to a particular activity such as a conversation”. Moreover, Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 588) provide evidence that body posture can be an indicator for social status in a conversation and show whether the interactants feel comfortable or uncomfortable. Mehrabian (1972), for instance, has found in this respect that people tend to lean toward one another when they like each other.

One of the most communicative body movements can be found in the form of head movement. According to McClave (2000: 855), “[s]peaker head movements pattern predictably and have semantic, discourse, and communicative functions”. She elaborates:
Head movements of native speakers of American English carry semantic meaning beyond the familiar up-and-down nods for affirmation and side-to-side sweeps for negation. Head movements function as modality markers for uncertainty, and they also signal discourse structure by introducing direct quotes. In narration, they can have a deictic function, and lexical repairs are kinesically marked. Interactionally speaker head nods function as backchannel requests. (McClave 2000: 859)

Therefore, head movements are also relevant in connection with silence. Silent answers accompanied by the nodding or shaking of the speaker’s head are, therefore, easily understood as agreement or disagreement respectively. Furthermore, in case of uncertainty (McCalve 2000: 862), a participant might tilt his or her head to one side in order to perform a silent question. Moreover, the silent tilting of one’s head from side to side might be interpreted as expressing doubts or uncertainty.

3.2.5. Touch

Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 588) suggest that touch might be the “earliest form of communication we learn”. Consequently, as outlined by McDaniel and Andersen (1998: 59), touch is one of the most important interpersonal communicative tools. This significance is also acknowledged by Hall (1990: 62) who regards touch as “the most personally experienced of all sensations”. Different types of touches can be categorized in terms to their characteristics, i.e. gentle, firm, brief, enduring, etc. (Hogg & Vaughan 2008: 588). Moreover, their meaning differs in regard to the different parts of the body that are being touched, i.e. hands, shoulders, chest, etc. (ibid.).

Jones and Yarbrough (1985: 29ff.) have found five different categories of touch. Positive affect touches are used to express support, appreciation, psychological closeness, sexual interest, and affection. Playful touches are employed to signal playful affection and playful aggression. Control touches are used to show compliance, to draw attention, and to announce a response. The fourth category includes ritualistic touches which are employed in connection with greetings and departures for instance. Finally, task related touches are employed when attempting to complete a task. According to Hogg and Vaughan (2008: 588), two additional categories found by Burgoon et al. (1989) can be added to this list. These are negative
affect touches such as “gently pushing an annoying hand away” and aggressive touches such as slaps, kicks, or punches (Hogg & Vaughan 2008: 588).

In relation to silence, touch can play an important role in all of the above mentioned situations. Moreover, it might also be used in order to attract attention to oneself and signal that the use of one’s silence is intentional and meaningful.

This chapter has discussed some of the pragmatic aspects of silence. It has been shown that silence can be understood and interpreted by relating it to its context and by considering other communicative modes in face-to-face interaction. Before considering two of the most important pragmatic functions of silence, namely silence as a speech act and silence as a politeness device, in more detail, the next chapter briefly discusses the selected data and procedure of the practical aspect of this thesis.
4. Data and procedure

The previous chapters have introduced silence as a subject of interest in the field of pragmatics and have established it as an effective communicative tool by showing that it conveys meaning in relation to context and other modes of communication. In order to be able to demonstrate how interlocutors can communicate with and make sense of silence, linguistic data that is embedded in context and that can be observed in connection with nonverbal communicative modes is needed. However, linguistic corpora usually do not provide such extra-linguistic insights. For this reason, illustrative data for this thesis has been collected from contemporary Hollywood drama movies. At this point, due to the controversial status of movie language as real authentic language, it should be stressed once more that the main objective of this thesis lies in investigating how silence can be used as a communicative tool, as opposed to offering a quantitatively substantiated overview of all possible and realized functions of silence.

Within the field of linguistics, it has often been argued that movie language does not represent real life face-to-face interactions (Forchini 2012). One of the problems with movie language is that it is primarily staged language. Moreover, it appears to be artificially constructed, as an actor or actress is not the only person involved in the production of utterances. Screenwriters write the first version of the eventually spoken dialogue in the form of a movie script. Due to the involved writing and re-writing processes at this stage, it can be argued that the language is likely to lack spontaneity. The productive process of how language is eventually performed on the screen is further influenced by the director of the movie. He or she might advise and guide an actor or actress on how their dialogue should be enacted, pronounced, intonated, etc. This consequently also includes the use of pauses and other instances of silence.

However, despite these seemingly artificial production processes, corpus studies comparing real life data to spoken movie language have shown that there is no significant difference between the two (Forchini 2012) and that “movie language reflects face-to-face conversation[s], more than [it] is generally recognized (Forchini 2010: 334). This is also stressed by Griffin (1995-1996: 42), who claims that movie language is the language that is “heard on the streets, in the shops, in all facets of
real life”. Moreover, since audiences tend to recognize overtly artificial dialogues, it can be argued that movie language needs to be as authentic as possible in order for a movie to be successful, as audiences would otherwise not be able to relate to it. Therefore, it seems that movie language must bear close resemblance to real life language in order to achieve its intended effects. This argument appears to apply at least to the genre of Hollywood drama movies in contemporary settings which aim to portray real life-like situations. However, the same may not necessarily hold true for comedies which are frequently characterized by their fast-paced and witty dialogues, for instance.

Considering these factors, language displayed in contemporary Hollywood drama movies appears to be a suitable and fruitful source for the selection of illustrative excerpts that exemplify how silence can be put to use. The following four drama movies have been selected: *Broken Flowers* (2005), *The Last Kiss* (2006), *Two Lovers* (2008), and *Remember Me* (2010). All four movies were produced within the last decade and consequently reflect contemporary language use. This is an important aspect as it cannot be ruled out that the use of eloquent silence changes alongside with the use of language. Furthermore, since the focus of this thesis lies on the use of silence in Western cultures (cf. section 2.2), all actors and actresses in the selected excerpts are English native speakers and perform with an American accent. Due to the fact that different speakers have different (personal) communicative styles, attention has been paid to ensure that the chosen extracts include different age groups as well as both male and female speakers.

As has already been stated, the selected movie sequences, labeled as excerpts, are intended to illustrate, demonstrate, and consequently corroborate the various proposed applications of silence in the contexts of speech act theory and politeness. In order to be able to show how an individual instance of silence is used to communicate and how it is consequently interpreted and understood by a listener, it is analyzed in relation to its co-text, context, and supportive communicative modes. The analyses are conducted in three steps: First, the co-text, i.e. the words and/or silences that surround the particular expression of silence that is of interest, are transcribed. Instances of silences are indicated in terms of their individual lengths and are noted in square brackets. The communicative silences that are examined in the individual excerpts are highlighted in bold. The transcription of the co-text is followed by a brief
contextualization of the excerpt which is necessary in order to be able to fully comprehend the meaning of the silent utterance. Finally, attention is given to the speakers’ use of other communicative modes that support the communicative intent and that contribute to the successful transmission of meaning. In order to be able to maximize the efficiency of the descriptions of these additional communicative modes, the speakers’ relevant nonverbal actions are further illustrated with screenshots. Based on the insights gained from co-text, context, and the various modes of communication, it is demonstrated how the individual expressions of silence are put to use and how they are understood.
5. **Silence as a speech act**

This chapter considers silence as a speech from a general perspective and subsequently demonstrates some of its pragmatic functions by exemplifying how silence is applied in order to perform various kinds of speech acts. Therefore, it is first necessary to establish a theoretical background by having a look at speech act theory itself.

5.1. **On speech act theory**

Crystal (2008: 446) defines speech act theory as a theory that “analyses the role of utterances in relation to the behavior of the speaker and hearer in interpersonal communication”. Therefore, a speech act is not merely an expression of words in the form of a statement, but a communicative activity motivated by a speaker’s intention to induce an effect (Yule 1996: 47; Crystal 2008: 446).

The development of speech act theory is generally credited to the philosopher J.L. Austin (1962), who was the first to declare interest in the subject. In his lectures, which were posthumously published in *How to do things with words*, he developed an argument that started with the distinction between statements and what he called constatives and performatives (Austin 1962: 3ff.). Constative utterances, on the one hand, are utterances that look like statements, but are “either not intended at all, or only intended in part, to record or impart straightforward information about the facts” (Austin 1962: 2). Performatives, on the other hand, are utterances which perform an action (Austin 1962: 6). Unlike statements or constatives they are neither true nor false as they are “not normally [used to] just say something” (Austin 1962: 7).

As Austin (1962) develops his argument further, he eventually asserts that also a statement in the form of a sentence like “I argue (or urge) that there is no backside to the moon” is a kind of a performative utterance (Austin 1962: 85ff.). Consequently, he abandons the distinction between statements, constatives, and performatives in favor of

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a general full-blown theory of speech acts, in which statements (and constatives in general) will merely be a special case. So it is now claimed that all utterances, in addition to meaning whatever they mean, perform specific actions (or ‘do things’) through having specific forces (Levinson 1983: 235-236).

Consequently, Austin (1962: 101) proposes that when we produce an utterance we are performing three acts simultaneously. He calls them locutionary act, illocutionary act, and perlocutionary act. The locutionary act is described as “the act of ‘saying something’” (Austin 1962: 94), i.e. the production of a “meaningful linguistic expression” (Yule 1996: 48). The illocutionary act is the “performance of an act in saying something as opposed to the performance of an act of saying something (Austin 1962: 99-100, original emphasis). In other words, the illocutionary act is concerned with the communicative force behind an utterance. Finally, the perlocutionary act refers to the effect of the utterance on the listener (Austin 1962: 101). In summary, it is asserted that when producing an utterance, a speaker performs three acts simultaneously. The first is an expression of meaning, the second of force, while the third “is the causing of change in the mind or behavior of the listener” (Coulthard 1985: 18-19). As far as the differentiation of illocutionary and perlocutionary acts is concerned Coulthard (1985: 19, original emphasis) adds:

Basically an illocutionary act is a linguistic act performed in uttering certain words in a given context, while a perlocutionary act is a non-linguistic act performed as a consequence of performing locutionary and illocutionary acts.

In contrast to Austin (1962), Searle (1969: 29ff.) suggests a different view. Coulthard (1985: 21, original emphasis) summarizes that Searle chooses not to separate an utterance into locutionary and illocutionary acts, preferring to see it as consisting of two (not necessarily separate or even separable) parts: a proposition, and a function indicating device which marks the illocutionary force.

Searle (1969: 24) suggests that the performance of a propositional act consists of referring and predicating. In other words, a proposition can be seen as the content of an utterance (Tsohatzidis 2010: 341). Searle (1969: 29) elaborates that “[w]hen a proposition is expressed it is always expressed in the performance of an illocutionary act”. Therefore, the illocutionary force indicator discloses “what illocutionary force the utterance is to have” (Searle 1969: 30). Such force indicating devices include “word order, stress, intonation contour, punctuation, the mood of the verb, and the so
called performative verbs” (ibid.). However, it is also acknowledged that in certain communicative situations context suffices in order to define the illocutionary force (ibid.). As a concluding comment on Searle’s conception of force and proposition, Tshohatzidis (2010: 341) remarks that force is the “particular relation that a speaker bears to [the] proposition”.

A central problem in speech act theory is the issue of speaker meaning and intention as opposed to the listener’s understanding. Coulthard (1985: 20) observes that “Austin attaches considerable importance to speaker’s intention” and points out that this approach is not unproblematic as “there is the problem of discovering what the speaker’s intention was”. Furthermore, in reference to Grice’s (1957: 383ff.) understanding of meaning which focuses on its connection with intention, Searle (1969: 43) argues for the defectiveness of such a conception in the light of speech act theory on two grounds:

This account of meaning does not show the connection between one’s meaning something by what one says, and what that which one says actually means in the language. Secondly, by defining meaning in terms of intended effects it confuses illocutionary with perlocutionary acts.

In other words, by performing an illocutionary act with the motivation of achieving a particular perlocutionary effect, a speaker has no guarantee that the listener will recognize and understand the utterance the same way as it was intended. Therefore, it is essential to consider the listener’s interpretation in order to evaluate whether an illocutionary act was successful or not (Coulthard 1985: 20). In this respect, Edmondson (1981: 50) proposes what he calls the hearer-knows-best principle. This principle suggests that a conversation generally continues on the grounds of the listener’s understanding rather than on the basis of the speaker’s intention. Moreover, a speaker usually has the chance to clarify what he or she meant, if it becomes apparent that the actual perlocutionary effect does not match the intended effect (ibid.).

Before shifting the focus toward the classification of speech acts, it should be noted at this point that the research on speech acts did not end after Austin and Searle. However, since their findings remain to be the most prominent and significant up until
today and since the scope of this thesis does not allow a more in-depth consideration of speech act theory, the focus has to be limited to these two essential approaches.\textsuperscript{4}

\textbf{5.1.1. Classification of speech acts}

In his analysis of illocutionary forces, Austin (1962: 150, original emphasis) detects that there are “general \textit{families} of related and overlapping speech acts”. By attributing the illocutionary force of an utterance to performative verbs, he proposes a list of five classes of illocutionary acts. These comprise verdictives, exercitives, commissives, behabitives, and expositives (Austin 1962: 151). Verdictives are “typified by the giving of a verdict [...] by a jury, arbitrator, or umpire” and include, for instance, estimates and appraisals (ibid.). Exercitives are concerned with the “exercising of powers, rights, or influence” and include examples like voting, ordering, and advising (ibid.). The third class commissives commit the speaker “to doing something, but include also declarations or announcements (Austin 1962: 151-152). Austin (1962: 152, original emphasis) describes behabitives as a “very miscellaneous group [that has] to do with attitudes and social behavior”; for instance acts like apologizing or congratulating fall into this category. Finally, expositives are used to clarify “how our utterances fit into the course of an argument or conversation” and include examples like replying, illustrating, and assuming (ibid.).

Austin’s (1962) classification has been heavily criticized and even Austin (1962: 151-152) himself admits he is not overly “happy about all of” his categories, stating that he is not “putting any of this forward as in the very least definitive” and suggesting that “some fresh classification altogether [might be] needed”. Searle (1976: 7ff., original emphasis) excoriates that Austin (1962) confuses illocutionary acts with illocutionary verbs, by assuming that “classification of different verbs is \textit{eo ipso} a classification of kinds of illocutionary acts”. This criticism is also stressed by Leech (1983: 174) who refers to this misconception as the illocutionary-verb fallacy. Further limitations noted by Searle (1976: 8-9) include the “great deal of overlap from one category to another”, the discrepancy that “not all of the verbs listed in the classes

\textsuperscript{4} More recent approaches to the subject are, for instances, discussed in Tsohatzidis (2010: 344ff.).
really satisfy the definitions given”, and most importantly the unclear and inconsistent “principles on the basis of which the taxonomy is constructed”.

Due to these deficiencies, Searle (1976: 10ff.) proposes an alternative taxonomy of illocutionary acts. He distinguishes between five basic categories: Representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and declarations. Representatives “commit the speaker (in various degrees) to something’s being the case, to the truth of the expressed proposition” (Searle 1976: 10) and consequently include statements, predictions, confessions, beliefs, etc. (cf. Coulthard 1985: 24; Yule 1996: 53; Tsohatzidis 2010: 344). The second class is directives. These are described as “attempts […] by the speaker to get the hearer to do something” and can vary in their forcefulness from modest invitations to strong insistencies (Searle 1976: 11). They include commands, orders, requests, suggestions, etc. (cf. Yule 1996: 54). The category of commissives, which Searle adapts from Austin, includes “illocutionary acts whose point it is to commit the speaker (again in varying degrees) to some future course of action” (Searle 1976: 11), such as promises, threats, refusals, offers, vows, etc. (cf. Yule 1996: 54; Tsohatzidis 2010: 344). Expressives are used to display the speaker’s “psychological state” (Searle 1976: 12), i.e. they express what the speaker feels. They are apologies, thanks, congratulations, condolences, and expressions of joy, pain, sorrow, etc. (cf. Yule 1996: 53; Tsohatzidis 2010: 344). The last category, declarations, includes speech acts which “change the world via their utterance” (Yule 1996: 53) and usually “tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions” (Levinson 1983: 240). These include convictions, resignations, appointments, etc. (Tsohatzidis 2010: 344).

However, also Searle’s (1976) classification has limitations. Leech (1983: 1976), for instance, argues that Searle’s taxonomy is, not unlike Austin’s (1962), subjected to the illocutionary-verb fallacy. Furthermore, he also questions the speech act status of declarations arguing that “they are not illocutionary acts at all. Instead, they are conventional rather than communicative acts: the linguistic parts of rituals” (Leech 1983: 180). Another weakness in Searle’s approach is the problem of the inclusion of questions into the categories of directives. Therefore, Coulthard (1985: 25) suggests that it would be “much more insightful to see questions as a separate category”. Leech (1983: 206) acknowledges this issue as well and proposes the
addition of another category. Hence, according to Leech (ibid.) rogatives are speech acts that carry out a question or inquiry.

Although different attempts have been made in order to classify speech acts, most notably Stiles (1981), Searle’s (1976) taxonomy remains to be the most accepted and useful one. Therefore, in consideration of the various speech act functions of silence, Searle’s categorization with the valuable addition of Leech’s (1983) rogatives will be applied for the purpose of this thesis. Before shifting the focus to silence itself, however, it is first necessary to have a look at indirect speech acts, since silence is generally portrayed as an indirect means of communication (Tannen 1985: 97).

5.1.2. Indirect speech acts

Searle (1975: 59) notes that “[t]he simplest cases of meaning are those in which the speaker utters a sentence and means exactly and literally what he says”. However, meaning is not always produced in such a straightforward way:

In hints, insinuations, irony, and metaphor – to mention a few examples – the speaker’s utterance meaning and the sentence meaning come apart in various ways. One important class of such cases is that in which the speaker utters a sentence, means what he says, but also means something more. (ibid.)

Such cases are generally referred to as indirect speech acts. Crystal (2008: 242) defines an indirect speech act as “an utterance whose linguistic form does not directly reflect its communicative purpose”. In other words, one does not always explicitly say what one means and vice versa. Consequently, indirect speech acts can be characterized as “speech acts performed indirectly through the performance of another speech act” (Coulthard 1985: 27). In order to explain this phenomenon, Searle (1975: 62) distinguishes between primary and secondary illocutionary acts. Primary illocutionary acts refer to the indirectly expressed utterances that are performed via secondary illocutionary acts. These secondary illocutionary acts are, therefore, literal in meaning (ibid.). In the frequently cited example of the sentence Can you pass the salt? (e.g. Searle 1975: 65), the secondary illocutionary act would therefore be an inquiry on the ability of the hearer to pass the salt, i.e. the literal meaning of this utterance. However, in uttering this sentence a speaker would normally not be interested in the listener’s ability, but would hope that he or she would actually pass the salt. Therefore, the primary illocutionary act would be a request.
At this point two questions arise. First, why would a speaker refrain from performing a “direct speech act” (Davison: 1975: 143) and, more importantly, how does a listener recognize the indirectly expressed meaning? In regard to the motivation for performing an indirect speech act, Searle (1975: 74) suggests that rules of politeness appear to be a major consideration. However, this view is severely challenged by Davison (1975: 149-150) who states that

> [u]tterances can be said politely without being overtly (syntactically) marked for politeness, and in a discourse in which the participants are continuously polite, the sentences used are not all indirect speech acts. [...] If the only function of indirect expression of a speech act is to indicate politeness, it is strange that sequences of polite sentences (or sentences uttered by polite people) cannot occur as sequences of indirect speech acts. It is closer to linguistic reality to view indirect speech acts as having a signaling function of some sort rather than just an expressive function. If indirect speech acts are used as signals of some psychological state, then it would not at all be strange that they are often used intermittently rather than continuously [...] 

This assertion does not only appear to be highly plausible, but also contributes profoundly to the understanding of silence as an indirect speech act, as outlined in greater detail in section 5.2 below. In regard to the second question, namely how a hearer is able to recognize and understand the indirectly performed intention of the speaker, Searle (1975: 60-61) offers the following explanation:

> In indirect speech acts the speaker communicates to the hearer more than he actually says by way of relying on their mutually shared background information, both linguistic and nonlinguistic, together with the general powers of rationality and inference on the part of the hearer.

In other words, Searle (ibid.) suggests that a listener is able to infer the intended meaning by relating the speaker’s utterance to the context and the shared knowledge between them. However, Searle (1975: 76) also recognizes that due to their frequent use, particular indirect speech acts acquire a conventional status, as in the form of polite requests for instance (ibid.). Hence, in such cases, a listener does not have to process the uttered meaning, but is able to understand an indirect speech act as if it were direct.

This section has outlined the essence of speech act theory, has considered various classification attempts of illocutionary acts, and has also briefly examined the case of indirect speech acts. In a next step, the following section will look at silence as
a speech act in general, before illustrating its usage for the performance of various illocutionary acts.

5.2. Silent speech acts

In relation to Searle (1969: 24), who states that “[o]ne can utter words without saying anything”, Saville-Troike (1989: 146) asserts that it is equally possible to “say something without uttering words”. However, not all instances of silence can be considered to be speech acts and consequently treated as meaningful. Therefore, a few basic distinctions have to be made. First, since speech act theory can be seen as “a theory of speaker meaning” (Tsohatzidis 2010: 342), the performance of a speech act depends on the speaker’s want to communicate something. Hence, an expression of silence has to be intentional (cf. section 2.3.2) in order to be considered as a speech act (cf. Kurzon 1995: 60; 64). By observing silent answers, Kurzon (1998: 25) notes in this respect that

[i]f an act is the deliberate activity on the part of an individual, then an addressee’s decision to remain silent is such an act. Since the alternative to this act of silence is speech, then we may say that such silence is also a speech act.

The second criterion that an expression of silence has to fulfill in order to be regarded as a speech act is the carrying of meaning (Schmitz 1990: section 2.4; Ephratt 2008: 1921). Silence has to be eloquent (cf. section 2.3.2) since the motivation behind the performance of a speech act lies in the creation of a perlocutionary effect, which cannot be achieved via meaningless expressions. Finally, Saville-Troike (1985: 6) furthermore distinguishes between “silences which carry meaning, but not propositional content, and silent communicative acts […] which carry their own illocutionary force”. While the former can be both intentional and unintentional and include pauses and hesitations, the latter take the form of speech acts by “filling many of the same functions and discourse slots” (ibid.). She elaborates:

As with speech, silent communicative acts may be analyzed as having both illocutionary force and perlocutionary effect (cf. Austin 1962), although here we clearly cannot use ‘locution’ in its usual sense. The analogy carries further, since similar inferencing processes are employed to interpret the meaning of what is not spoken as in interpreting the meaning of what is said. (Saville-Troike 1985: 6-7, original emphasis)
By careful contemplation of silence as a speech act, it becomes apparent that silence takes the form of an indirect speech act (Schmitz: 1990: section 2.4; Ephratt 2008: 1922). Tannen (1985: 97) notes in this respect that “[s]ilence is the extreme manifestation of indirectness. If indirectness is a matter of saying one thing and meaning another, silence can be a matter of saying nothing and meaning something”. Therefore, in Searle’s (1975: 62) terms, as has been outlined above in section 5.1.2, an expression of silence is a secondary illocutionary act that conveys a primary illocutionary act defined by contextual circumstances. Hence, the recognition and understanding of silence as an indirect speech act relies on contextual and mutually shared knowledge. In addition, by recalling the quote from Davison (1975: 149-150) which suggests that indirect speech acts have a signaling function, it can be claimed that a listener also has to expect an expression of meaning or has at least to be aware that communication is taking place in order to identify a speaker’s silence as an attempt to communicate meaning. Thus, in situations where speech is expected, silence draws attention and invites the listener to treat it as meaningful (cf. Sobkowiak 1997).

The strong contextual dependency of silence (cf. section 3.1.2) allows speakers to use it for the performance of a variety of speech acts. Therefore, Saville-Troike (1985: 6) suggests that

> [s]ilence may be used to question, promise, deny, warn, threaten, insult, request, or command, as well as to carry out various kinds of ritual interaction.

Although compelling, this list proves to be incomplete and a more in-depth attempt to outline the variety of illocutionary acts that can be performed via silence is needed. The following subsections consider the classes of illocutionary acts outlined in section 5.1.1 and provide representative examples from the selected movie database (cf. section 4) of how silence is applied in order to perform these individual illocutionary acts. It should be noted at this point that due to reasons of space and due to the aim of illustrating the pragmatic functionality of silence in terms of understanding and communicating with it, it is not possible to discuss every speech act that can be performed via silence. Therefore, only a few representative examples per category are selected.

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5 cited in section 5.1.2 on page 42
5.2.1. Representatives

As has been discussed above, Searle’s (1976: 10) class of representatives commit a speaker to the truth of his or her proposition. Examples for illocutionary acts that fall into this category are, for instance, confessions, beliefs, doubts, statements, predictions, assertions, descriptions, etc. The force of these acts is frequently expressed by the use of corresponding performative verbs, such as I believe, I doubt, I state etc. However, it is not only possible to perform these acts without the use of these performative verbs (cf. Leech 1983: 175), but it is also possible to complete them without uttering a single word.

Excerpt (1), for instance, portrays a situation in which a speaker chooses to remain silent in order to express his doubt:

(1) Aidan: You had to tell her eventually man.
    Tyler: [7 sec].
    Aidan: She’ll be back.
    Tyler: [5 sec]. [sighs]. [12 sec].

(=Remember Me 2010: 1h 24min 25sec – 1h 24min 53sec )

In order to fully understand the communicative acts in this excerpt, the scene needs to be contextualized: Tyler has recently been left by a woman after she had found out that he had been neglecting to tell her the truth about a past event. Aidan, who has been aware of this neglect, expresses his belief about the lack of the severity of the offense with the comforting utterance She’ll be back. Tyler clearly does not share this optimism and expresses his doubt about this assertion. In order to ensure that Aidan understands his silence as an expression of doubt, Tyler makes use of various extra-linguistic modes. In the initial situation, the speakers do not face each other as they are sitting next to one another. While Aidan, who is simultaneously eating, continuously shifts his gaze back and forth between his meal and Tyler, Tyler chooses to stare into one of the corners of the room. Since he clearly avoids looking at Aidan, he is relying on Aidan’s gaze toward him for the transmission of meaning. In response to the first utterance, You had to tell her eventually man, he slightly nods his head up and down in silence in order to signal agreement and more importantly in order to reassure Aidan to have heard the utterance and to acknowledge that communication is taking place. In response to the second utterance, as illustrated in figure 1, he firmly presses his lips together and pushes them slightly forward. In addition to his unhappiness with the
situation, this facial expression clearly signals his doubt about Aidan’s assertion. Tyler continuous his silent turn by sighing before he leans forward and lethargically stands up and walks away. These slow movements further express his dejection and his non-belief in Aidan’s utterance. The worried facial expression of Aidan indicates that the he has understood and interpreted the silence the way it had been intended.

Figure 1: Expressing doubt (*Remember Me* 2010: 1h 24min 37sec)

Excerpt (2) illustrates the possibility to use silence in order to make a confession:

(2) Isabella: Leonard! Are you leaving?
Leonard: [4.5 sec].
Isabella: I saw at the computer that you checked travel sites last night.
Leonard: [sighs].
Isabella: You’re going with her?
Leonard: Yes [inaudibly whispered]. [13 sec]. I have to go Mom.
(*Two Lovers* 2008: 1h 32min 35sec – 1h 33min 06sec)

The context of this situation is as follows: Leonard, a young man around the age of thirty, has decided to abandon his life with his parents in order to move away with the woman he intends to marry. Hoping to avoid a confrontation he chooses not to tell his parents about his plans. His mother, however, appears to have suspected him leaving and catches him on his way down the stairs. As Leonard is being confronted about his plans, he chooses to confess by performing a silent speech act. Apart from the fact that his silence in itself can be understood as a lack of reassurance about his not going away, he additionally uses other communicative modes in order to confess his departure. When hearing his mother’s voice, Leonard, abruptly stops, takes a couple of steps back, and looks up to his mother. As illustrated in figure 2, his initial response to
the question *Are you leaving?* is a faint smile that does not appear to be untypical when admitting one’s guilt. After being confronted with Isabella’s knowledge about the travel sites on the computer, he bends down his head and eventually places it on his hands which are resting on the handrail. This posture, pictured in figure 3, clearly signifies resignation in terms of hiding the truth and confesses that his mother’s assumption about his plans are correct.

Figure 2: Making a confession (*Two Lovers* 2008: 1h 32min 47sec)

Figure 3: Making a confession (*Two Lovers* 2008: 1h 32min 51sec)
5.2.2. **Directives**

As has been outlined above, directive illocutionary acts aim at getting the listener to do something. Realizations of such acts are commands, orders, requests, invitations, suggestions, etc. As demonstrated below with the help of examples for commands and requests, words are no necessary requisite for the expression of directives.

Excerpt (3) is an example for a successful communicative situation that does not rely on any kind of verbalization:

(3) Don: [5 sec].
    Girl: [1 sec].
    (Broken Flowers 2005: 59min 16sec – 59min 22sec)

In this scene, Don, a man who is approximately 60 years of age and who is sitting on a plane next to a girl, silently commands her to stop being noisy. He appears to be tired and rests his head on a pillow when the girl creates a slight commotion by playing with a toy horse. In reaction to this disturbance, Don opens his eyes and slowly moves his head toward the girl and intently gazes at her. It is due to this head movement and gaze that the girl is able to interpret Don’s silence as a command to be quiet. By returning the gaze, as illustrated in figure 4, the girl acknowledges that communication is taking place and that she has understood Don’s expression. Don, in turn, understands this action as a reassurance that his command has been recognized and that he does not have to vocalize it. As a result, he appears to be satisfied and terminates the conversation by moving his head back to its initial position.

![Figure 4: Making a command (Broken Flowers 2005: 59min 22sec)](image-url)
The situation in excerpt (4) exemplifies the use of silence in order to make a request. Although the contextual situation involves three participants, Ally’s act of silence, which functions as the request, is clearly directed at Tyler only.

(4) Tyler: [2 sec].
Charles: [3 sec].
Ally: [2 sec].
Tyler: [2 sec]. Alisa Craig, uhm, this is my father, Charles Hawkins.
Ally.
Charles: [shakes Ally’s hand]. It is my pleasure.
Ally: Pleasure.

(Remember Me 2010: 1h 6min 23sec – 1h 6min 42sec)

As can already be inferred form the dialogue above, the context of this conversation is the introduction of a woman to her boyfriend’s father. Charles, who is Tyler’s father, is late and has just sat down when the communicative situation begins with nine seconds of silence. Although the motivation for the production of the first two instances of silence in this conversation is only of minor concern here, it should be noted that these result out of a tensed and complicated relationship between Tyler and his father. Due to Tyler’s failure to provide a formal introduction, Ally, who appears to be embarrassed about the lack of speech, feels the need to request and urge Tyler to introduce her. She makes this request by gazing at him with widely opened eyes, as displayed in figure 5, and by pointing at his father with slight directive head movements. Her widely opened eyes express the intension to alert Tyler to his lapse and are meant to signal that action on his part is required and expected. The directive head movement functions to clarify what she expects of Tyler, by making a connection between her and Charles. In addition, she also slightly smiles at Tyler, which can be interpreted in two different ways. On the one hand, it might be seen as a visual manifestation of a coping strategy displaying her embarrassment and discomfort, while, on the other, it might also be seen to signal friendliness toward Tyler, elucidating that the illocutionary force of her expression is not that of a command, but that of a request. After a short pause used for processing the events, Tyler recognizes her request and eventually initiates the introduction.
As illustrated by these two excerpts, a speaker can use silence in order “to get someone else to do something” (Yule 1996: 54). However, silence can also be used in order commit oneself to a future action, as is shown in the next subsection.

5.2.3. **Commissives**

Commissives, as has been outlined above, are illocutionary acts that are performed in order to express what a speaker intends to do (Yule 1996: 54). These acts include promises, refusals, threats, offers, vows, etc. As illustrated by the following three examples, it is possible to perform commissives silently without fearing that a listener might not understand them.

Excerpt (5) depicts a situation where a speaker commits himself to a future action by making a promise:

(5)  
Lolita: Oh, that’s my phone. Just, just stay there. I’ll be right back, ok?  
Don: [1 sec]  
Lolita: Ok.  
(Broken Flowers 2005: 37min 05sec – 37min 10sec)

In this situation, Don is a guest at Lolita’s mother’s house. He has just entered and has been offered a seat while waiting for Lolita’s mother to return, when Lolita’s telephone starts to ring in the other room. Since she does not know Don personally, she asks him not to go anywhere while she would leave the room in order to answer the phone. His short expression of silence can be interpreted as a reassurance and
promise to stay seated and not to wander and look around the house. In order to ensure that Lolita is able to understand his silence, he nods slightly and quickly closes and opens his eyes again. The latter, as portrayed in figures 6 and 7, can be seen as another common way of signaling agreement and understanding. Don’s silence is easily interpreted by Lolita as she quickly signals to have understood it by uttering Ok.

Figure 6: Making a promise (*Broken Flowers* 2005: 37min 8sec)

Figure 7: Making a promise (*Broken Flowers* 2005: 37min 8sec)

Excerpt (6) illustrates how silence can be used in order to express a threat:

(6)  
Tyler: Uh, excuse me. Can I bother you for a second?  
Ally: No, you’re already bothering me.  
Tyler: [smiles]. [3 sec]. So I’m doing this sociological experiment and just wondered whether you could help me out for a second.  
Ally: You, you’re kidding me, right?  
Tyler: Can, can I ask your name?
As can be taken from this excerpt, Tyler tries to introduce himself to Ally. From her initial responses it can already be inferred that she is rather mistrustful, as she does not encourage his attempts. She meets Tyler’s audacious question *is that Greek?* with an expression of silence signaling the threat that she will terminate the conversation if he does not quit his nonsense. Hence she commits herself to a future action by performing a silent illocutionary act. In order to ensure that Tyler interprets her silence correctly, she disambiguates it by using explicit facial expressions and gaze. As can be seen in figure 8, she raises her eyebrows and slightly drops her jaw while staring at him intensely. The slightly dropped jaw signals her surprise and sheer disbelief about the impudence of his remark, as well as her speechlessness. Her raised eyebrows strengthen this impression. Moreover, they challenge his eligibility to ask her such a question and can be seen as an indication of warning. In combination with her forceful stare, these facial expressions mark the uttering of the silent threat. Tyler immediately seems to grasp the seriousness of the situation by acknowledging the threat with a short nod and by quickly leading the conversation into a safer territory.

Excerpt (7) shows how silence can be used in order to perform a refusal. This particular extract illustrates the kind of refusal that is probably prototypically associated with silence, namely the refusal to talk about something:
Ally: God, Tyler can we at least talk about this?
Tyler: [1 sec].
Ally: You what. [1 sec]. Where’re you gonna go right now and what, what you gonna do is actually gonna help anything?
Tyler: [1 sec].
Ally: You really think? Do you really think. Don’t
Tyler: You’ll have to look out for yourself for now. You capable [sic] of doing that?

(Remember Me 2010: 1h 10min 48sec – 1h 11min 5sec)

The context of this situation comprises a heated argument. Tyler is upset about his father and intends to confront him. In order to be able to do so, he first returns home with the intention of picking up his bicycle. This is when Ally tries to conciliate him and is met with his refusal to calm down and talk about it. Tyler’s silent turns in this conversation are relatively short, as Ally does not need time to process the silences, but continues to reject Tyler’s refusal. As illustrated in figure 9, Tyler pretends to ignore her and continues to get ready for his departure. This attempted ignorance is additionally displayed by Tyler’s avoidance of mutual gaze. The fact that his silence is intentional and not the result of psychological absence is demonstrated by his reaction to Ally’s utterance Do you really think. As the argument becomes physically violent at this point, he acknowledges having heard everything she had said. Therefore, his verbal response, with which he terminates the conversation, is a result of and has been provoked by Ally’s non-acceptance of his refusal to talk about his undertaking.

Figure 9: Refusal (Remember Me 2010: 1h 10min 54sec)
5.2.4. Expressives

As has been pointed out above, expressives are used to display the speaker’s “psychological state” (Searle 1976: 12). They, as the name already suggests, are used to express what a speaker feels and include acts like apologies, congratulations, condolences, as well as expressions of gratitude, pleasure, joy, sadness, anger, understanding, consternation, etc. Since silence is a very powerful communicative tool for the expression of emotions (cf. Jaworski 1993: 38; Berger 2004), expressives appear to be among the most frequently performed speech acts that solely consist of silence. The following four extracts support this claim.

Excerpt (8) demonstrates how silence can be used in order to perform an apology.

(8) Ron: Hey, oh ho ho, Don, I wanna show you something. Excuse me. [leaves table].
Don: [sighs]. [4 sec].
Dora: [5 sec].
Ron: [returns]. Ha, isn’t this […]

(Broken Flowers 2005: 53min 38sec – 53min 53sec)

The context of this scene is as follows: Don, who is an old friend of Dora, is visiting her and her husband Ron. As they are having dinner, Ron dominates the conversation and clearly makes Don feel uncomfortable. As Ron leaves the room in order to fetch an item from an adjacent room, Don audibly sighs in order to display and express his unease. As he subsequently gazes at Dora, she responds with a silent apology. In order to mark her silence as a means of apologizing, Dora applies a combination of gaze, head movements, and facial expressions, as displayed in figures 10, 11, and 12. At the beginning of her turn, she meets Don’s gaze and forms her lips to a forced smile, indicating to have understood Don’s sigh and that she is sympathizing with him and shares his feeling of discomfort. Subsequently, she expresses her embarrassment by slowly moving her gaze and her head away from Don. She concludes her turn by lowering her head and closing her eyes, which signals her inability to change the situation. In addition, Don is able to observe that her forced smile is slowly fading from her lips. Her silence in connection with the meaning expressed via these modes enables Don to comprehend the apologizing intention of Dora’s turn.
Figure 10: Apologizing (*Broken Flowers* 2005: 59min 48sec)

Figure 11: Apologizing (*Broken Flowers* 2005: 53min 48sec)

Figure 12: Apologizing (*Broken Flowers* 2005: 53min 50sec)
Excerpt (9) illustrates how silence can be used as an expression of joy:

(9) Laura: Can I help you with something.
    Don: [4 sec].
    Laura: [4.5 sec]. Donny, is that you?
    Don: [4 sec]. Hey Laura.
    Laura: [3 sec]. What are you doing here? [chuckles].
    [24 sec of mutual silence]
    Laura: We’re having chicken for dinner.
    (Broken Flowers 2005: 39min 02sec – 39min 50sec)

The only contextually relevant information required to understand each of these instances of silence is that Laura and Don, who had been in a relationship nineteen years ago, see each other for the first time since then. As their silences are accompanied by facial expressions that are typically associated with joy (cp. figure 13) each speaker understands that the other’s happiness to see each other again.

As can be taken form excerpt (10), silent expressions of sadness are also directly linked to facial expression:

(10) Leonard: I was just calling you. The car’s out front waiting.
    Michelle: I’m not going.
    Leonard: [4 sec].
    Michelle: I’m not going. He left his family for me. He told his wife
      everything. He says he wants us to get married. I’ve finally
      let him know about my miscarriage and that really changed
      things for him.
    Leonard: [3 sec].
    Michelle: Leonard, you’re such a wonderful person.
    Leonard: [2 sec].

Figure 13: Expressing joy (Broken Flowers 2005: 39min 40sec)
Michelle: He left them for me and I gotta give it a chance. I feel like if I wasn’t with Ronald we could
Leonard: [3 sec]. Just go.
Michelle: I’m so sorry.
Leonard: Go!
Michelle: He’s gonna pay you back for the tickets, ok? I’m sorry.
Leonard: [10 sec].
(Two Lovers 2008: 1h 36min 9sec – 1h 37min 29sec)

The context of this sequence is as follows: Leonard and Michelle have made plans to move away together. The extract above depicts the moment where Leonard is impatiently waiting for Michelle to arrive at their meeting point. In reaction to her change of mind about not going away with him, Leonard appears to be at a loss of words and displays his sadness, hurt, and shock with silence. He communicates his emotions to Michelle with the help of facial expressions that are typically associated with sorrow, as illustrated in figure 14, and by avoiding mutual gaze.

Figure 14: Expressing sadness Two Lovers 2008: 1h 37min 1sec

As a last example for expressive speech acts, excerpt (11) shows the ability of articulating consternation with silence:

(11) Receptionist: You know you can’t smoke in here!
Tyler: [2 sec]. Wh- Why do you have an ashtray?
Receptionist: It’s a bowl. It completes the room.
Tyler: [picks up the bowl and smiles]. [9 sec]. This is a bowl?
Receptionist: [4 sec].
Tyler: Hm, I’m sorry. [Puts out the cigarette in the bowl]. I guess it was just here to tease me.
(Remember Me 2010: 21min 14sec – 21min 47sec)
In this extract, Tyler is waiting in the lobby of an office building and lights a cigarette. The receptionist, who appears to be offended, tells him that smoking is prohibited in this building. Tyler seems to be reluctant about the idea of putting out his cigarette and chooses to provoke the receptionist by referring to a bowl as an ashtray. A first sign for the upset state of mind of the receptionist can be found in the very distinct and mildly angry tone of her utterance *It’s a bowl*. Tyler, however, appears to be amused by it and further challenges the receptionist by continuing to smoke and by refusing to accept that the object in question is indeed a bowl. At this point, the receptionist appears to be at a loss of words. Her silent response can therefore be interpreted as an expression of consternation. This is manifested by her reaction in the form of a deep gasp for air, which causes her shoulders to rise and sink down again. Additionally, she slightly opens her mouth in order to indicate that she does not know what to say. By fixing her gaze at Tyler, she clearly demonstrates that her silence is directed at him. He seems to understand that his game has come to an end and eventually puts the cigarette out. Figure 15 illustrates the receptionist’s reaction:

![Figure 15: Expressing consternation (Remember Me 2010: 21min 37sec)](image)

5.2.5. Declarations

As has been outlined above in section 5.1.1, declarations are speech acts that “change the world via their utterance” (Yule 1996: 53) and usually “tend to rely on elaborate extra-linguistic institutions” (Levinson 1983: 240), such as courts, juries, governments, people in upper echelons, vicars, etc. Illocutionary acts that fall into this
category include convictions, resignations, appointments, declaring war, christening, firing someone from employment, etc.

Due to their severe consequences in terms of changing the world, it appears to be debatable whether these kinds of illocutionary acts can be expressed solely via silence. One could argue that words are needed in order to perform such speech acts as the ambiguous nature of silence (cf. section 3.1.1) entails too much risk for possible misinterpretations. The proposition that silence can be used in order to perform a declarative speech act, for instance in the form of a silent answer paired with a confirmative facial expression to the question *I’m fired, aren’t I?*, or, in a more personal setting, a silent response to a question such as *Are you breaking up with me?*, can be countered with the argument that they are more likely to be interpreted as representatives due to their preceding co-texts. The fact that also the analysis of the source material did not reveal any clear instances of declarations performed solely via silence additionally supports the claim that an interlocutor needs words in order to perform these kinds of illocutionary acts.

5.2.6. Rogatives

As has been pointed out above, in order to compliment Searle’s (1976) categories of illocutionary acts, Leech (1983: 206) proposes an additional category which he labels as rogatives. Rogatives are acts that are concerned with asking questions and making inquiries (ibid.). Excerpt (12) illustrates that such an act can be performed solely via silence:

(12) Izzy: Look me in the eye and tell me that you don’t love me anymore.
Arianna: I don’t love you anymore.
Izzy: No I, I refuse to accept that.
Arianna: Izzy, go home!
Izzy: [3 sec]. You really want me to leave?
Arianna: Yes!
Izzy: [2 sec]. That’s what you’re saying?
Arianna: That’s what I’m saying.
Izzy: [1 sec]. Ok. [starts to walk away].
Arianna: [sighs].
Izzy: Ari.
Arianna [3 sec].
Izzy: [sighs]. I love you forever.
Arianna: [4 sec].

(*The Last Kiss* 2006: 22min 33sec – 23min 16sec)
This extract depicts a post-separation confrontation in which Izzy is trying to change Arianna’s mind. After a series of emotionally loaded attempts of persuading her, Izzy appears to resign as he agrees to walk away. However, he turns around once more and addresses Arianna by uttering her name. Her silent response can be interpreted as a way of asking What is it? She articulates this silent question with the help of gaze and facial expressions. First, as illustrated in figure 16, she closes her eyes, expressing her misery and anguish about the conversation not being over.

Figure 16: Asking a question (The Last Kiss 2006: 23min 05sec)

Subsequently, she opens her eyes again and gazes at Izzy in expectation of an utterance. Figure 17 shows that while her sad facial expression mainly signals her
emotive state, her wide opened eyes, which stare directly at Izzy, manifest the impression that her turn is a rogative illocutionary act.

When looking at the twelve excerpts above, it is interesting to note that a large number of these silent speech acts are performed in response to a question. Since this suggests the importance of silent answers, section 5.3 intends to briefly discuss this matter further.

5.3. The silent answer

Yule (1996: 76-77) points out that in order to be able to “cope with the everyday business of social interaction”, we apply various “automatic patterns”. Such patterns or sequences are called adjacency pairs (ibid.). These include conversational pairs like greeting-greeting, offer-acceptance, and question-answer (Levinson 1983: 305). Such automatic patterns are usually conventionalized in a way that when a speaker utters the first part, a listener is expected to utter the second part (Yule 1996: 77). In everyday life situations, however, this second part does not always directly follow the first part. In such cases they are separated by an insertion sequence, i.e. “a two part sequence that comes between the first and second parts of another sequence in conversation” (Yule 1996: 131). Therefore, in this respect, Levinson (1983: 306) argues for the importance of the “notion of conditional relevance” in this respect. He states:

What the notion of conditional relevance makes clear is that what binds the parts of adjacency pairs together is not a formation rule of the sort that a question must receive an answer if it is to count as a well-formed discourse, but the setting up of specific expectations which have to be attended to. (ibid.)

Hence, a speaker assumes that a listener will either produce the second part of the pair or an utterance that is of contextual relevance. Thus, every non-answer to a question, for instance, is usually treated as a meaningful absence (Yule 1996: 77).

According to Yule (1996: 79-80), a silent answer in the question-answer adjacency pair is “always an indication of a dispreferred response” and an “extreme case, [that is] almost risking the impression of non-participation in the conversational structure”. Although a silent answer can be a sign of non-participation, especially in the case of unintentional silence (cf. section 2.3.2), silence is widely accepted as an appropriate and satisfactory reply in many situations. In this regard, Kurzon (1998: 25) points out that “[o]n being asked a question, the addressee has been given a verbal
stimulus, but s/he has a choice between speech and silence as the answer. This choice creates meaning, thus silence has meaning.”

The research on silence as an answer has mostly focused on its role in legal discourse. Heydon (2011), for instance, discusses the entitlement to Miranda rights, i.e. the civil right in US law to remain silent when being arrested, whereas Cotterill (2005) explores silence in the context of the UK’s legal system, noting that in contrast to US courts, English juries are allowed to make inferences based on a suspect’s silence (Cotterill 2005: 7). Kurzon (1995; 1998) also focuses mainly on the silent answer in legal discourse. Based on the factors intention, knowledge, and ability he proposes a model for the interpretation and motivation of silent answers (Kurzon 1995: 62; 1998: 45). Although he acknowledges that his model is primarily suited for institutional settings, he nevertheless claims that “it may [also] be applied in a weaker version to more everyday speech events”. However, since he treats intentional silence in this model essentially as “the lack of cooperation on the silent addressee’s part”, this claim has to be rejected alongside with Heydon’s (2001: 2308) assertion that “it is extremely unlikely that silence would ever be regarded as an appropriate response to a question”. Excerpts (2), (5), (6), (7), and (11) have already clearly demonstrated that this is not the case and that silence can function as a cooperative, meaningful, and satisfactory answer. In order to further strengthen this claim, silent answers corresponding to the individual types of questions found in American English conversations (Stivers 2010) are briefly considered below.

Stivers (2010: 2773) found that there are three general types of questions in American English: Polar questions, which account for 60 percent of all questions, Q-word questions, which account for 27 percent, and alternative questions, which account for only 3 percent. Polar questions are questions that are typically “answered with a yes or a no in English” (ibid.). Depending on the context, a silent answer to such a question can be used to express both. Excerpt (2), cf. page 46, illustrates how silence can function as a yes, whereas excerpt (13) demonstrates how it can function as a no:

(13) Stephen: What makes you think this isn’t gonna happen again?
Michael: I know it won’t.
Stephen: Alright.
Michael: Come on, aren’t we supposed to be able to learn from our mistakes? I did something horrible but I’ve learned from it. I
met this little brunette and I faltered. Are you tell [sic] me that throughout your entire marriage you’ve never faltered?

Stephen: [6 sec].
Michael: You haven’t.
Stephen: [4 sec].
Michael: Never?
Stephen: Never.

(The Last Kiss 2006: 1h 24min 22sec – 1h 24min 56sec)

Figure 18: Replying to a polar question (The Last Kiss 2006: 1h 24min 45sec)

In this extract, Stephen, who is going to be Michael’s father in law, confronts Michael about his misstep. With his silent response to Michael’s question, he strongly states that he has never faltered. His confident, firm, and confirmative gaze, as illustrated in figure 18, enables for Michael to interpret his silence as a no.

Q-word questions are questions that usually start with a question word, such as what, how, why, when, where, or who (cf. Stivers 2010: 2775). Although it is also possible to answer these kinds of questions silently, it appears to be more difficult than in the case of polar questions, as usually more shared contextual knowledge between the interactants is required in order to ensure an understanding of the silent response. Excerpt (7), cf. page 53, exemplifies a silent answer to a Q-word question. Whereas the first instance of silence in this extract solely expresses refusal to talk, the second instance can additionally be seen to function as an answer. Judging from Ally’s subsequent reaction she knows exactly where Tyler is going and what he intends to do.

According to Stivers (2010: 2776) alternative questions are questions that present a “forced choice between two alternatives”. As an example she offers the question “Were you drunk or were you sober” (ibid.). These kinds of questions can be
successfully answered silently when a speaker makes use of gestural responsive actions (cf. Berger & Rae 2012: in press). For instance, when asked to choose between two items a directive hand/finger movement suffices to achieve understanding and it is not necessary to vocalize an answer.

Athanasiadou (1993: 562) offers a categorization of questions that is more concerned with their pragmatic functions than with their syntactical constructions. He distinguishes between questions that request information, questions that request action, and unanswerable questions (ibid.). Since questions that request information aim at a “linguistic reaction” (Athanasiadou 1993: 568), it appears to be untypical to answer them with silence. However, that does not mean that it is impossible. Excerpt (2), cf. page 46, can be seen as good example of how a silent answer can satisfy this request. Questions that request actions, on the contrary, are often answered nonverbally. Athanasiadou (1993: 569) elaborates:

[W]ords may not be addressed by words or their gestural substitute, but by a physical doing, a nonlinguistic deed which may comply with, for instance, a request. So, when in reaction to being asked for providing something the respondent passes it. Here, words may accompany the responsive action […] but not necessarily.

An example for a silent answer to a question requesting action can be found, for instance, in excerpt (5), cf. page 50. In this extract, Don’s silent answer, alongside with his indication to remain seated, satisfies Lolita’s request. Athanasiadou’s (1993: 570-571) last category of unanswerable questions are those kinds of questions where the addresser is not expecting “an answer or any other kind of response”. These include, among others, rhetorical questions (ibid.). Here, a silent response seems to be the appropriate reply, as the speaker often provides an answer him- or herself and because the addressee usually understands that he or she is not expected to provide a vocal response.

5.4. Summary

This chapter has considered silence in relation to speech act theory. It has been shown and illustrated that silence is essentially an indirect speech act and that it can be used in order to perform various kinds of illocutionary acts. By showing that silence is able to convey a communicative force and to effectively produce perlocutionary effects, it
has been demonstrated that it is more than just a useless and void failure of communication (cf. discussion in section 2.1). Moreover, it has further been stressed that silence is interdependent with its context and relies on the help of other communicative modes, such as gaze, facial expressions, etc. (cf. section 3.2), in order to ensure that a listener is able to understand a speaker’s intention and to interpret the silence adequately. Given the suitable context, one might even go as far as suggesting that there is hardly anything a speaker cannot express via silence. As has been shown, this certainly seems to be the case for illocutionary acts such as representatives, directives, commissives, expressives, and rogatives. However, as has been discussed, silence might not be suitable for the performance of declarative speech acts due to the high danger of severe consequences of possible misinterpretations.

This chapter has also shown that silent answers to questions are not necessarily inappropriate, unsatisfactory replies. Instead, they can function as meaningful and fitting responses in respective contexts and/or in connection with other communicative modes.

After having discussed silent speech acts, the next chapter explores the importance of silence in relation to another crucial field of pragmatics: politeness. Politeness is considered to be a vital aspect of everyday interactions, as it explains how and why we say things the way we do.
6. Silence and politeness

The aim of this chapter is to investigate how silence can be used and applied in order to be (im)polite. However, before being able to focus on silence as a means of politeness, it is first necessary to establish an adequate framework by discussing some of the most prominent positions and approaches in politeness theory.

6.1. On politeness theory

As will be shown throughout this section, it does not appear to be an easy task to define politeness, as different theories and approaches to the subject seem to have different conceptions of it. In very general terms, politeness can be described as a social phenomenon that has to do with “being tactful, generous, modest, and sympathetic towards others” (Yule 1996: 60) and which is applied in order to ensure that a conversation between two or more participants runs smoothly.

The following subsections discuss individual approaches to the subject and also briefly consider their respective weaknesses. It should be noted, however, that due to the multiplicity of theories a selection had to be made. Therefore, focus is given to the comparison between the traditional approaches of Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987) and the more recent discursive approach (e.g. Watts 2003; Locher 2006).

6.1.1. Leech’s politeness principle

A highly influential theory of politeness has been proposed by Leech (1983). Building on Grice’s (1975) cooperative principle (cf. chapter 3), Leech (1983) introduces what he calls the politeness principle. The politeness principle is thought of as “not just [...] another principle to be added to the CP, but as a necessary complement, which rescues the CP from serious trouble” (Leech 1983: 80). This claim is based on the thought that the cooperative principle is unable to account for the reason why people often make use of indirect formulations and do not opt for the easiest and most direct way of communicating (ibid.). He argues further that the politeness principle ensures that one of the cooperative principle’s most basic assumptions, namely the idea that the
participants of a conversation are being cooperative, can be realized as it “maintain[s] the social equilibrium and the friendly relations which enable” the participants to establish and preserve a cooperative bond (Leech 1983: 82). In simpler terms, “unless you are polite to your neighbour, the channel of communication between you will break down” (ibid.). Consequently, Leech (1983: 81) formulates the basic guidelines of the politeness principle as to “minimize [...] the expression of impolite beliefs [and to correspondingly to] maximize the expression of polite beliefs”. He indicates, however, that the former is more important than the latter (ibid.).

In this respect, not unlike Brown and Levinson (1987; cf. discussion in section 6.1.3), Leech (1983: 83, original emphasis) distinguishes between positive and negative politeness:

Some illocutions (eg orders) are inherently impolite, and others (eg offers) are inherently polite. Negative politeness therefore consists in minimizing the impoliteness of impolite illocutions, and positive politeness consists in maximizing the politeness of polite illocutions (which includes taking the opportunities for performing polite illocutions in situations where no speech may otherwise be called for).

Moreover, Leech (1983: 104) acknowledges that “[d]ifferent kinds and degrees of politeness are called for in different situations”. In order to estimate “the degree of tact [that is] appropriate” he proposes a variety of scales. These are the cost-benefit scale, i.e. “the cost or benefit of the proposed action” to a speaker, the optionality scale, i.e. “the scale on which illocutions are ordered according to the amount of choice” an addressee, and the indirectness scale, i.e. the scale measuring “the length of the path […] connecting the illocutionary act to its illocutionary goal” (Leech 1983: 123). Furthermore, he also asserts that the factors authority and social distance play a crucial role in defining the appropriate degree of politeness (Leech 1983: 126). Leech’s (1983) politeness principle consists of the following six maxims:

i. Tact maxim: Minimize cost to other, maximize benefit to other
ii. Generosity maxim: Minimize benefit to self, maximize cost to self
iii. Approbation maxim: Minimize dispraise of other, maximize praise of other
iv. Modesty maxim: Minimize praise of self, maximize dispraise of self
v. Agreement maxim: Minimize disagreement between self and other, maximize agreement between self and other
vi. Sympathy maxim: Minimize antipathy between self and other, maximize sympathy between self and other

(summarized from Leech 1983: 132)
In addition to these six maxims, Leech (1983: 141) ponders about the inclusion of a phatic maxim “which may be provisionally formulated either in its negative form ‘Avoid silence’ or in it’s positive form ‘Keep talking’”. He further defines it as “the need to avoid silence, with its implication of opting out of communication” (ibid.). However, due to the assertion that it is “inadequate to describe phatic communion as simple avoidance of silence” (ibid.), Leech (1983: 142) proposes to “treat avoidance of silence as a special case of the Agreement and Sympathy Maxims” instead.

For the consideration of silence, it appears to be interesting that Leech (1983: 141) defines silence here as a “form of impoliteness”, as this stands in contradiction to his view of the indirectness scale which proposes that the degree of politeness increases and decreases with the degree of indirectness (Leech 1983: 108). Having defined silence as the “extreme manifestation of indirectness” (Tannen 1985: 97; cf. section 5.2), would consequently suggest that to remain silent is one of the politest forms of behavior. Hence, in consideration of silence, there seems to be a discrepancy in Leech’s (1983) proposal.

6.1.2. The notion of face

Before being able to discuss Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model of politeness, it is first necessary to briefly discuss the notion face. The concept of face that set the frame for various politeness theories was originally introduced by Goffman (1967 [1955]: 5) and defined “as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact.” A line, in turn, is characterized as the “pattern of verbal and nonverbal acts by which he [the speaker] expresses his view of the situation and through this his evaluation of the participants, especially himself” (ibid.). Watts (2003: 124-125) summarizes Goffman’s (1967) notion of face as “the conceptualization each of us makes of our ‘self’ through the construals of others in social interaction” and as “a socially attributed aspect of self that is temporarily on loan for the duration of the interaction in accordance with the line or lines that the individual has adopted”. In order to fully understand the role of face in politeness theory, one must take into account that people are emotionally attached to the perception of their self-face. In this respect Goffman (1967: 6) notes that:
If events establish a face for him that is better than he might have expected, he is likely to “feel good”; if his ordinary expectations are not fulfilled, one expects that he will “feel bad” or “feel hurt.”

Hence, Goffman’s (1967) concept of facework refers to the “efforts made by participants in verbal interaction to preserve their own face and the face of others” (Watts 2003: 274). Watts (2003: 119) points out that facework is not an equivalent of politeness, as it involves social behavior that is not limited to linguistic politeness. In agreement with this observation, Bargiela-Chiappini (2003: 1459) claims that “Goffman’s primary interest is in a theory of social interaction rather than a framework for polite behaviour”. Nevertheless, Brown and Levinson (1987: 61) adopt Goffman’s notion of face and use it as basis for their politeness model.

6.1.3. The Brown and Levinson model

Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 61) definition of face differs from Goffman’s (1967: 5) conception and has consequently not been regarded as unproblematic (cf. O’Driscoll 2007). According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 61), face is something that “can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and [something that] must be constantly attended to in interaction”. Assuming that people intend to cooperate in communication, the authors argue further that it is “in every participant’s best interest to maintain each other’s face” (ibid.). An essential modification to Goffman’s conception is Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 61) distinction between negative and positive face. Negative face, on the one hand, is defined as “the basic claim to territories, [...] i.e. to freedom of action and freedom from imposition” (ibid.). Consequently, negative face can be attended to in a conversation by giving a listener enough space and ways out when making an imposition, request, offer, etc. In other words, when attending to the negative face wants of a hearer, a speaker is considered to be polite if he or she retains his or her distance. The notion of positive face, on the other hand, refers to the idea that people desire that their self-image be respected and valued by others (ibid.). Thus, Brown and Levinson (1987: 62) define it as “the want of every member that his wants be desirable to at least some others”. Consequently, in order to attend to the positive

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6 Criticism of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness model is discussed in greater detail in section 6.1.5.
face wants of a hearer, a speaker is perceived as polite if he or she emphasizes common interests, for instance.

In what forms the core of their theory, Brown and Levinson (1987: 65) acknowledge the existence and unavoidability of what they call face-threatening acts (FTAs): “[C]ertain kinds of acts intrinsically threaten face, namely those acts that by their nature run contrary to the face wants of the addressee and/or of the speaker” (ibid.). They further claim that the weightiness of an FTA is defined by the sociological variables of social distance, relative power, and absolute ranking which refers to “a culturally and situationally defined ranking of impositions by the degree to which they are considered to interfere with an agent’s wants of self-determination or of approval” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 74ff.). Depending on the weightiness of an FTA, a speaker needs to soften its seriousness in order to ensure that a conversation continues to run smoothly. Therefore, as illustrated in figure 19, Brown and Levinson (1987: 68-69) propose a variety of super-strategies that can be employed:

![Diagram](image)

**Figure 19: Brown and Levinson's (1987: 60) politeness strategies**

These five super-strategies form a hierarchical order as the degree of politeness rises alongside the increasing strategy number. In other words, this model suggests that the greater a speaker considers the risk of the performance of an FTA to be, the more likely he or she is to opt for a higher politeness strategy. Therefore, Brown and
Levinson’s (1987) politeness model can be seen as a production model that focuses on the behavior of the speaker (Watts 2003: 85).

It is proposed that when a speaker chooses to perform an FTA he or she is faced with the basic choice of going on record, i.e. clearly indicating the communicative intention, or going off record, i.e. being vague about the communicative intention. If he or she decides to go on record, he or she is furthermore faced with the option of employing redressive action, i.e. “attempts to counteract the potential face damage of the FTA by doing it in such a way, or with such modifications or additions, that indicate clearly that no such face threat is intended” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 69-70), in the form of positive or negative politeness. The most polite strategy is to refrain from the performance of an FTA (Brown & Levinson 1983: 68ff.).

Performing a speech act baldly and without redress “involves doing it in the most direct, clear, unambiguous and concise way possible” (Brown & Levinson 1983: 69). A speaker is likely to choose this politeness strategy in situations in which “the relevance of face demands may be suspended in the interests of urgency or efficiency”, in which the risk of face loss is small, or in which a speaker “is vastly superior in power” (ibid.).

Positive politeness acknowledges the hearer’s positive face wants by “communicating that one’s own wants (or some of them) are in some respects similar to the addressee’s wants” (Brown & Levinson 1987: 101). Furthermore, it can be asserted that with the use of positive politeness strategies one intends to reduce social distance, since the speaker wants to emphasize common interests and goals that he or she shares with the listener. Concerning the linguistic realizations of positive politeness, Brown and Levinson (1987: 101) claim that they “are in many respects simply representative of the normal linguistic behaviour between intimates”.

Negative politeness strategies attend to negative face wants of a listener and are thus more frequently used in formal situations in which a speaker wants to reduce the impact of his or her imposition (Brown & Levinson 1987: 129). Furthermore, in contrast to positive politeness, negative politeness is usually focused and goal oriented. Attending to a listener’s negative face wants is a useful tool for a speaker when he or she feels the necessity to create or acknowledge social distance (ibid.).
When a speaker employs the super-strategy off record, he or she disguises the FTA with ambiguous statements or by making indirect hints hoping that the addressee will decipher its meaning (Brown & Levinson 1987: 211):

A communicative act is done off record if it is done in such a way that it is not possible to attribute only one clear communicative intention to the act. In other words, the actor leaves himself an ‘out’ by providing himself a number of defensible interpretations; he cannot be held to have committed himself to just one particular interpretation of his act. (ibid.)

Therefore, Brown and Levinson (1987: 211) state that “off record utterances are essentially indirect uses of language”. While Brown and Levinson (1987) barely discuss the subject of silence and consider it to be the realization of the fifth and final super-strategy, Sifianou (1997: 73) notes in this context that silence functions as an important off-record strategy.

The highest super-strategy is the most inefficient in terms of communicating one’s wants, as the speaker completely avoids performing the FTA. By choosing this option, he or she does not take any risks of being impolite or rude. Brown and Levinson (1987) equate “Don’t do the FTA” with silence and exclude it from their detailed discussion of the individual super-strategies. Sifianou (1997: 71, my emphasis) criticizes:

It is understandably polite to avoid committing an act which you believe would be extremely damaging to your interlocutor’s self-image (speaker-produced silences). But it is unlikely that silence instead of a response to a face-threatening act is always the most polite way of handling such a situation (addressee-produced silences).

Therefore, she claims that silence as avoidance of committing an FTA only “expresses politeness when talk is not necessarily expected” (Sifianou 1997: 72). Moreover, in contrast to what Brown and Levinson’s (1987) propose, she also demonstrates that silence plays a significant role in relation to positive, negative, and off-record politeness (also cf. Tannen 1985: 99f.), concluding that “[v]iewing silence in this angle may constitute a better explanation for the variety of forms it can take and the variety of functions it can perform” (Sifianou 1997: 73).

The publication of Brown and Levinson’s politeness model (1987 [1978]) has had a tremendous impact on subsequent publications on politeness. Locher and Watts (2005: 9-10) note in this respect that it “provides a breadth of insights into human behavior which no other theory has yet offered, and it has served as a touchstone for
researchers who have felt the need to go beyond it”. Nevertheless, despite its popularity it has also become one of the most criticized pragmatic theories (O’Driscoll 2007: 463). Before shifting the focus toward these criticisms, however, Chen’s (2001) theory of self-politeness is considered first, as it is largely based on Brown and Levinson’s (1987) approach and since it offers valuable insights for the investigation of silence as a politeness device.

6.1.4. Self-politeness

In his plea for the need of a concept of self-politeness, Chen (2001: 87) criticizes that previous approaches to politeness, most notably Leech (1983) and Brown and Levinson (1987), have “focused exclusively on other-oriented politeness while no attention has been paid to the fact that speakers’ need to save their own face also has a bearing on their linguistic behavior”. In his view, self-politeness “refers to cases in communication where the need to protect and enhance one’s own face influences what one says and the way she says it” (Chen 2001: 88). In accord with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model, to which Chen’s (2001) proposal is complementary, he establishes four super-strategies that can be employed in order to soften what he calls ‘self-face threatening acts’ (SFTA), i.e. acts that intrinsically threaten one’s self-face:

i. Baldly
ii. With redress
iii. Off record
iv. Withhold the SFTA
(Chen 2001: 96)

The ideas behind these super-strategies are similar to those of Brown and Levinson (1987). However, a major difference is the lack of distinction between positive and negative politeness, which is accounted for with the assertion that a speaker does not have a choice between the two when attending to self-face wants (Chen 2001: 96). Another difference between the two models is that in contrast to Brown and Levinson (1987), Chen (2001: 103) considers the strategy “Withhold the SFTA” to be essential in self-politeness. However, in his treatment of silence as the linguistic realization of this strategy, he fails to acknowledge that silence can also take the form of a speech act (cf. chapter 5) and that it hence can also function as an off-record strategy.
Summing up, the proposal for self-politeness intends to “fill a void” left by Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness model and aims to establish politeness as “a dichotomy [between] other-politeness and self-politeness” (Chen 2001: 104). Nevertheless, Chen (ibid.) also admits that “there are cases in which the distinction between the two is not at all clear”. In order to illustrate this point, he provides the example of euphemisms, which function to save the face of both the speaker and the listener (ibid).

6.1.5. Criticism of the Brown and Levinson model

As has already been suggested in section 6.1.3, the publication of the politeness model of Brown and Levinson (1987) has not been uncontroversial. The aim of this section is to discuss some of its major concerns and shortcomings. More elaborate critiques can be found in e.g. Werkhofer (1992), Eelen (2001), or Watts (2003).

One of the most criticized points of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness model involves their claim to its universal validity (Chen 2001: 93). Brown and Levinson (1987) support their assertion by providing examples from three unrelated languages: English, Tamil, which is spoken in South India, and Tzeltal, which is spoken by Mayan Indians in Mexico. However, a variety of subsequent studies have demonstrated “that many speech acts are perceived differently on the dimension of politeness in different cultures” (Chen 2001: 93). Accordingly, Watts (2003: 98) questions the selection of examples suggesting that they might “have been chosen by a process of introspection precisely because they appear to support their argument” and furthermore finds fault with the “claim for universality based on language data from just three languages”. Moreover, Meier (1995: 388) also appears to be skeptical about the possibility of defining politeness in universal terms: “Politeness can be said to be universal only in the sense that every society has some sort of norms for appropriate behavior, although these norms will vary”. In defense of Brown and Levinson (1987), Chen (2001:93) argues that their model is nevertheless suitable for, at least, individualistic Western cultures (Chen 2001: 93).

Another recurring point of criticism is concerned with the blurry distinction between positive and negative politeness (O’Driscoll 2007: 464). Meier (1995: 385) observes that many studies result in multiple interpretations of this distinction and thus
accuses Brown and Levinson (1987) of having established a “framework in which something can be anything.” Not quite convincingly, Chen (2001: 94) attempts to defend the model by indicating that due to the “complexity of social interaction [...] one utterance can perform more than just one act.”

Furthermore, Brown and Levinson’s (1987) model has also been criticized for “the degree of rational choice that speakers are expected to exercise in choosing an appropriate strategy” (Watts 2003: 88). Moreover, confronting speakers with choices does not allow them to make use of more than one strategy at a time (ibid.). Related to this respect Watts (2003: 85; 89; 119) additionally observes that since the focus lies on the speaker and his choices to be polite, contextual factors and the possibility that a speaker might not be unwilling to cooperate are neglected.

Moreover, Locher and Watts (2005: 10) question the status of Brown and Levinson’s (1987) politeness theory:

[As] solid and comprehensible as it is, Brown & Levinson’s Politeness Theory is not in fact a theory of politeness, but rather a theory of facework, dealing only with the mitigation of face-threatening acts.

Watts (2003: 119) explains and elaborates that linguistic politeness is only a part of facework and that since “it is questionable whether the phenomenon of politeness can be reduced to forms of rational means-goals behaviour” (Watts 2003: 85) a different approach to politeness is needed altogether.

### 6.1.6. The discursive approach

Due to the shortcomings of the traditional politeness theories, Watts (2003), Locher (2004), Locher and Watts (2005), and Locher (2006) propose a completely new approach that conceptualizes “politeness as a discursive phenomenon” (Kasper 2006: 243). Watts (1992; 2003) disregards the viability of the traditional models by distinguishing between first order politeness (politeness₁) and second order politeness (politeness₂). Locher and Watts (2005: 15) summarize:

By first order politeness (politeness₁) we understand how participants in verbal interaction make explicit use of the terms “polite” and “politeness” to refer to their own and others’ social behavior. Second order politeness (politeness₂) makes use of the terms “polite” and “politeness” as theoretical concepts in a top-down model to refer to forms of social behavior.
Watts (2003: 142) outlines how politeness theories make the mistake of establishing theoretical models which claim to be “equipped to predict where instances of verbal politeness should occur in interaction”. Since lay members do not always agree with what is classified as polite behavior in everyday conversations (ibid.), he “establishes politeness1 as the only viable object of study” (Terkourafi 2006: 419). Therefore, the discursive approach to politeness claims that “no utterance is inherently polite” (Locher 2006: 251), but that polite behavior is determined by the “interactants’ perceptions and judgments” (Locher & Watts 2005: 10). Furthermore, it is argued that even a speaker and his or her listener might have different perceptions of the politeness of an utterance (Locher 2004: 91; 2006: 252-253).

Considering this discursive and contextual dependency of politeness, Watts and Locher develop a model that “tries to offer ways of recognising when a linguistic utterance might be open to interpretation by interlocutors as ‘(im)polite’” (Watts 2003: 143, original emphasis). Therefore, politeness is considered to be a “part of relational work and [that it] must be seen in relation to other types of interpersonal meaning” (Locher & Watts 2005: 10). Relational work, which is defined as “efforts made by the participants in verbal interaction to be as considerate towards one another as possible” (Watts 2003: 277), is very similar to the concept of facework. However, due to the common misconception of attributing facework only to the “mitigation of face-threatening acts”, the term relational work is preferred (Locher 2006: 250). Relational work is based on Goffman’s (1967) conception of face (e.g. Locher & Watts 2005: 10) and consequently treats face as “an image which is discursively negotiated” and that is “socially attributed anew in every social interaction” (Locher 2006: 251). In other words,

[the notion of relational work refers to the interpersonal level of communication […] It pays tribute to the fact that people are social beings who use language not only to communicate facts but also to shape their identities vis-à-vis their interactional partners. (ibid.)

According to Locher (2006: 255), relational work refers to “the entire spectrum of behavior” and thus cannot be “reduced to a dichotomy of impolite and polite behavior”. Figure 20 illustrates how relational work can be interpreted by an interactant:
As can be taken from this figure, in addition to being polite, impolite, non-polite, or over-polite an utterance in the context of relational work can also be perceived to be politic/appropriate or non-politic/inappropriate as well as positively marked, negatively marked, or unmarked. Politic behavior is defined as “that behavior, linguistic and non-linguistic, which the participants construct as being appropriate to the ongoing social interaction” (Watts 2003: 144). A participant constructs what he or she believes to be the appropriate behavior in a situation by drawing from his or her experiences of past events and by considering social norms (Watts 2003: 145). In other words, “politic behaviour is behaviour which is consistent with the depositions of the habitus in accordance with the social features of the situational context” (ibid.).

The concepts of positively marked, negatively marked or unmarked behavior are in accordance with markedness theory (e.g. Jakobson 1972) and refer to the positively, negatively, or neutrally valued presence/absence of a form of behavior. Figure 20 shows that impolite or over-polite behavior is negatively marked and considered to be non-political behavior, whereas both non-polite behavior which is unmarked, and polite behavior which is positively marked, are perceived as politic and thus appropriate behavior. In this regard, Locher (2006: 257-258) notes that “any judgment on politeness […] automatically involve[s] knowledge about expectations of appropriate behavior” and that “politeness cannot be assessed in isolation, but needs to be understood with respect to the entire continuum of possible relational work manifestations”. Moreover, “the boundaries within relational work are constantly being negotiated […] and may shift over time” (ibid.). This implies that it is not
possible to construct a universally valid model of politeness or polite behavior since it is not even possible to define constant variables within one cultural realm.

This absolute dependency on discursive situations, social conceptions, and individual views of what Terkourafi (2005) calls the postmodern-view of politeness has not been treated as unproblematic in the more recent literature. Some of the shortcomings of the discursive approach to politeness are discussed in the next section.

6.1.7. *Between the traditional and postmodern views of politeness*

Terkourafi (2005: 241) analyzes that the discursive, i.e. the postmodern, view of politeness rejects the traditional approaches due their basis on Grice’s (1975) maxims and speech act theory. She notes that it investigates “longer stretches of discourse” and neglects the idea that single words or utterances can entail politeness (ibid.). Therefore, this approach to politeness is more concerned with social than pragmatic aspects. Terkourafi (2005: 242) criticizes this development and encourages reclaiming “politeness as a viable object of study within linguistic pragmatics”. Culpeper (2010: 3232) shares this view as he states:

> It is not the case that any particular linguistic form guarantees an evaluation that it is [polite or] impolite in all contexts […] However, the current tendency to emphasize the context rather than linguistic form risks throwing out the baby with the bath-water.

Consequently, he argues that it is not inconceivable that politeness is also semantically encoded to some extent (Culpeper 2010: 3236). He proposes that people have opinions about how different expressions relate to different degrees of politeness or impoliteness *out of context*, and often opinions which are similar to others sharing their communities. They must have some kind of semantic knowledge; or, to put it another way, the pragmatics of these expressions must be semantically encoded in some way. (ibid., original emphasis)

Therefore, Culpeper (2010: 3236) suggests that politeness can be both “inherent in a linguistic expression” and be “determined by context.” Hence, neither the traditional nor the postmodern view of politeness is able to provide full satisfactory answers.

Another problem Terkourafi (2005: 245) attests to the postmodern view is its inability to make predictions. She argues that one of the main purposes of every valid theory is “to draw on situations experienced to make predictions about situations not
(yet) experienced” (ibid.). In consequence, she criticizes the discursive approach to politeness as providing only “minute descriptions of individual encounters […] that do not in any way add up to an explanatory theory of the phenomenon” (ibid.).

Considering the benefits and limitations of both the traditional and the discursive approaches to politeness, it does not seem unreasonable to follow Terkourafi (2005) and Culpeper (2010) in treating both views as complementary to a moderate extent. Terkourafi (2005: 254) argues that each theory offers valuable insights. She claims that the traditional theories “are concerned with the ‘formal’ face-constituting potential of an expression \( x \) as part of a system and in virtue of \( x \)’s relation to other expressions in that system” and that they are hence useful in order to make predictions (ibid., original emphasis). Yet, the discursive approach is interested in “the micro-level” and consequently “account[s] for the ‘actual’ meaning of [an] expression \( x \) on an occasion in use” Terkourafi (2005: 255, original emphasis).

Therefore, when talking about silence in connection with politeness, it appears to be essential to take both views in consideration. One the one hand, the focus clearly lies on one linguistic form with the intention of discussing its role in politeness. On the other hand, however, when considering the ambiguity and contextual dependency of silence (cf. section 3.1.1 and 3.1.2), it would be illogical and fallacious to claim that silence is inherently polite or impolite. Therefore, it is indispensable to consider an (im)polite act of silence in the light of its social and discursive context. However, in doing so, patterns of strategic usages of silence in connection with particular contextual factors are likely to arise and consequently it might be possible to make generalizations about these usages within individual cultures and speech communities.

Since the establishment of quantitatively substantiated theories of possible applications of (im)polite silences would go far beyond the scope of this thesis, exemplary instances have been selected and intend to offer a starting point for a fuller and more comprehensive quantitative investigation of how silence can be used in relation to (im)politeness within American societies. In consideration of the subsequently proposed strategic usages of silence, it should be noted that the distinction between polite and politic behavior is not always clear-cut but fuzzy. Additionally, by relying mainly on the traditional politness framework of Brown and Levinson (1987), one might argue that the subsequent usages of silence are more closely related to facework rather than to linguistic politeness per se. Nevertheless,
since silence is a linguistic form and since linguistic politeness is a part of facework (Watts 2003: 199), this approach to the subject appears to be suitable and legitimate.

6.2. Silence as a politeness device

The aim of this section is to discuss various usages of silence as a means of being polite or impolite. The following subsections suggest eleven different categories or possibilities of how silence can be applied to this effect. These are: Committing an FTA indirectly, maintaining social space, avoiding damage to the addressee’s face, saving self-face, ellipsis, giving deference, avoiding disagreement, intensifying interest, making the addressee feel uncomfortable, and avoiding taboos, sensitive subjects, and “the elephant in the room”.

6.2.1. Committing an FTA indirectly

Committing an FTA indirectly via silence refers to Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 225) off-record politeness strategy “be vague or ambiguous”. As outlined in sections 3.1 and 5.2, silence is an indirect and ambiguous form of communication that relies on physical and contextual cues to achieve understanding. Alluding to these attributes, Sifianou (1997: 73) associates silence with off-record politeness referring to it as “a case of saying nothing and meaning something”. In reference to Lakoff (1973), Jaworski (1993: 24) notes in this respect that such an utterance of silence is perceived as polite because it leaves the listener options to react. Furthermore, it is considered to be a safe strategy for the performance of an FTA since it is easier for a speaker to repair face damage if he or she notices that the produced threat is too severe. Jaworski (1993: 25) notes therefore that “[i]t is easier to undo silence than it is to undo words”.

Excerpt (14) displays a situation where silence is used in order to save the addressee’s face when making a demanding request:

(14) Kim: Why’d you leave without saying goodbye?
Michael: I’ve to go to this work thing, I was, I didn’t wanna wake you up. [2 sec]. Have you seen my keys? [starts looking for his keys].
Kim: [7 sec]. You can’t wait to get back to her, can you?
Michael: Can you just please help me find my keys?
Kim: What did I do?
Michael: [4 sec]. You didn’t do anything Kim. You’re amazing.
Kim: You’re amazing, last night was perfect.
Michael: [3 sec].
Kim: [sighs and takes the keys out of her pocket]. Here.
Michael: [2 sec]. Thank you.
Kim: Are you gonna call me?
Michael: I’ll call you.

(The Last Kiss 2006: 1h 12min 13sec – 1h 13min 6sec)

The context of this extract can be briefly summarized as an early morning conversation between an unfaithful man and his mistress. Michael, who has attempted to leave without saying goodbye, returns to Kim’s room after realizing that he has forgotten his car keys. This is when Kim, who appears to be very vulnerable in this situation, confronts Michael. Michael seems to recognize her vulnerability, as he tries to lie about the reason for his sudden exit, asks politely for assistance in the search for his keys, and finds reassuring words in response to her question What did I do? Nevertheless, he appears to be determined to find his keys and to leave without discussing the matter further. Therefore, he decides to perform a second request for assistance in the search for his car keys off record via silence in order to minimize the proposed threat to Kim’s face. By slightly bowing his head and slowly opening and closing his eyes twice (cp. figure 21) before redirecting his gaze at Kim, he stresses his intent of not wanting to have this discussion and his desire to simply obtain his keys. Kim’s response in the form of a sigh and the handing over of Michael’s car keys demonstrates that she has understood Michael’s silent utterance.

Figure 21: Committing an FTA indirectly (The Last Kiss 2006: 1h 12min 46sec)
A frequently recurring form of a silent off-record performance of FTAs is the declination of offers, requests, invitations, etc. (Jaworski 1993: 52; 92). Davidson (1979: 103) notes in this respect that “[silences occurring immediately after an invitation, offer, request, or proposal may be taken as displaying that it is possibly going to be rejected”. Although the inviter understands the silent speech act as “some sort of trouble or problem that the recipient is having with the invitation or offer” (Davidson 1979: 104), it is often perceived as less face threatening than a sheer rejection.

6.2.2. Maintaining social space

An action that is associated with Brown and Levinson’s (1987) negative face wants is the maintenance of social space (Sifianou 1997: 72). In regard to the role of silence in this context, Saville-Troike (1985: 4) notes that

[i]n public encounters between strangers, such as seatmates on a train or airplane, silence may be used to prevent the initiation of verbal interaction, and to maintain social space.

An example for such a situation is illustrated in excerpt (3) on page 48. In this brief communicative event between Don and the little girl on the airplane, silence is the central mode of communication and allows both interlocutors to transmit meaning without uttering words and consequently to secure each other’s personal spaces.

However, the use of silence in order to maintain social space is not limited to encounters with complete strangers. It may also be used in situations in which one participant does not want to step on the other participant’s toes and/or feels that he or she would rather be left alone. Therefore, in refraining from making an imposition, silence functions as a means to maintain personal space also in interactions with acquaintances.

6.2.3. Avoiding damage to the addressee’s face

With the intention of avoiding damage to the addressee’s face, silence often occurs “out of consideration for other people’s feelings” (Kwiatkowska 1997: 334). This motivation for remaining silent can be equated to Brown and Levinson’s (1987)
strategy of “Don’t do the FTA” and to Leech’s (1983) tact maxim. This politeness function of silence has also been observed by Verschueren (1985: 103ff.), Jaworski (1993: 25), Sifianou (1997: 72), Nakane (2006: 1814), and Zerubavel (2006: 29; 75).

Excerpt (15) serves as an illustrative example:

(15) Leonard: I wasn’t expecting visitors.
Sandra: [4 sec]. Yeah, you got a lot of stuff in here.
Leonard: Yeah. Yeah I wasn’t planning on being home for so long, so.
I know I gotta organize this place, oh fuck.
Sandra: When, when did you get back?
Leonard: Uhm, about four months ago.
Sandra: [3 sec].

(Two Lovers 2008: 9min 9sec – 9min 28sec)

The context of this situation is as follows: Leonard has been asked to show Sandra, visitor at Leonard’s parents’ place, some of his photographs in his room. As can be taken from his first utterance, he appears to be embarrassed about the mess in his room and tries to make excuses for it. Sandra clearly takes notice of the untidiness but attempts to be polite about it. Therefore, she chooses to withhold a FTA in response to Leonard’s confession about living in this chaos for several months. Instead she nods politely and continues to gaze around the room. The fact that she is refraining from expressing her thoughts is especially apparent for an external observer. While Leonard is not able to observe her facial expression as he has turned his back toward her in order to look for his photographs, Sandra, as illustrated in figure 22, briefly expresses her shock about Leonard’s confessions by opening her eyes widely.

Figure 22: Avoiding causing damage to the addressee’s face (Two Lovers 2008: 9 min 27sec)
6.2.4. Saving self-face

Chen (2001: 103) proposes that silence plays an important part in his model of self-politeness in regard to his strategy “Withhold the SFTA”. The most fruitful observation of silence as a means of self-politeness is offered by Jaworski and Stephens (1998) who investigate the self-protective use of silence by people who suffer from hearing impairments. They outline that one of the main reasons for the silent avoidance of talk by people with hearing impairment is motivated by “concerns for one’s own face due to the difficulties in processing utterances by others” (Jaworski & Stephens 1998: 74). In a different context, it is pointed out that acts which are “failing to mention something”, are considerate to one’s self-face and are “particularly well suited for political manipulation of others, on a personal level, as well as on a societal level” (Jaworski 1993: 108-109). In reference to the concept of white lies, Verschueren (1985: 104) speaks in this context also about “cases of ‘white silence’”. However, as excerpt (16) illustrates, a speaker does not have to suffer from hearing impairment or has to have manipulative intentions when he or she is silently withholding from a SFTA:

(16) Izzy: […] Of course you know. You and Jenna are like the same person.
Michael: [2 sec].
Izzy: And now you’re having a baby?
Michael: Yeah.
Izzy: How intense is that?
Michael: Pretty intense. [2 sec].
Izzy: I envy you, you prick.
Michael: [6 sec].
(The Last Kiss 2006: 8min 6sec – 8min 26sec)

In this extract, Michael and Izzy are talking about current events in their lives. As can be taken from the dialogue above, Michael is about to become a father for the first time. His choice to remain silent in response to Izzy’s confession of envy marks a realization of self-politeness since Michael is not happy about becoming a father. He appears to be afraid of losing face if he admits his true feelings. Not unlike in the situation in excerpt (15), Michael’s facial expressions and head movement reveal his true thoughts. However, since he and Izzy are sitting next to each other and Izzy is not looking at him, he fails to take notice. An external observer, however, is able to perceive that Michael displays an utterly worried and sad facial expression, turns his
gaze away from Izzy toward the ground (cp. figure 23), and eventually moves his head in the opposite direction so that Izzy would not be able to see his facial expression if he re-directed his gaze toward him.

In addition to withholding a SFTA, one can also use silence in order to save one’s own face by producing an indirect off-record speech act. An example for such a situation can be found in excerpt (8) on page 54. In this case, the SFTA of apologizing is softened by performing it indirectly via an expression of silence.\footnote{According to Brown and Levinson (1987: 187) apologizing also functions as a negative politeness strategy.}

6.2.5. Ellipsis

As part of more a formal criterion, silence contributes to the politeness function of ellipses. Brown and Levinson (1987: 111-112) note that an ellipsis, i.e. the omission of parts of an utterance, can function both as a positive as well as a negative politeness strategy. On the one hand, it can signal “the existence of in-group shared knowledge”, while, on the other hand, it can also be seen as an indirect way of communication that attends to negative face wants (ibid.). The politeness function of silence as a part of an ellipsis is recognized by Ghita (1994: 381) as well as by Saville-Troike (1989: 147) who states that

Figure 23: Saving self-face (The Last Kiss 2006: 8min 21sec)
[u]tterances are also commonly completed in silence when the topic is a particular delicate one or the word which would be used is taboo, or when the situation is emotionally loaded and the speaker is ‘at a loss’ of words.\textsuperscript{8}

The use of an ellipsis to save both the face of the speaker and the listener is exemplified in excerpt (17):

(17) Kim: Isn’t this fantastic?
Michael: [3 sec]. Yeah it’s pretty crazy, huh? It’s like a condominium or something.
Kim: Yeah, mind if I [2 sec]?
Michael: Yeah, please.

\textit{(The Last Kiss 2006: 14min 39sec -14min 54sec )}

This passage can be contextualized as follows: Michael is sitting in a giant tree house all by himself, when Kim, whom he does not really know, climbs up the ladder and addresses him with her sentiment of the tree house in the utterance \textit{Isn’t this fantastic}? Michael appears to be surprised at first, as he clearly has not expected that somebody would find him there. Kim then politely asks whether she could join him and sit down next to him. She performs this speech act with the use of an ellipsis, as she completes her utterance with silence. In order to indicate what her expression \textit{mind if I} refers to, she makes a quick directive movement with her arm in Michael’s direction (cp. figure 24). Since they do not really know each other and there is only little space next to where Michael is sitting, Kim’s question is face threatening as she asks for permission

\footnote{\textit{The subject of handling taboos is further explored in section 6.2.10}}
to invade his personal space and risks being rejected. Therefore, the omission of the second half of her utterance attends to both his and her own face.

6.2.6. Giving deference

Brown and Levinson (1987: 178) consider giving deference as a negative politeness strategy. Sifianou (1997: 72) notes in this respect that “silence [can be] used to demonstrate deference to socially superior or older people”:

(18) Stephen: You got something to say for yourself?
Michael: [7 sec]. I don’t know, I, I panicked, I got scared.
Stephen: [2 sec]. Well that’s a very compelling argument. You won’t have any trouble convincing her of that.
Michael: [2 sec].
Stephen: What the fuck were you thinking?
Michael: [1 sec].
Stephen: Did you just get bored?
Michael: No, I’m just an idiot.
Stephen: Oh on that much we agreed [sic]?!
Michael: [4 sec]. I love her Stephen. […]

(The Last Kiss 2006: 1h 22min 58sec – 1h 23min 30sec)

Excerpt (18) is taken from the same context as excerpt (13) on page 62. Due to Michael’s error of judgment and Stephen’s socially dominant position, which is defined by his age and his status as future father-in-law, Michael shows deference and submission in this conversation by remaining silent and by choosing not to defend himself. The act of deference is further strengthened by his body posture and facial
expression. As illustrated in figure 25, Michael has lowered his shoulders, avoids eye contact, and gazes at the ground. All of these modes indicate and express his surrender.

6.2.7. Avoiding disagreement

The acts of agreeing and disagreeing appear to be of central concern in traditional politeness theories. Leech’s (1983: 132) politeness principle, for instance, entails a maxim of agreement which states that disagreement with a speaker should be minimized, whereas agreement should be maximized. In a similar conception, Brown and Levinson (1987: 112ff.) propose the positive politeness strategies “Seek agreement” and “Avoid disagreement”. Similarly, studies in conversation analysis, for instance Sacks (1973) and Pomerantz (1984), suggest that agreement in conversations is preferred over disagreements. Sifianou (2012: 1, in press) offers a newer evaluation of the subject, as she claims that disagreements do not necessarily have to be a sign of impoliteness but that they can also “be a sign of intimacy and sociability and may not destroy but rather strengthen interlocutors’ relationships.” Nevertheless, the overall tendency to favor agreement in order to claim “common ground” (Sifianou 2012: 8) seems to be undeniable.

Although silence is often used to “signal potential disagreement” (Pomerantz 1984: 77), it can also be applied, for instance, in order to pretend agreement. Excerpt (19) illustrates such a situation:

Leonard: [3 sec].
Sandra: You don’t have to worry about anything, not to be embarrassed.
Leonard: [2 sec]. Thank you. You know, I’ve got a lot of stuff going on right now, that’s [3 sec]. I don’t even know what it’s like to be myself right now.
(Two Lovers 2008: 1h 11min 28sec – 1h 12min 11sec)

The context of this situation is that Leonard, who suffers from a bipolar disorder, and Sandra are at the beginning of their relationship. She is aware of his mental instability and displays her devotion by offering to take care of him. However, what she does not know is that Leonard is not in love with her but with another woman. Therefore,
Leonard’s silent response to her assessment of his character attends to Sandra’s positive face wants and can be interpreted as way of avoiding disagreement in order to preserve harmony. Additionally, it also functions as a form of self-protection. In order to hide his disagreement with Sandra’s assessment of him, Leonard avoids mutual gaze and defensively bows his head while he pokes around in his sundae (cp. figure 26).

Figure 26: Avoiding disagreement (Two Lovers 2008: 1h 11min 51sec)

6.2.8. Intensifying interest

Another positive politeness function of silence can be found in Brown and Levinson’s (1987: 106) strategy of intensifying interest. They state:

Another way for S [a speaker] to communicate to H [the hearer] that he shares some of his wants is to intensify the interest of his own (S’s) contribution to the conversation […] (ibid.).

Sifinaou (1997: 72) notes in this respect that “either by just listening carefully or by not asking questions and letting the speaker say as much as he or she wants to” silence appears to be among the most valuable forms of such contributions. This can also be observed in excerpt (20):

(20) Izzy: I just love knowing, you know?
   Michael: [3 sec].
   Izzy: I just saw my whole life laid out in front of me, perfect.
   Michael: [3 sec].
   Izzy: And then, that bitch just yanked it all away from me. It’s just [makes a popping sound]
The context of this extract is the same as in excerpt (16) on page 84. Here, Michael silently listens to what Izzy has to say and hence attends to Izzy’s positive face wants. By shifting his gaze away from the ground and by turning his head toward Izzy in response to the tag question you know?, he ensures that Izzy recognizes his silence as a sign that he is listening and paying attention (cp. figure 27).

**Figure 27: Intensifying interest (The Last Kiss 7min 47sec)**

### 6.2.9. Making the addressee feel uncomfortable

All of the previously mentioned usages of silence are employed with the intention of being polite. However, silence can also be applied in order to be impolite. Limberg (2009: 1376) defines impoliteness as “an intentional form of face-aggravation caused by verbal and nonverbal means [… that is] interactively construed in a particular context”. As has been discussed in section 6.1.1 above, Leech (1983: 141) considers silence as an essentially impolite form. In a more specifically defined context, Laver (1981: 301) asserts that silence is considered as hostile behavior in initial stages of conversations where “speech is conventionally anticipated”. Furthermore, Culpeper (1996: 358) suggests in his study on the anatomy of impoliteness that the impoliteness strategy “make the other feel uncomfortable” can be achieved by not avoiding silence. Excerpt (21) depicts a situation where silence makes the addressee feel uncomfortable:

(21) Dora: So, [4 sec] what brings you out here?
Don: [1 sec]. Oh I was kind of in the area, so I thought I drop in.
Dora: I see. [2 sec]. How, how did you track me down exactly?
Don: Uh, on the computer. They can do anything.
Dora: [16 sec].
Don: Nice place you got here.
Dora: Oh thank you. It’s a nice example. My husband and I are in real estate. We sell landscape lots and reconstructed designer homes. Or do you already have this information from your computer? [hands Don her business card]
Don: No, [3 sec] your card is pink!
Dora: [3 sec]. Yes. Ron, my husband, thought it would be cute if mine were pink and his blue.
Don: [7 sec]. I like those pearls.
Dora: [4 sec].
Don: Did I give you those?
Dora: [6 sec]. I don’t think so. [2 sec].
Don: I should have.
Dora: [14 sec]. It’s very strange you showing up like this.
Don: [4 sec]. Yeah, it is strange.
Dora: [5 sec].

(Broken Flowers 2005: 49min 27sec – 51min 24sec)

Figure 28: Reaction to silence as a means of making the addressee feel uncomfortable (Broken Flowers 2005: 50min 5sec)

The context of this situation is as follows: Dora is bewildered and puzzled by a surprise visit of her old life-partner Don, whom she has not seen for almost twenty years. Although she does not appear to be happy about Don’s appearance, she invites him into her house by courtesy. It appears that Dora is making Don feel uncomfortable throughout this entire conversation by using both words and silence. In addition to her remarks Or do you already have this information from your computer? and It’s very strange you showing up like this which are clearly face-aggravating, her silences,
especially the sixteen, fourteen, and five second long instances, appear to be almost hostile. Don displays his irritation about Dora’s behavior by nervously and repeatedly gazing around the room (cp. figure 28).

6.2.10. Avoiding taboos, sensitive subjects, and “the elephant in the room”

It has been pointed out in section 2.3.1 that silence should be conceptualized in the light of prototype theory and that it hence does not necessarily manifest as absence of sound. Therefore, when avoiding taboos and sensitive subjects, for instance, participants are often confronted with a form of silence that disguises itself as talk. Kurzon (2007: 1677) refers to such instances of silence where a person talks but “does not relate to a particular topic” as thematic silence⁹.

Zerubavel (2006: 26ff.) notes that such thematic silences play an important role in the treatment of taboos:

[A]s the familiar image of the three wise monkeys so perfectly remind us, strict taboos on looking or listening are often coupled with functionally complementary prohibitions against speaking. Thus […] there are certain things that are never supposed to be discussed, or sometimes even mentioned, at all.

The avoidance of taboo words and topics as well as sensitive subjects in social interactions is generally perceived as polite behavior (Zerubavel 2006: 29). The common saying that one should never discuss sex, politics, and religion with other people in order to avoid confrontations or heated discussions appears to support this theory. These avoidance strategies are applied in order to save both the face of the hearer and of the speaker. While taboo words are often avoided and paraphrased by the use of euphemisms (Zerubavel 2006: 28), small talk and talk about other subjects are instances of thematic silences that are used in order to avoid taboo topics and sensitive subjects.

Another use of thematic silence that is related to the avoidance of uncomfortable topics is the avoidance of “the elephant in the room”. Zerubavel (2006: 52) notes that avoiding “the elephant in the room” often involves desperate attempts of finding another subject to talk about in order to “cover up uncomfortable silences”:

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⁹ Since the main focus of this thesis lies on the communicative function of instances of prototypical silences that are observable on the level of locution, illustrative examples of thematic silences are not provided here.
We thus end up talking about ‘unimportant but discussable’ matters and telling trivial stories essentially designed to cover up untold ones. To make sure we do not actually acknowledge the elephant’s presence by accidentally bumping into it we also keep a safe distance away from it by discussing only ‘safe’ topics and avoiding ones from which we might inadvertently slip into undiscussable territory. (Zerubavel 2006: 84)

The difference between avoiding taboos and avoiding “elephants” is that taboos are often socially determined constructs, whereas “elephants” normally originate from the co-denial of two interactants (ibid.). Since denial is usually motivated by “our need to avoid pain”, Zerubavel (2006: 5) asserts that “[a]s a form of denial, silence certainly helps us avoid pain”. Therefore, thematic silences that are used to deny the existence of “an elephant in the room” qualify as a negative politeness strategy.

6.3. Summary

This chapter has looked at some of the most dominant politeness theories and has established silence as fruitful subject for a study of politeness. While refraining from fallacious claims about the inherently (im)polite nature of silence by acknowledging the importance of the discursive and social context of a silent utterance, various strategic (im)politeness usages of silence have been proposed. These involve committing an FTA indirectly, maintaining social space, avoiding damage to the addressee’s face, saving self-face, performing an ellipsis, giving deference, avoiding disagreement, intensifying interest, and making the addressee feel uncomfortable. Furthermore, it has also been shown that instances of thematic silence can be used in order to avoid taboos, sensitive subjects, and “the elephant in the room”.

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7. Conclusion

The main objective of this thesis was to investigate how a speaker can communicate meaning with silence and how a listener is able to successfully understand this meaning. It has been explained from the point of view of pragmatics how a semantically undefined linguistic form can be used to express so many different meanings. It has been shown that the meaning a silent utterance can take is completely dependent on contextual factors and visual cues that are performed via other communicative modes. Hence, an efficient and successful attempt of communicating with silence presupposes shared and contextual knowledge between the interlocutors and relies on contributive extra-linguistic information that is transmitted via the use of gestures, gaze, facial expressions, body movement and posture, as well as touch.

In order to gain a deeper understanding of how and why speakers use silence as a communicative tool, this thesis has investigated the role of silence in two of the most important fields in pragmatics: speech act theory and politeness. Silence is an interesting subject in both fields, as the former is concerned with speakers’ intention of inducing an effect onto listeners and the latter is interested in explaining how and why speakers say the things the way they do.

It has been argued that intentional and eloquent silences can take the form of indirect speech acts. Moreover, by relying on Searle’s (1976) classification of speech acts with the addition of Leech’s (1983) category of rogatives as a basis, it has been demonstrated that silence can be used in order to perform representative, directive, commissive, expressive, and rogative illocutionary acts. Furthermore, it has also been shown that silence can qualify as a sufficient answer to polar questions, Q-word questions, as well as alternative questions.

Moreover, different possibilities to use silence as a politeness device have been proposed. In the interest of a theory of politeness, it has been suggested that silence can be used to commit an FTA indirectly, maintain social space, avoid damage to the addressee’s face, save self-face, perform an ellipsis, give deference, avoid disagreement, intensify interest, make the addressee feel uncomfortable, as well as avoid taboos, sensitive subjects, and “the elephant in the room”.

One of the main achievements of this thesis lies in the employment of a multimodal view of communication which throws new light on the communicative
functionality of silence. With the help of illustrative movie sequences, it is been argued that silence never occurs without visual cues in face-to-face conversations and that these contribute substantially to the human ability to create meaning via silence on the part of the addressee and to interpret and understand it at the end of the addressee. The analysis of the individual movie sequences has demonstrated that these extra-linguistic modes have a tremendous impact on the communicative force of a silent utterance and offer vital assistance for he transmission of meaning.

Furthermore, to my knowledge, to this point no study has investigated the role of silence in connection with speech act theory and politeness theory in sufficient depth. The findings of this thesis in both areas contribute to the understanding of its pragmatic functions and versatility. However, in exploring silence as a communicative tool from the point of view of pragmatics, this thesis has been more concerned with the question of how silence can be used and employed than investigating where, when, and how often it occurs in discourse. Therefore, focus was given to the speakers’ intentions, wants, and aims. In other words, the main concern of this thesis was not to investigate how silence is used in actual discourse, but how a speaker can employ it in order to achieve a particular communicative goal. Moreover, by highlighting the importance of contextual and shared knowledge as well as the use of the other communicative modes, it has been pointed out how silence can be understood by a competent listener. The question of how listeners treat and react to silent utterances in various discourses might pose a different question.

This thesis was concerned with the communicative functionality of silence in dyadic communicative situations. An in previous research often neglected aspect that could not be taken into consideration due to the scope of this thesis either is the role of eloquent silence in communicative situations that involve more than two participants. Therefore, further research observing the communicative role of silence in groups of three or more interlocutors is needed.

In addition, further research might also be needed for the consideration of silence as means of politeness. Despite considering the discursive context in the individual strategic possibilities of using silence as an (im)politeness device and despite refraining from fallacious claims of silence as being inherently polite or impolite, the approach taken in this thesis relies heavily on the theoretical framework of politeness theories. Due to the assertions of the discursive approach to politeness,
i.e. the distinction between polite and politic behavior as well as the claim that different interactants might have different opinions on the degree of the politeness of an utterance, it would be fruitful to test the strategies that were proposed in this thesis by conducting a quantitative survey inquiring whether and to what degree speakers actually perceive and evaluate representative instances of these strategies as polite behavior.

In this thesis, silence has been established as a complex phenomenon that can be used effectively in order to communicate meaning. Due to its strong reliance on contextual and shared knowledge between interlocutors as well as on meaning that is expressed via other contributive communicative modes, a speaker cannot always be certain that his or her utterance of silence is actually interpreted the way it was intended. Yet, as has been shown in this thesis, silence is a very powerful communicative tool that can be used in order to express almost everything that can be articulated with speech. Therefore, I would like to close with the words of the Roman philosopher and politician Marcus Tullius Cicero who once said that “Silence is one of the great arts of conversation” (http://quotationsbook.com/quote/36214/, 3 Nov. 2012).
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“Silence is one of the great arts of conversation”. (http://quotationsbook.com/quote/36214/, 3 Nov. 2012)


**Primary Texts**


*Remember Me*. 2010. DVD. Prod. by Nicholas Osborne; Trevor Engelson; Erik Feig; Robert Pattinson. dir. by Allen Coulter. Summit Entertainment.

*The Last Kiss*. 2006. DVD. Prod. by Gary Lucchesi; Tom Rosenberg; Marcus Viscidi; Andre Lamal. dir. by Tony Goldwyn. Dream Works.

Appendices

Appendix A: Abstract

Since silence has often been a neglected topic in linguistics, only a handful of studies have investigated its communicative value by observing its role in human face-to-face interactions. The aim of this thesis is to seek a deeper understanding of the pragmatic aspects of silence by showing how it can be used to communicate meaning and how that meaning can be successfully comprehended. Therefore, focus will be given to the role of silence in connection with speech act theory and politeness theory.

It will be shown that communicative instances of silence convey meaning only in relation to contextual and shared knowledge between interlocutors. Moreover, it will be claimed that due to the multimodal nature of face-to-face communication, different communicative modes contribute to the creation of meaning and that such extra-linguistic and nonverbal behavior is of special importance when communicating with silence. The practical aspect of this thesis, which builds on these notions, aims to illustrate how silence can be applied as a communicative tool in various contexts. This will be achieved by an analysis of illustrative movie sequences.

On the basis of the theoretical framework of Austin (1962) and Searle (1969; 1975; 1976), silence will be defined as an indirect speech act. Moreover, it will be shown that a speaker can perform various kinds of speech acts solely via silence. The thesis furthermore investigates how silence can be used as a politeness device after considering both traditional (Leech 1983; Brown & Levinson 1987) and postmodern (Watts 2003; Locher 2006) theories of politeness and proposes various strategic possibilities of how silence can function as a means of being polite and impolite.
Appendix B: Deutsche Zusammenfassung


Appendix C: Curriculum vitae

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