

“Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe” as a form of Non-Verbal Communication in Igbo Culture – Fr. Kevin Chukwuka

Introduction

In 1959, Erving Goffman published his work, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. He argued that our social interaction is fundamentally a performance. In our daily activities, we mainly manage the impression we present to others as actors on a stage. This shows up in how we present ourselves as competent, friendly, powerful, or whatever identity we want to project. This idea is encapsulated in the word dramaturgy, which uses theater as a metaphor to analyze everyday life. In life, we present ourselves in ways that communicate more than mere words. Communication is not limited to words; it includes gestures, silence, posture, and other expressive behaviors.

One function of communication is expressing human thoughts. Communication also serves this expressive function. Human beings communicate to express inner states, emotions, thoughts, hopes, frustrations, joys, and sorrows. This expression is central to psychological well-being and to the authenticity of relationships. Even when communication is not aimed at informing, bonding, or acting, it may simply express what is inside a person. Expression lets individuals reveal their identity and share their subjective world with others. Without expressive communication, human interiority would remain hidden, and relationships would lack depth. The expressive function shows its role in articulating human subjectivity. As a person from Southern Nigeria, I was amazed to discover that silence, or gestures one may ignore, can be a presentation of self.

I would like to explore an adage in Igboland that highlights silence, a form of nonverbal communication, as performance in the line of Goffman's thought. Though it seems like a non-communicative action, it is communication itself. We always communicate, even in silence. In other words, this points to the fact that our action or inaction is a message to others. They also interpret it as a message. When we communicate, we are aware of what we are doing, although not all communication is intentional. Communication is not only interpersonal; it can also involve the transmission of roles and individuals. Each of us interprets our roles in communication differently. The adage reads “*Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe*.” It is by exploring this adage that we state that among the Igbo of Nigeria, silence, which is devoid of sound, is a sign, a message that is a form of communication. The adage therefore provides a culturally specific example through which Goffman's understanding of social performance and impression management can be examined: silence is not simply the absence of speech but a socially interpreted act through which individuals present themselves and negotiate their relationships with others

Meaning and Cultural Context of the Adage “*Ogbaru Nkịtị Kwere Ekwe*”

The Igbo adage “*Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe*”, which can be translated as “silence means consent” or literally as “one who keeps quiet has agreed,” expresses a deep cultural understanding of non-verbal communication. In Igbo, the word ‘silence’ could mean *I gbachi nkiti*, *I dere juu*, or *I mechi onu*. Silence is the state of being silent or the refusal to speak when expected. Making someone keep quiet can also be seen as being silenced, which could be interpreted as

estrangement.¹ This adage suggests that silence transcends mere absence of words; it embodies a significant form of communication. When a person chooses to remain silent, they are not simply refraining from speaking; rather, they convey a profound message. In this context, silence is interpreted as a gesture of agreement or acceptance, emphasizing the idea that what is unspoken can express sentiments just as powerfully as spoken words.

Igbo adages represent the bedrock beneath the social, metaphysical, epistemological, moral, economic, and even religious worldviews of the Igbos, which can be easily excavated and retrieved at will². In many Igbo communicative contexts, silence is rarely viewed as neutral. If someone is wronged, challenged, or presented with a proposal and they remain silent, it is taken as an acknowledgment or acceptance of the terms, regardless of whether they actually agree internally. This adage is often used to urge action or speech, reminding people that failing to speak up against injustice or in defence of oneself is equivalent to accepting the consequences. It is also a form of social control that serves as a social mechanism to prompt individuals to take a stand, reminding them that they cannot claim ignorance or involuntary submission if they did not speak up.

Non-verbal Communication in Igbo Culture

Before treating silence, which is the point of my reflection on non-communication in my culture, it is important to note that there are other forms of non-verbal communication. Igbo culture communicates through a variety of non-verbal practices; they include

1. Greetings and Gestures of Respect: Younger people greet elders by placing their left hand on their right forearm (or elbow) when shaking hands, bowing, or making a slight genuflection. This signals humility and deference, especially toward elders or superiors
2. Use of Objects as Nonverbal Symbols: When one offers and breaks the kola nut (*oji*), it is a nonverbal ritual of hospitality and welcome³. The way it's presented (e.g., first to elders) and broken signals agreement, peace, or the start of important discussions. In the novel *Things Fall Apart*, Achebe shows this when Unoka welcomes his guest, Okoye, by presenting a kola nut. The host passes it to the guest, who insists the host break it as an honour signifying respect. The oldest man blesses it with prayers to ancestors for health and protection, then shares it. This nonverbal ritual opens conversations peacefully, shows hospitality, and reinforces communal bonds. Refusing or mishandling it signals disrespect.⁴
3. Proxemics and Touch: In Igbo culture, the use of the left hand for giving, receiving items, eating, or pointing is considered disrespectful. One is expected to use the right

¹Cf. Chukwuma Arinze Ikegbo, THE PHILOSOPHICAL APPRAISAL OF SILENCE AS CONSENT IN IGBO ONTOLOGY, in *Nnadiabube Journal of Philosophy* (NJP) Vol. 7 No. 1 (2024)

² Onwuchekwa Okorie. "Philosophy in indigenous Igbo adages: Cross-cultural media for education in the era of globalization." *Open Journal of Philosophy* 3, no. 01 (2013): 218.

³ Ezegwu, Doi & Danie, & Odo, Ogochukwu & Nneoma, & Nwokeocha, Ifeanyi & Ezegwu, Daniel & Daniel, Communicating the Significance of Kolanut among Igbo People of Nigeria. In *Indiana Journal of Arts & Literature*, Vol. 04,2023, 24 -29.

⁴ Chinua, Achebe. "*Things fall apart*." Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York (2021).⁶

hand or both. Again, hugging or embracing is reserved for close friends or relatives; it conveys warmth and intimacy but is avoided in formal or hierarchical settings.

These practices demonstrate that communication within Igbo society extends beyond spoken language. Among these forms, however, silence is particularly significant because it can function as an interpreted response and can acquire different meanings depending on social context.

Silence as a Non-Verbal Communication

Palo Alto School of Communication, a group of scholars based in California, a suburb of San Francisco, and led by Paul Watzlawick, developed what became known as *The Pragmatics of Human Communication*, a study of the underlying principles governing interpersonal interaction. The Palo Alto scholars initially focused their research on *disturbed communication*, that is, communication among individuals with psychological or relational disorders. In studying these cases, they discovered several fundamental principles, or axioms, of human communication that apply universally. Among the five key principles they identified, the most famous states: “You cannot not communicate”.⁵ This means that, as long as we are in the presence of others, every aspect of our behaviour carries communicative value. Even when we do not intend to send a message, our actions, gestures, and expressions inevitably convey meaning. For example, scratching one’s head may simply be a response to an itch, yet observers may interpret it as a sign of confusion or doubt. Similarly, the way we dress, whether consciously chosen or not, communicates something about us.

Silence is one of the most powerful forms of non-verbal communication in human interaction. In communication theory, silence is not understood as the absence of meaning, but as a meaningful sign whose interpretation depends on context, culture, and relationship. What silence communicates is shaped by who is silent, when the silence occurs, and within what social situation it is expressed. In Igbo culture, silence often functions as a communicative response rather than a lack of response. The adage *Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe* captures this understanding by affirming that silence can signal agreement or acceptance. In communal settings, silence may signal consent, respect for communal decision-making, or trust in elders' authority. In this sense, silence becomes part of communication's expressive function, conveying meaning without words. For instance, in a village meeting, among elders or family heads discussing land allocation, dispute resolution, or community projects, an elder or respected member proposes a plan. If someone who might be expected to object remains silent, others typically interpret that silence as acceptance or consent. Speaking out would signal disagreement or a need for further discussion, but staying quiet shows trust in the group's wisdom, respect for the elders' authority, and agreement with the communal direction. Interrupting or protesting would disrupt harmony, so silence maintains it while conveying approval.

This insight aligns closely with the approach to non-verbal communication in Gili and Colombo’s general theory of communication. Gili and Colombo emphasize that communication is not limited to spoken language. It also includes silence, gestures, posture, facial expressions, and other non-verbal behaviours, all of which can carry meaning depending

⁵ .Guido Gili. & Fausto Colombo. *Communication, culture, society: The sociological approach to communicative relationships*. La Scuola.(2012),39

on the context.⁶ From their perspective, silence is a form of communication because others interpret it within a shared cultural and relational framework. This understanding challenges purely verbal models of communication and confirms that meaning is not confined to speech. Silence, like gesture or facial expression, is a socially learned code. Its meaning emerges from shared cultural expectations and interactional norms. As such, silence must be read within its social and cultural context in order to be properly understood.

Silence as Performance, and Impression Management

Erving Goffman's dramaturgical approach provides a useful framework for understanding silence as a form of performance. In social interaction, individuals constantly engage in impression management, seeking to present themselves in ways appropriate to the situation. Silence can be a deliberate front-stage behaviour used to maintain harmony, show respect, or avoid conflict.

In many Igbo social contexts, choosing silence is not a passive act but a strategic performance. By remaining silent, an individual may signal agreement, acknowledge authority, or demonstrate self-control. This performance helps sustain the shared definition of the situation and protects the "face" of both the speaker and the silent participant. Silence, therefore, contributes to social order by supporting interaction rituals that value restraint and respect. For example, if I, as a parish priest, visit a parishioner's family compound to address a heated sibling quarrel over inheritance that has disrupted family peace. Then the elder brother accuses the younger of disrespect and unfair demands. And I listen calmly to his passionate explanation. Rather than immediately intervening, correcting, or taking sides (which could shame the accuser or escalate tension), I choose strategic silence for a moment, simply nodding thoughtfully while maintaining eye contact.

My silence is performative. It only acknowledges the accuser's authority as family head and protects my face by not interrupting or dismissing him. My silence communicates restraint, respect for the family structure, and a willingness to let the speaker express himself without interruption. Moreover, it signals implicit agreement with the process (that is, submitting to priestly mediation) and sustains the shared definition of the situation as a respectful, prayerful resolution rather than a confrontation. By not reacting verbally right away, I avoid loss of face for anyone and uphold social harmony (*udo*). My silence has strategically set the stage for reconciliation, allowing the interaction ritual to proceed in an orderly manner under my guidance. This reflects how Igbo cultural wisdom blends with Catholic pastoral work, using silence actively to foster peace.

Following this perspective, silence functions as a cooperative act. Just as audiences use tact to overlook minor disruptions, silence can be used to prevent disagreement from becoming public. It allows interaction to continue smoothly and reinforces the norms that govern communal life.

Risks and Ambiguities of Silence

Although silence is meaningful, it is also ambiguous and risky. The adage *Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe* assumes a shared understanding of silence as consent, but this interpretation is not always

⁶ Guido Gili. & Fausto Colombo. *Communication, culture, society: The sociological approach to communicative relationships*.

accurate. Silence may also express disagreement, uncertainty, or the desire to avoid confrontation. When silence is misinterpreted, communication can break down.

Following our communication theory perspective, silence can become a form of “noise” when its meaning is unclear or contested. What one participant interprets as agreement may be experienced by another as pressure or exclusion. This ambiguity highlights the limits of non-verbal communication and the importance of context in interpretation. This was illustrated in Chinua Achebe's novel “Things Fall Apart,” one of the great writers of Africa and Igbo culture.

In the novel, the Igbo clans, particularly Umuofia, passively allow white missionaries and colonial administrators to settle on their land. The missionaries build their church in the Evil Forest without initial conflict, and the clansmen respond with silence, which Okonkwo interprets as consent⁷. However, this silence reflects uncertainty and private resentment rather than agreement, leading Okonkwo to view it as a weakness that invites disaster⁸. As missionaries gain influence and convert members, including outcasts, the clan's unity begins to fracture, leading to cultural erosion and changes in its traditions.⁹ The silence, meant to be harmonious, becomes a source of miscommunication, with one side seeing it as indifference while the other experiences alienation. Achebe underscores this with an Igbo adage about the dangers of silence, illustrating that the clans' quietude ultimately weakens their cohesion and leads to their downfall. Achebe's example demonstrates the danger identified above: the communicative meaning one participant assigns to silence may not match the intention or internal disposition of those who remain silent.

Goffman's analysis of interactional breakdown helps explain these risks. When silence disrupts the expected flow of interaction or later reveals disagreement, embarrassment or conflict may follow. This shows that silence, like speech, requires careful management. Its effectiveness depends on shared norms, trust, and mutual understanding.

Conclusion

We have seen that silence is not an absence of communication but a powerful and meaningful form of expression. Through the analysis of the Igbo adage *Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe*, silence emerges as a socially learned and culturally regulated way of communicating agreement, respect, and acceptance. Meaning, therefore, does not reside only in spoken words but also in non-verbal acts that are shaped by shared norms and expectations. We have also demonstrated that silence performs an expressive and relational function. It helps maintain social bonds, regulate interaction, and sustain communal harmony. Silence operates as a communicative sign whose meaning depends on context, role, and relationship, confirming that communication is always embedded in social structures.

Goffman's dramaturgical approach further deepens our understanding by showing that silence can function as a front-stage performance used in impression management. So if I choose silence, it may serve to protect face, preserve the definition of the situation, and avoid interactional breakdown. At the same time, silence reflects the moral dimension of communication, as individuals are expected to cooperate in sustaining interaction rituals that uphold social order. Conversely, this write-up has also highlighted the connection between

⁷ Chinua, Achebe. "Things fall apart." Anchor Books, Doubleday, New York (2021).154

⁸ Chinua, Achebe. "Things fall apart." 158

⁹ Chinua, Achebe. "Things fall apart." 174

silence, hierarchy, and power in Igbo society. Silence often reflects respect for elders and recognition of authority, but it can also carry risks of misinterpretation and exclusion. This ambivalence shows that silence, like all forms of communication, is both meaningful and fragile.

Finally, we have learned something new about human communication in an Igbo cultural setting. The adage *Ogbaru nkịtị kwere ekwe* illustrates how non-verbal communication functions as a shared cultural practice that shapes meaning, identity, and social order. Silence, understood through both communication theory and Goffman's dramaturgical framework, confirms that human interaction is not only spoken but performed, negotiated, and sustained through everyday practices that give form to communal life. I will be cautious with nonverbal communication. The adage therefore teaches not simply that silence communicates, but that its meaning must always be interpreted within the cultural, relational, and situational context in which it occurs.

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