



**Silence as a Communicative Tool: A  
Comparative Pragmatic Study between  
English and Arabic Cultures**

**الصمت أداة للتواصل: دراسة تداولية  
مقارنة بين اللغتين الإنجليزية و العربية**

**Inst. Suhair Adel Abdulamir**  
College of Education for Women  
Department of English - Al- Iraqia University

**م. سهير عادل عبد الأمير**

كلية التربية للبنات – قسم اللغة الإنكليزية - الجامعة العراقية

suheradel75@gmail.com





## Abstract

This study tackles the concept of silence as a communicative tool. It aims at illuminating its functions, types, and the cultural perspectives related to its interpretation in different contexts. It also aims at examining the communicative functions of silence in both English and Arabic cultures and identifying differences and similarities in how silence can be interpreted and used across the two cultures. To do that, the researcher conducted a qualitative analysis of silence in texts extracted from two stories: the first being an English story: Hemingway's 'Hills like white elephants', and the second an Arabic story: Kanafani's 'men in the sun'.

The study has concluded that silence in English culture often functions as a tool of avoidance, politeness, or emotional distance, whereas in Arabic culture it usually indicates deeper collective meaning as survival, powerlessness, and suppressed identity. It highlights how silence acquires different pragmatic functions depending on cultural context and shows its importance as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon.

**Key words:** pragmatics, silence, communicative function, English culture, Arabic culture.

## المستخلص

تتناول هذه الدراسة مفهوم الصمت باعتباره أداة للتواصل. تهدف الدراسة إلى تسليط الضوء على وظائف الصمت، أنواعه، والعوامل الثقافية التي تؤثر على تفسيره في سياقات مختلفة. كما تهدف إلى بحث الدور التواصلية للصمت في الثقافتين الإنجليزية والعربية، وتعيين أوجه الاختلاف والتشابه في تفسير واستعمال الصمت في هاتين الثقافتين. ولأجل ذلك، أجرت الباحثة تحليلاً نوعياً للصمت في نصوص اختيرت من قصتين: الأولى قصة انجليزية للكاتب آرنست همنغواي: "تلال تشبه الفيلة البيضاء"، والثانية قصة عربية للأديب العربي غسان كنفاني: "رجال في الشمس".

استنتجت الدراسة أن وظائف الصمت في الثقافة الإنجليزية عادةً ما تكون تعبيراً عن تجنب المواجهة، الكياسة والتهديب، أو البعد العاطفي. في حين يعبر الصمت في الثقافة العربية عن البقاء، العجز والضعف، والهوية المكبوتة.

أوضحت الدراسة كيف يمكن أن يكون للصمت وظائف تداولية متنوعة بالاعتماد على المعايير الثقافية وكيف أنه ظاهرة لغوية وثقافية بالغة الأهمية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: التداولية، الصمت، الوظيفة التواصلية، الثقافة الإنجليزية، الثقافة العربية.



## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Problem of the Study

Silence is the absence of speech, yet it serves several communicative functions as speech does depending on various contextual and cultural norms. In English culture, silence is seen to have pragmatic functions as politeness, avoidance or emotional distance, while in Arabic culture it reflects collective experiences as survival, resistance, dominance, or loss of power. Comparative studies that deal with the analysis of silence pragmatically across these two cultures remain limited, therefore, it is felt necessary to explore how silence is used and interpreted in these different cultures, especially in literary texts that reflect authentic communicative practices.

### 1.2 Aims of the Study

The study aims at:

- 1- Highlighting the concept of silence, its functions, types, reasons, and the cultural perspectives that affect it.
- 2- Explaining how silence functions differently in both English and Arabic cultures.

### 1.3 Limits of the Study

The study is limited to:

- 1- Illuminating the pragmatic functions of silence in English and Arabic cultures.
- 2- Analyzing silence in texts extracted from two stories only:  
Hemingway's: Hills Like White Elephants, and  
Kanafani's: Men in the Sun

### 1.4 Procedure of the Study

The study follows a qualitative approach depending on pragmatic analysis. First, a theoretical background of silence was reviewed besides its communicative functions. Then two literary texts were selected:



Hemingway's 'Hills Like White Elephants' which represents the English context, and Kanafani's 'Men in the Sun' which represents the Arabic context. Examples of silence in these stories were identified and analyzed depending on their pragmatic functions. After that, the findings were compared to illuminate the differences or similarities between English and Arabic cultures in using silence.

## **2. Pragmatics**

Pragmatics is the study of the hidden meaning or how we understand what meant even if it isn't said or written. In this case, speakers (writers) must depend on a lot of shared assumptions and expectations and provide us with some insights into how more is always being communicated than is said. Thus, communication clearly depends on recognizing what speakers mean by their utterance as well as recognizing the meaning of words in an utterance (Yule, 2010: 127-128).

Accordingly, pragmatics has more to do with the analysis of what people mean by their utterance than might mean by themselves.

Pragmatics is the study of contextual meaning; the interpretation of what people mean depends on a particular context which influences what is said, because it requires a consideration of how speakers organize what they want to say according with who they're talking to, where, when and under which circumstances.

In pragmatics, context refers to the situational and social factors that influence the meaning and interpretation of language. It includes such elements as physical environment, speaker's intention, listener's expectation, and the social and cultural criterion of the community in which the communication takes place. Context is thus essential in determining the meaning of utterances since words and phrases can have various interpretations depending on the context in which they're used (Yule, 1996:3).



### 3. Silence

A wide range of attention has been given to silence in literary and linguistic studies since it has a function in the communication process and meaning depending on the context, culture and the topic of the communication (Amer, etal. 2019).

Silence is the absence of talk but serves specific communicative purposes. It's the meaningful absence that leaves its traces back in the signifying empty place in a text. It's a linguistic element which conveys meaning as speech does, even if it is nonverbal behavior. It's thus an actual, meaningful means of communication and has various functions in different contexts and different cultures.

Silence should be differentiated from other concepts such as pause, stillness, and silencing since those are comprehended as means by which a non- communicative process is achieved.

Breaks, whether filled or not, are choices of the speakers inserted in their turns to breathe or to prepare their next utterance, whereas stillness is a kind of non-communicative absence of sound, it's a noise not speech. On the other hand, silence is the speaker's choice to exercise power over another; it's an act to deprive a person of expression (Ephratt, 2008, Amer, et al,2019, Ibrahim, etal, 2023).

### 4. Reasons for Silence

There are several reasons behind using silence in human communication. Berger (2004) gave three causes of silence: unexpected information, extreme emotions, and lack of information or knowledge. Kurzon (1995) made a distinction between intentional silence: an internal source triggered by the speakers' own will, and unintentional silence: imposed by an external source. He also distinguished between conversational (explicit) silence: refusing to make utterances in a conversation, and thematic (implicit) silence: choosing not to talk about a particular topic. Linguists also shed light on broad line cases that can fall between the two extremes such as memory failure in which one does not really find words to say and is partially forced to remain silent (cited in Al Jahdhami, 2018).



Other reasons may vary: the question could be embarrassing, the addressee doesn't want to reveal the information requested, expressing various emotions and motives, as hostility, respect, fear, assumptions, deliberate disrespect, and empathy. Also, it can be an expression of anger or respect, sympathy or guilt, ignorance, cynicism, and disagreement. Anyhow, this depends on its intentional use and nature. The understanding of silence depends on the logic dictated by different contexts.

Silence is considered as a feature that interacts with, and values sounds as well as positions itself as a mediator between them. In language, this does not necessarily enrich the sound, but simply fulfills a communicative function (Gutierrez, and Paniagua, 2024).

## **5. Functions of Silence**

Silence often carries meaning and fulfills important functions. Below are the main functions of silence in interaction:

### **1- Rhetoric function:**

Yule (1996) defined pragmatics as the study of the speaker's intended meaning in relation to the contextual factors. It studies what and how more than the words are communicated. Accordingly, silence is seen as a definite source of rhetoric in pragmatics. It is used in speeches, literature, performance to create emphasis, drama, or rhythm (Moghaddam, etal, 2014, AI,2025)

### **2- Revelation function:**

Silence could reveal (self- exploration) or hide information from others (Albayati and abbas, 2021).

### **3- Conveying emotions:**

Smiling and making different facial and body gestures during conversation are also considered to be kinds of silence. They're called emotive silence. It might also be used to show other emotional expressions such as surprise, shame, anger, hesitation, embarrassment, and courtesy (Al- Harahsheh, 2013).



#### 4- Politeness:

Silence is used to serve several politeness functions.

It is a way of using a face- saving strategy. The recipient tends to be silent in order not to say something that could be embarrassing to the current speaker. The speaker in this case chooses to select his words carefully to avoid inconvenience to his participation in the conversation (Ibid).

## 6. Types of Silence

In linguistics, silence is classified into certain types:

### *By temporal perception*

1. Psycholinguistic silence: indicates short silences that often happen during the process of speaking itself. It's of two types:
  - Fast – time silence: short pauses or quick breaks in speech used for hesitation or to correct oneself.
  - Slow – time silence: intentional pauses that slow the pace of speech, giving the listener time to absorb the message (Kurzon, 2007, Bruneau, 2006)
2. interactive silence: extended pauses that connect to social relationships and the natural flow of conversation, especially during turn – taking between speakers (Ibid)
3. sociocultural silence: silence that is affected by societal and cultural norms and consequently influence both cognitive – linguistic and interactional aspects (Ibid).

### *By conversational structure*

1. Within- turn silence (pause): the speaker intentionally takes a short pause within his own turn to think, emphasize, or hesitate (Wang, 2019).
2. Inter – turn silence:
  - Silence between different speakers.
  - Gap: a pause between turns in which the speaker has completed turn, but no speaker immediately starts speaking next.



- Lapse: like a gap, this happens when a speaker finishes their turn and the conversation doesn't proceed, with neither the next speaker nor the original one continuing the conversation (ibid)

*By intent*

1. Strategic (communicative) silence: it is sometimes called 'eloquent silence' where the speaker deliberately chooses to be silent for a specific purpose or message (Al – Jahdhami, 2018)
2. Unconscious silence: the speakers naturally and unintentionally stop talking, they're not aware of being silent (Hu – Chan, 2023).

*By broader context*

1. Thematic silence: Kurzo describes thematic silence as a situation in which the speaker avoids mentioning the topic of the conversation or text though it is relevant or expected in the context (kurzon, 2021)
2. Textual silence: it refers to implied meaning in written texts, or gaps in the narrative that a reader is expected to fill in (kurzon, 2007)
3. Situational silence: silence that naturally belongs to a specific context, like quiet in a library or the silent atmosphere observed in a solemn ceremony (ibid)

*Other types*

- Strategic silence: speakers use silence deliberately as a negotiation technique or to convey a message without speaking (Al – Jahdhami, 2018).
- Attentive silence: a listener uses silence to show engagement and inform the speakers that they're being heard and understood (Winbolt, 2024)
- Unconscious silence: a silence that occurs without a purpose or naturally when a person is unaware, they're not talking (Hu – Chan, 2022, ai, 2025).



## 7. Cultural Perspectives on Silence

The meaning and interpretation of silence varies from culture to another. For example, in many eastern and Nordic societies, it is valued as a symbol of respect, contemplation, and the preservation of social harmony. By contrast, in certain low – context western cultures, silence may be interpreted negatively, suggesting disinterest or impoliteness. Within hierarchical traditions, silence often conveys respect toward authority, whereas in other settings, it serves as a meaningful tool for thought, decision – making, and even spiritual engagement (Shah, 2023, Yvex, 2025)

In listening – oriented cultures such as Japan and the Nordic countries, silence reflects thoughtful reflection, attention to what has been expressed, and mindful listening.

In certain African cultures, shared silence conveys ease between individuals and signals that there is no obligation to fill the moment with words (Shearer, 2020, Halcrow, 2020)

Moreover, many spiritual traditions consider silence as a path to enlighten, self – awareness, and a deeper connection with the divine or oneself (Shah, 2025)

In high – context cultures, silence is more common and natural depending on implicit, non – verbal cues. On the contrary, silence may be viewed negatively in low – context cultures where communication is more direct and explicit (Halcrow, 2020)

Also, the ability to stay silent is often viewed as assign of wisdom and authority, particularly in hierarchical societies where elders and leaders are granted greater freedom to withhold speech (Shah, 2025)

In group – oriented and many Asian cultures, silence serves as a means of preserving dignity for oneself and others, placing group harmony above voicing a personal opinion that may conflict with the collective in what is called “saving face” (Shearer, 2020, AI Editor, 2020).

Misunderstanding the cultural significance of silence can result in major misinterpretations in both personal and professional interactions.



It's therefore very important to decode silence by understanding the specific cultural context of the situation to prevent confusion and promote clearer communication (Shah, 2025).

### **7.1 Speech Act Theory**

Speech act theory, introduced by Austin (1962) and developed further by Searle (1969) confirms that language is not merely a means for conveying information, but also performing actions. In this respect, silence can itself function as a speech act, such as showing agreement, refusal, or disapproval without using words. Thus, silence may be considered a performative act in pragmatic analysis that carries meaning depending on context and cultural norms (Austin, 1962, Searle, 1969).

### **7.2 Politeness Theory**

Brown and Levinson (1987) proposed the politeness theory which suggests that communicative behavior is determined by the need to preserve one's own and others' 'face' (social self – image). Silence plays an important role in this process, because it may be used to avoid threatening another's face, to show respect, or to manage delicate situations. For example, silence towards elders demonstrate respect in many Arabic contexts, while it serves as a polite avoidance strategy in English contexts (Brown and Levinson, 1987).

### **7.3 Conversational Implicature**

According to conversational implicature theory by Grice (1975), meaning goes beyond the literal words spoken, determined by conversational maxims as quantity, quality, relation and manner. Hence, silence can be interpreted as a form of implicature: it may signal disagreement, hesitation, or implied meaning relying on cultural conventions. So, silence is a pragmatic strategy which communicates through what is left unsaid indirectly (Grice, 1975)



## 7.4 Hall's High – Context vs. Low- Context Cultures

Hall (1976) distinguished between high – context and low – context cultures explaining how cultures vary in their dependence on implicit against explicit communication. For instance, Arabic cultures are often categorized as high – context, as silence conveys rich meanings determined by shared cultural knowledge. On the contrary, English – speaking cultures tend to be low– context, depending on explicit verbal communication, and therefore extending silence could be interpreted as uncomfortable or negative (Hall, 1976).

## 7.5 Hofstede's Cultural Dimensions

Hofstede's (1980, 2001) cultural dimensions framework indicates how cultural values determine communication practices. In many Arab cultures, which belong to societies with high power distance, silence signals respect or submission to authority. Similarly, silence serves as a strategy to avoid ambiguity or confrontation in cultures with high uncertainty avoidance. On the contrary, English – speaking cultures, with lower power distance, silence can be interpreted as a lack of involvement or as discomfort (Hofstede, 1980, Hofstede, 2001).

## 8. Data Analysis

This section deals with the practical side of the research. The researcher relied on extracting texts containing silence from two literary stories. The first story is Earnest Hemingway's 'Hills like White Elephants', which is the English story, and the second is Ghassan Kanafani's 'Men in the Sun', which is the Arabic story. Analyzing the texts in these two stories will highlight the differences and similarities between the English and Arabic cultures in using silence as a communicative tool.

### 8.1 Results and Discussion

Analysis of silence in 'Hills Like White Elephants:

Hemingway uses silence not only as the absence of speech, but rather as a communicative device which conveys emotion, hesitation, and



cultural meaning. The examples below show how silence functions throughout the story:

1. The first example of silence in this story is seen in the opening scene where a man and a girl sitting at a table in the shade waiting for a train. Silence here highlights the tension and unspoken thoughts between the characters before the conversation starts. This moment is a deliberate communicative device rather than a mere pause to prepare the reader for the unspoken tension between the characters.

*Pragmatic function:* sets a tone of tension, unspoken thoughts, and anticipation. It sheds light on the emotional distance between the characters and shows how they avoid addressing the core issue directly a matter that aligns with theories of silence as a tool for managing sensitive topics (Jaworski, 1993).

2. “the girl looked at the bead curtain, ‘they’ve painted something on it ‘, she said. ‘What does it say?’”

The girl in this context tries to convert attention from the conversation by gazing at the curtain and questioning about the painting. This moment of silence acts as an avoidance tactic, diverting the dialogue away from the central issue.

*Pragmatic function:* indicates withdrawal, refusal to engage, emotional spacing. This goes in line with the pragmatic function of silence in English culture where direct confirmation is avoided and indirect communication is often preferred (Tannen, 1985).

3. “The girl looked at the ground that the table legs rested on”.  
The girl’s downward gaze refers to discomfort and a desire to avoid being engaged in the conversation. This non – verbal hint communicates her discomfort to talk about the topic at hand. It illuminates non – verbal silence as a communicative act.

*Pragmatic Function:* this silence is deliberate; it functions as a communicative act conveying emotions indirectly. It signals discomfort and withdrawal from conversation. Silence in this context



reflects the cultural tendency in English communication in using silence as a means of politeness and avoidance of confrontation (Jaworski, 1993).

4. “The girl didn’t say anything”

In this context, there is a direct acknowledgment of the girl’s silence which indicates her desire to avoid the conversation with the man and reflects the communication gap between them. It highlights the tension and difficulty in addressing the sensitive issue.

*Pragmatic function:* silence here acts as a deliberate communicative strategy, illuminating the girl’s inner conflict and her desire to refuse expressing her thoughts in words. In this context, silence acts as a meaningful response, not only the absence of speech (Ibid)

5. At the end of the story, there is a moment of silence before the girl says, “I feel fine”, deepens the impact of her words. This short response after a period of silence refers to a desire to end the conversation, because she sees that their discussion is unresolved.

*Pragmatic function:* in this context, silence functions as an emotional process and reflects resignation. The girl’s short answer is ambiguous, giving the room for many interpretations of this conversation. Silence here shows how it could function as a conclusion, a communicative closure, or a deliberate procrastination of meaning (Tannen, 1985).

Analysis of silence in “Men in the Sun”:

In this story, silence can be felt as having various functions: as negotiation, suffering, survival, existential metaphor, power and death. Unlike Hemingway’s text in which silence indicates interpersonal and psychological objectives, Kanafani’s silence shows social, political, and collective depth. Below are some examples:

1. There is an interaction between the three Palestinian men (Abu Qais, Assad and Marwan) and the water carrier (Abu Khaizuran).

The three men met him and asked him for help, but he hesitates before answering them. His pauses and hesitation are deliberate. He withholds speech to impose authority over these desperate men. While Hemingway’s characters use silence to avoid conflict, here silence represents control which reflects the tendency in Arabic culture to use



silence to emphasize dominance or using time in social interaction (Sifianou, 1997)

*Pragmatic function:* silence functions as a tool of power and negotiation.

2. In an empty water tank, the three men hide themselves and are forced to be completely silent in order not to be discovered at the checkpoints. Silence here is not a choice, it is imposed on them.

*Pragmatic function:* silence here functions as a survival strategy, because if they say anything, they will die. It, therefore, expresses men's helplessness and submission to external authority (Jaworski, 1993).

3. In this tank, where these men fall and suffer from the hell of heat and suffocation, none of them was able to open his mouth with a word to scream, protest or even demand relief.

*Pragmatic function:* silence here is a symbol of suppressed resistance. Allen (1995) observed that Kanafani's fiction usually transforms silence into a collective existential metaphor. It conveys the tragic voicelessness of the Palestinian condition.

4. Abu Khaizuran opens the tank and sees the three men dead. Silence here is silence of death. It's no longer a pause or hesitation, it becomes absolute.

*Pragmatic function:* in this context, silence shows powerlessness and the impossibility of communication. They no longer can express their suffering, resist, or demand help, their silence communicates the total absence of voice. It expresses the denial of voice, an ultimate communicative impossibility (Jaworski, 1993).

5. After discovering that the three men are dead, Abu Khaizuran cries: "why didn't you knock on the walls of the tank?" this moment shows silence as a failure of communication.

*Pragmatic function:* silence in this context functions as a communicative failure and resignation. The men's silence, whether because of their weakness or hopelessness, becomes the direct reason



of their death. Besides, Abu Khaizuran's words turn silence, showing how silence can be pragmatically meaningful even when it doesn't achieve its purpose (Allen, 1995).

## 9. Conclusion

The study has come to the following conclusions:

1. On the theoretical part, it confirms the theoretical viewpoint that silence is a culturally shaped communicative tool, with different pragmatic functions in English and Arabic contexts.
2. On the practical part, the analysis of the texts in the English and Arabic stories shows that silence in English culture often functions as a tool of politeness, avoidance, or emotional distance, whereas in Arabic culture it indicates deeper collective meaning as survival, loss of power, and suppressed identity. Accordingly, the different applications of silence in both cultures shows how it requires different pragmatic functions depending on cultural context and highlights its importance as a linguistic and cultural phenomenon as well.

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