

THE SILENCE OF POWER AND SOLIDARITY
IN *FALLEN SONS*

ADAM JAWORSKI

Cardiff University

1. Introduction

According to Halliday (1978) language performs three basic metafunctions: the *ideational*, the *interpersonal* and the *textual*. The ideational metafunction refers to talking about people, objects, states, events, etc., i.e., about anything within the extralinguistic reality. The interpersonal metafunction has got to do with the way language both reflects and defines relationships among interactants: the speaker (sender) of the utterance, the hearer (receiver), and the possible audience. The textual metafunction gives language the capacity to refer to itself (as metalanguage) and to signal whether a given text is intended as a lecture, poem, play, joke, chit-chat, or some other type of speech event. Although silence may be limited in performing the ideational and textual metafunctions (Sobkowiak 1997), it is an important strategy with respect to the interpersonal metafunction.

The interpersonal aspect of communication has traditionally been described in terms of two dimensions: *power* and *solidarity*. According to Brown and Gilman (1960 [1972]), power obtains between two persons when one "is able to control the behaviour of the other" ([1972]: 255). This relationship is non-reciprocal and it can have a number of different bases: physical strength, wealth, age, or institutionalized role within the state, family, church, army, and so on, and examples include relations such as: *older than*, *richer than*, *stronger than*, *parent of* and *employer of*. The relationship of power is matched by the power semantic, which is also nonreciprocal, and can be illustrated by the non-reciprocal exchange of pronouns and other forms of address (see also Brown – Ford 1964). For example, the superior can address the inferior with his/her first name but is addressed in return with title and last name.

the communication which goes on in the play is structured through silence, rather than through talk (Philips 1985).

The main characters of the play are the twin brothers Danny and Iorry, their mother and father, and Danny's family. The action of the play shifts constantly across three years and Danny and Iorry's three birthdays: 1993, Danny and Iorry's 70th birthday; 1963, Danny and Iorry's 40th birthday; 1935, Danny and Iorry's 12th birthday (and a few following days). The location is rural South Wales and Cardiff.

The central event around which the plot of the play revolves is the accidental killing of his father by Iorry. The accident (Welsh *damwain*) takes place on the day of the twins' 12th birthday. While everyone else is outside the house doing different chores, Iorry plays with his father's shotgun inside the house. The father stops chopping the wood and comes into the house to find matches to light up his pipe and as he walks into the house Iorry turns round pointing the gun in the direction of his father and pulls the trigger. Danny and his mother run into the house and find the father lying dead on the floor and Iorry standing next to him. The mother shakes Iorry angrily and slaps him in the face.

4. Silence in *Fallen Sons*

Due to limitations of space I deal here only with the manifestations of silence among four characters: the twin brothers and their parents. However, even within this seemingly limited scope, the role of silence in managing interpersonal relations in terms of power and solidarity relations is quite apparent. I discuss three types of silence which define the relations among Danny, Iorry, their mother and father. Next, I situate these silences in a broader pragmatic framework.

4.1. Iorry's silence: alienation

The fatal accident in which Iorry shoots his father renders the boy speechless. We cannot be sure whether it is the fact that he shot his father or that his mother slapped and rejected him that leaves Iorry in a profound state of shock. He tries to say something to his mother but cannot utter a word. Ultimately, he becomes the silenced member of the family as his mother sends him away to live on his uncle's farm.

Iorry is silenced literally and symbolically. Both types of silence relegate him into some kind of social oblivion. First, as a mute, he is deprived of the basic human faculty of speech, rendering him a non-person. Second, his mother's decision to send him away from home turns him into an outcast within his own family. Silence here signals total rejection, severing of all links and creating distance.

In everyday communication, silence is probably the most important communicative strategy marking extreme social distance. If two individuals find themselves in close spatial proximity which enables them to communicate with one another (e.g., co-passengers on the train, patients in the waiting room of a surgery, and so on), the ensuing silence between them is the means of maintaining their relationship as "strangers" (Saville-Troike 1985). A verbal (or other non-verbal) exchange between them changes this relationship, however fleetingly, to "casual acquaintance". Thus, the silencing of Iorry and of all the discourse about him (see below) turns him into a stranger within his own family.

4.2. Silence between Danny and Iorry: bonding and separation

On the day of the accident, Danny and Iorry are shown as two ordinary (twin) brothers. Their closeness and ease of being in each other's company is quite obvious by the apparent lack of talk between them. In several scenes in which we see the two boys, they do things together: playing, clowning and helping their parents around the farm. The only longer piece of dialogue which they engage in is an argument at breakfast over whether Iorry knows how to skin rabbits, which the boys' father has brought home this morning for dinner on their birthday. The argument comes suddenly to an end when their mother declares "No arguing on your birthday". The ease with which the boys come in and out of the argument and slip back into silence without any mitigating talk emphasizes their closeness, too. Ritualized aggression is commonly interpreted as a marker of social bonding, especially among males (cf. Labov 1972; Tannen 1993).

The meaning of silence between the boys changes when after the accident their mother decides to send Iorry away from home. Although Danny opposes his mother's decision in principle he has to take her side; he has no choice but to stay with her on the farm. In the scene which follows the mother's announcement of Iorry's future, Iorry tries to drown himself in a lake near the house but Danny pulls him out of the water. Then, in another completely wordless scene, Danny beats Iorry and leaves him on his own by the lake.

In both scenes which involve hostilities between the boys, whether verbal (argument about skinning the rabbits) or non-verbal (Danny beating Iorry), their aggression is ritualized and it results in silence. However, in each case the silence appears to belong to the opposite end of interpersonal distance: first, is the silence of extreme intimacy, while the second is that of rejection and detachment.

The latter silence between the two bothers lasts for decades, despite Iorry's attempts to break it. First, as he is left by the lake he tries to say something but he can only produce an unintelligible cry; in later years he sends or brings his brother birthday cards, but when he comes to Danny's on the day of their

40th birthday, the only words that Danny says to him are: "You're not wanted, Iorry. You're not wanted." On this occasion, Danny's young son sees his uncle for the first time and when he asks his father who the man is, Danny sends him into the house without an answer. Thus Danny continues his life as a silent/silenced stranger to his brother and his family.

It takes the brothers' 70th birthday for Danny to change his mind and visit Iorry. He finds his brother on a boat, sailing on the same lake where he once attempted to drown himself. The last scene of the play shows the two old men on the boat, drinking whisky from one bottle and Iorry finally managing to say the word which he has been trying to say all his life: *damwain* 'accident'. There is no more talk between the brothers, only the silence of reconciliation to which they finally come after fifty-eight years of separation.

4.3. The silence of power and powerlessness

Silence (and silencing) in *Fallen Sons* may also mean power. One of the main characters who remains silent throughout the whole play is Danny and Iorry's father. On one hand, his silence may be interpreted symbolically as signalling his untimely death. On the other hand, his silence depicts him as a stereotypically strong, masculine, silent character (Sattel 1983; Tannen 1993). When Danny and Iorry clown around on their 12th birthday he brings them to order by lightly slapping Danny in the back of his head. He remains silent during the boys' argument at breakfast (it is their mother who scolds them and stops the argument). In another scene, when the father stops chopping the wood to go inside the house to light up his pipe, he hands the axe to Danny without saying a word. Danny immediately understands this least of direct orders and takes over the chopping of the wood.

Another powerful character in the play is the boys' mother. However, unlike the father, she does not exert her power by remaining silent but by silencing others. After the shooting accident, she silences Iorry literally (Iorry becomes mute after she slaps him) and symbolically (she sends him away), and when Danny asks her "When will we see him again, Mam?", she responds only by saying "Don't ask", silencing Danny and turning Iorry to an unmentionable (taboo) topic.

5. Discussion and conclusion

Although I have only described a few examples of silence in *Fallen Sons*, they demonstrate well the relativity and the dialectic nature of this strategy in interpersonal relations, as a possible marker of separation or bonding, and power or powerlessness. Tannen (1993: 178) discusses silence as only one of a number linguistic strategies (i.e., volubility, indirectness, interruption, topic raising and

adversativeness) which may "be taken to "mean" power or powerlessness, domination or subjugation". As has been demonstrated above, *Fallen Sons* manifests all of these uses of silence. The play deals with extreme emotions: feelings of closeness and separation, love and hate, life and death. All of these extreme, seemingly opposite and exclusive categories are managed or made manifest through different forms of silence.

There is no contradiction here, however. In a model of social interaction based on the dimension of social distance, Wolfson (1988) suggests that rules of spoken communication are similar between intimates, status unequals and strangers, as opposed to nonintimates, status unequal friends, coworkers and acquaintances.² She argues that

when we examine the ways in which different speech acts are realized in actual everyday speech, and when we compare these behaviors in terms of the social relationships of the interlocutors, we find again and again that the two extremes of social distance – minimum and maximum – seem to call forth very similar behavior, while relationships which are more toward the center show marked differences (Wolfson 1988: 32).

According to Wolfson, this pattern of verbal behaviour is based on the perceived stability and fixedness of intimate and distant social relations, on one hand, and the perceived volatility of casual relations, on the other. Interactants in the former type of relationship find little need for elaborate, verbal negotiation of their respective statuses, while those in the other group operate in relationships which invite more negotiation of social status through verbal exchange.

In support of her theory, Wolfson cites numerous examples of ethnographic studies of the distribution of different speech acts in American English. For example, with regard to the speech act of invitation she notes that the data fell into two clear-cut categories:

The first consisted of unambiguous, complete invitations giving time, place, activity and a request for response. These unambiguous invitations occurred most frequently between intimates and between status unequals – the two sets of interlocutors whose relationships with the speaker were at the extremes of social distance. The second category of invitations consisted of ambiguous or incomplete references to the possibility of future social commitments. Once a large body of data had been collected, it was possible to recognize these so-called invitations as 'leads'. Utterances such as 'We really must get together sometime' or 'Let's have lunch together soon' are typical examples. But in order for a social commitment to result from a 'lead', it was nearly always the case that both parties to the interaction took part in negotiating the arrangement. And

² Wolfson's original work and theory were based on the data collected among white, middle-class, urban Americans, but the model can be extended to other speech communities (see, e.g., Holmes 1995).

what was particularly interesting about these 'leads' was that they occurred between status-equal nonintimates – that is, between speakers whose relationships are most open to redefinition (Wolfson 1988: 33).

The use and distribution of silence in *Fallen Sons* can be explained well by analogy to the Bulge model. The fact that Danny and Lorry are twin brothers emphasizes their similarity, or even sameness, which is often cited as a prototypical example of a most solidary (intimate) relationship (cf. Brown – Gilman 1960 [1972]). They do not need to engage in a verbal negotiation of their relationship remaining comfortably in silence for long stretches of time. Even when they argue, which is an otherwise highly face threatening act, they do not need to resort to elaborate verbal strategies to mitigate potential face threat (Brown – Levinson 1987).

After the shooting accident, their relationship is redefined in a radical fashion. From extremely close and intimate, it becomes extremely distant. The appropriate linguistic strategy for them to mark it as such, is, again, to engage in silence. Strangers do not talk to each other. And then, again, at the end of the play, the two men are reunited in a silent bond of affection and the only word spoken is *damwain* 'accident', which restores the intimate, solidary footing between them.

Likewise, silence is polysemous with regard to power relations. As Wolfson argues, there is little need for negotiation of social relationships between status unequals, and silence has frequently been shown to act as a marker of power or as a means of claiming interactional power (e.g., Gilmore 1985; Braithwaite 1990; Watts 1997). The character of the father in *Fallen Sons* is depicted solely through silence, and apart from his silence signalling the inevitability of his sudden and untimely death, he is nothing but a typical patriarch in a traditional, rural household. Likewise, the domination of the mother over Danny and Lorry lies in her right to silence the boys. And Lorry's silenced self is subjected to Danny's indignant authority.

Interestingly, the little talk that occurs in the play is best characterized in relation to silence. For example, it is used to stop undesirable discourse when it breaks a harmonious silence ("No arguing on your birthday"). Talk is also used several times to silence others. For example, when the doctor examines Lorry after the accident to find out why he has stopped speaking, the mother uses talk for silencing twice. Consider the following extract:³

- 1 Doctor: There's no physical reason why he won't speak, Mrs Davies. [2] All I can
2 suggest is that he is in a profound state of shock. [3] Mrs Davies, [5] he'll
3 speak when he's ready to speak, [1] but it will take some time. [2]

³ The numbers in square brackets indicate the approximate length of pauses in seconds. Pauses briefer than 1 second are shown as [.]

- 4 Mother: Time will not help us run the farm, doctor. [1]
5 Doctor: Oh, he'll be fit enough for physical work, Mrs Davies. It's just that-
6 Mother: Not with me, he won't. [.]
7 Danny: Mam? [.]
8 Mother: Lorry is not going to live with us any more. He's going to live with his
9 uncle Frank.

In the above example, the doctor construes Lorry's silence as a temporary reaction to a shocking event (line 1). His diagnosis explains Lorry's silence as "normal" under the circumstances. The mother rejects the apparent rationality of the medical voice as it does not allow her to silence Lorry, whom she has already decided to send away from home (line 4). First, however, she silences the doctor by interrupting him with a contradiction of Lorry's usefulness as a farm worker (lines 5-6). Then, she announces that Lorry is going to be banned from home: silenced symbolically both as her son and as Danny's brother (lines 8-9). In a later scene, Danny also (and indirectly Lorry) is silenced by the mother after Lorry leaves the house and Danny asks her when they will see his brother again, to which she only provides a brusque response: "Don't ask", shutting the door into Danny's face. On other occasions, talk is used in order to break undesirable or hostile silences; for example, when Lorry finally manages to say *damwain* and thus end the long period of his silencing.

Interestingly, all these uses of talk in the play are very direct, unambiguous and they either lead to silence or occur in its place. This also locates the talk in the play at the extreme ends of social relations signalling intimacy, distance and/or a power imbalance between the interlocutors.

As has been suggested earlier, communication is as much a reflection as a construction of interactants' social realities. The use of silence to create distance, involvement or a power imbalance, functions in this respect similarly to other forms of (verbal) communication that are constitutive of these relations. Of course, a half-hour play spanning fifty-eight years of life of two men must necessarily be viewed as making use of a poetic license in representing these lives. In this sense, the use of silence (and the rest of the performance) is stylized (Coupland, forthcoming). However, time and time again, we see that the study of literary language allows us to gain insights into the workings of discourse which might not otherwise be easily accessible through observation of spontaneous talk.

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