

# Can Meaning Exist Without Silence?

Discussing Derrida's Perspective on Silence as an Active Presence in the formation of Meaning in Language

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Dear Thinkers,

I recently had the pleasure of coming across some interesting material that discussed the perspective of the famous French philosopher [Jacques Derrida](#) on the concept of *silence*. Being a *silence enthusiast* myself, needless to say I was driven to reading it and I found an aspect within the discourse that I felt I may have missed, or at the very least, hadn't properly covered, in the research article that I had published back in April of this year, titled, "[The Paradox of Being Silent](#)". By the way, if you haven't read it yet, I highly recommend you do. At the risk of self-publicity, I have to say, it is quite a unique take on silence. If you are interested in the philosophical and linguistic dimensions of silence, then you are the right audience for it.

But coming back to the topic at hand today, *can a sentence truly convey its meaning without the presence of silence?* This might seem like a peculiar question, but it's crucial to how we understand language. We often think of meaning as something born from words. But what if the true essence of meaning isn't just in the words themselves, but in the silence that surrounds them?

Without silence, our sentences would collapse into a formless rush of noise, devoid of the clarity and nuance that allow us to express complex ideas and emotions.



In my research on silence, I covered various facets of silence, i.e., its role as a form of listening, an act of kenosis, and even a way of life. However, I only briefly touched on one of silence's most important aspects, i.e., its intrinsic role in the construction of meaning within language. So, in this essay, we will talk about that dimension.

As mentioned earlier, Derrida's works are the primary source of inspiration for me in exploring this dimension, so we will be covering some of his insights in this matter. Particularly his concept of *différance*.



Artwork - fuzai ni okeru sonzai (不在における存在)



# The Role of Silence in the Structure of Language

You don't have to be a linguist to decipher this one. Just think about it. Without silence, the structure of communication would dissolve into a relentless stream of sound, leaving us unable to discern where one thought ends and another begins. The punctuation we use in writing i.e., commas, periods, ellipses, are not just decorative but functional *representations of silence*. These marks are the visual manifestation of the pauses we naturally incorporate into speech, each one introducing a moment of quiet that is essential for organising our thoughts.

Without punctuation, a sentence is just a breathless sequence of words that demands continuous attention without offering any respite. Such a sentence would be nearly incomprehensible, its meaning obscured by the lack of necessary pauses.

It's also worth mentioning that silence also operates on a more subtle level, shaping the rhythm and cadence of language. In spoken language, the way we modulate our voice, i.e., the rises and falls, the stresses and pauses, is crucial to how our message is received. Silence is what gives speech its musicality, its ability to convey not just information but emotion, intention, and nuance. It is the difference between a *statement* and a *question*, between *irony* and *sincerity*.

We can go a bit deeper here. The role of silence touches on something more fundamental than just the tone and comprehensibility of the language. It is the very *possibility of differentiation* within language itself. Silence is what allows words to stand apart, to be distinct from one another. Without silence, language would be a continuous blur, a single undifferentiated sound. One might go as far as to ask, could language itself exist without silence? A topic for another essay I suppose.



## Derrida's Différance and the Necessity of Silence

Now, let's talk about Derrida's concept of *différance*. And yes, Derrida has deliberately used the French variation for the word 'difference' here. He uses the French word *différance* to define his own concept that meaning is not a fixed entity, rather it is something that is continually *deferred* and *differentiated* within the play of language. This ongoing process, where words gain significance through their *differences* from other words, relies fundamentally on the *presence* of *silence*.

*"La différence n'est pas un mot, et ne se laisse pas comprendre d'emblée comme un concept, c'est ce qui rend possible, en général, l'activité, le jeu, les différenciations d'oppositions, le jeu des différences conceptuelles ou non-conceptuelles."* - Derrida, La différence (Essay).

Translation: *"Différance is not a word, and it is not immediately comprehensible as a concept; it is that which makes possible the activity, the play, the differences of oppositions, the play of conceptual or non-conceptual differences."*

*Différance* is the idea that meaning is never *fully present*. It is always in *motion*, always shifting, as it depends on the relationship between words rather than on the words themselves. Silence plays a crucial role in this dynamic, functioning as the space within which these differences emerge. It is the silent interval that allows us to perceive the distinctions between words, phrases, and ideas, giving rise to meaning as a *relational* rather than an *absolute* phenomenon.

The idea that meaning is always *deferred*, never fully *arrived* at, because it is contingent on a chain of *differences* that are constantly in flux makes *silence* integral to this *deferral*. It marks the places where meaning is



suspended, where the listener or reader must pause to consider, interpret, and eventually derive significance. These silences are the spaces where meaning is not yet determined, where it hovers in a state of potentiality, waiting to be realised through interpretation.

So, in a sense, silence is what makes *différance* possible. It allows for the play of *differences* that Derrida describes, creating the conditions under which language can signify. Without silence, this play would collapse, language would lose its dynamism, becoming a static and inert system (and a potentially impossible entity).

## Silence is the Absence That Defines

If you've read my research article on silence, you'd know that I have contended quite a lot with the concept of '*absence of silence*'. *Absence* is just as significant as *presence*. Silence, in particular, operates as a *defining absence*, a space where meaning is both constrained and enriched by what is left unsaid. This *absence* is not a void but a potent force that shapes the contours of meaning by highlighting what is present and allowing it to resonate more deeply.

Silence within a sentence or conversation often carries as much weight as the words themselves. It is in the *unsaid*, the *implied*, that much of the richness of communication resides. For example, consider a conversation where someone pauses before answering a question. That pause, that moment of silence, is filled with potential meaning, it might indicate hesitation, contemplation, discomfort, or even a subtle form of resistance. *The silence speaks, often more eloquently than words could.*

This idea can be seen in various linguistic phenomena. Think of *ellipses* in writing, a deliberate omission of words that make the reader fill in the gaps. The *ellipsis* is a form of textual silence, a space where the reader's imagination must engage with the text to complete the thought. This



interaction between what is *said* and what is left *unsaid* is the space where meaning is co-constructed by the author and the reader.

In speech, silence functions similarly. It creates emphasis, draws attention, and suggests layers of meaning beyond the literal. A pause before a statement can heighten its impact, allowing the listener to anticipate, reflect, or prepare for what is to come. Derrida's critique of *logocentrism*, i.e., the privileging of *speech* over *writing*, inadvertently speaks to the function of silence in speech.

In *logocentric thinking*, *speech* is seen as the *direct expression* of thought, supposedly more immediate and authentic than *writing*. Yet, Derrida argues that even in *speech*, meaning is not fully *present*. It is mediated by the same structures of *absence* and *deferral* that characterise writing. *Silence* disrupts the *illusion of immediacy* in speech, which goes to say that meaning is always, to some extent, *constructed* and *deferred*.

Silence serves as a *boundary*, a *necessary absence* that *frames* and *defines* the *presence* of language. It is within these boundaries that language finds its depth, its capacity to suggest, imply, and resonate beyond the surface of words.

## Silence is a Temporal Cognitive Process

Silence is not only spatial but also temporal, i.e., it unfolds in time, shaping the way we process and understand language. In the flow of conversation or the rhythm of reading, silence functions as a crucial interval that allows for reflection, interpretation, and comprehension.

The act of reading, writing, speaking, and listening, are inherently sequential, and the mind requires brief moments of silence to digest and integrate the information being presented, thus pointing towards an



aspect of silence that plays directly into something resonating with a cognitive requirement for humans.

## The Ethics of Silence

This section might seem a bit off topic, and in all honesty, it probably is. We have been approaching *silence* from a very technical perspective in this essay, so there is no cause for us to venture into the *ethics of silence*. However, given how passionately (dare say ‘obsessively’) Derrida explored *ethics* towards the end of his life, I feel compelled, out of respect for him, to explore *silence* in an *ethical framework*. I promise to keep it brief, but feel free to skip this section all the same, if it doesn’t interest you.

The ethical implications of silence arise in the spaces between speech, those moments where we choose to pause, to listen, or to withhold our words. Silence, in this sense, becomes an act of respect, of recognising the presence and voice of the other, and of creating a space where genuine dialogue can occur.

To remain silent when another speaks is to acknowledge their right to express themselves, to offer them the floor without interruption. This silence is not empty. It is filled with the intention to listen, to understand, and to respond thoughtfully. Derrida’s notion of *hospitality*, the idea of *welcoming* the other, can be applied here. Silence is a gesture of *openness*, a way of making room for the other’s voice, and thus, it is an ethical framework for communication.

Silence is also a brilliant aesthetic force. Consider the use of silence in poetry or music, where the absence of sound or words can evoke emotions that are otherwise inexpressible. A poem, for instance, might use line breaks, caesuras, or the space around the text to create a sense of pause, inviting the reader to dwell on the *unsaid*, to feel the weight of



what lingers in the silence. I highly recommend reading Emily Dickinson to get a hands on demonstration of this.

The rests between notes, the pauses in a melody, are what give music its rhythm, its dynamic tension, and its emotional depth. The silence after a powerful chord, the pause before a crescendo, these moments of quiet are charged with anticipation, with emotion, with meaning.

In visual art, the use of *negative space* i.e., the silence of the canvas, can be as impactful as the elements that are present. This silence allows for contrast, focus, and a sense of balance within the composition. It invites the viewer to engage with what is absent as much as with what is present. In the artwork that I used for this article, “*fuzai ni okeru sonzai* (不在における存在)”, I have effectively used negative space to convey the message of silence using an abstract illustration of the vast emptiness of nature. It is not just the trees, the rivers, and the mountains that give nature its beauty, but also the vast emptiness (read silence), that accompanies it.

That’s all I have to say about the ethics/aesthetics of *silence* for now. Let’s return back to the essay.

## Presence in Absence

To wrap up this discourse, I will attempt to link this aspect of silence with the broader topic of my previous research, [The Paradox of Being Silent](#). In my previous exploration of silence, I delved into its multifaceted nature, how it serves as a form of *listening*, an act of *kenosis*, and even a way of life. In this essay, I covered silence as a *presence in absence* in further detail. This paradox is a fundamental truth that permeates our understanding of language and meaning. A truth that has surfaced repeatedly in my research and finds resonance in Derrida’s concept of *différance*.





*Différance*, I feel, is a good framework for understanding why silence plays such an essential role in the construction of meaning. In my research, I argued that silence is more than just the absence of sound, it is a presence that carries significant *ontological weight*, shaping the way language functions and meaning emerges. Derrida's *différance* provides the philosophical backbone for this argument, suggesting that meaning is never *fully present* but always in the process of *becoming*, mediated by *differences* that silence makes possible.

My exploration of silence across languages revealed that while every culture recognises silence, its interpretation varies widely. However, the common thread remains, i.e., *silence* is a *presence* that transcends the spoken word, an absence that defines meaning. This universality of silence, as both *presence* and *absence*, resonates with Derrida's critique of *logocentrism*, i.e., the idea that speech is somehow more immediate or authentic than writing. My research suggests that whether in speech or writing, silence plays a crucial role in the *deferral* and *differentiation* of meaning, challenging the notion that language can ever be fully present or complete.

By integrating Derrida's concept of *différance* into this exploration, the role of silence in language is not only confirmed but also philosophically grounded. *Différance* provides the conceptual framework that explains why silence is indispensable to the process of *meaning-making*. It connects my empirical observations with a broader theoretical discourse.

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