

Beyond Words: Silence as an Illocutionary Act

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Abstract

This paper explores silence as an illocutionary act within the context of Kenyan school assembly discourse, guided by Searle's Speech Act Theory. Drawing on thirty two observed instances of silence collected from various school assembly events, the study explores how moments of deliberate silence function communicatively. This paper finds out that silence takes expressive, assertive, directive, commissive and declarative functions. Silence is not a mere absence of speech in school assemblies as it expresses disappointments, solidarity, enables cognitive uptake, elicit compliance of directives, facilitates implicit commitments and it is also a sign of following performative declarations. These interpretations were arrived at based on contextual cues, sequential position in discourse, and observable audience and speaker behavior. Each silence was analyzed using Searle's felicity conditions to determine its illocutionary force. The findings underscore that silence is not merely the absence of speech but is a strategic communicative resource embedded within the institutional and cultural routines of school life. The study contributes to the broader field of pragmatics by demonstrating that silence carries a distinct illocutionary force and should be recognized by linguists as a legitimate speech act in its own right.

Keywords: Silence, Illocutionary Acts, Speech Acts, Pragmatics, Institutional Discourse, Assembly

Introduction

Silence is often treated as a mere absence of speech. However, linguists have increasingly recognized silence as a powerful and deliberate communicative act. Jaworski (1993, p. 1) asserts that silence can be 'accounted for by the same principles as those of speech'. This assertion positions silence as an integral part of linguistic meaning-making. Cicero, as quoted in many philosophical traditions, described silence as 'one of the great arts of conversation,' suggesting its rhetorical force long before modern pragmatics. Contemporary scholars concur with his ideas that silence, far from being void can carry weighty pragmatic functions (Ephratt, 2008, p. 1910; Saville-Troike, 1985, p3).

Scholars in pragmatics have interpreted silence as a vital resource just like verbal language. Jaworski (1993, p 28) observes that silence indicates meanings through pauses, withholding responses and coordinating verbal cues. Through silence, interlocutors emphasize their speech, structure discourse and signal meanings that have been left unsaid by words. Ephratt (2008, p 1912) also posits that silence has the potential to perform direct and indirect speech acts when it aligns with Jakobson's (1960) functions of language. Therefore, there is a need to reconsider how Speech Act Theory accommodates silent performances.

Speech-acts semantics as outlined by Austin (1962, p 6) and Searle (1969, p 16) foregrounded illocutionary acts. However, silence was excluded from this framework and treated it either as the background to talk or at most as contributing perlocutionary effects (Saville-Troike, 1985, p 4). However, scholars have challenged this exclusion. Kurzon (2007, p. 31, 2013, p. 660) introduced the idea of thematic silence, where a speaker avoids a topic, thereby allowing the omission itself to communicate. MacDougald (2024, p. 2) extended this to legal pragmatics by conceptualizing contractual silences which refers to promises not to speak as nested illocutionary acts. This shows that even the absence of speech can enact communicative intentions and commitments.

Ephratt (2008, pp. 1915-1916) further argues that silence fulfills speech functions traditionally linked to verbal utterances: the conative function (directing behavior), the phatic function (maintaining contact), and even the expressive function (conveying emotion). In such cases, silence ceases to be accidental or passive and becomes a communicative choice with identifiable illocutionary force. These insights reposition silence from a peripheral phenomenon to a central one within speech-act theory.

Despite the richness of Searle's framework, one limitation that persists in classical speech act theory, both in Austin and Searle, is the emphasis on spoken or written utterances as the primary medium of communicative action, with little, if any attention was paid to silence as a medium of communication. The assumption is that speech acts are overtly encoded in linguistic form. Consequently, non-verbal elements of communication, particularly silence, are often marginalised or treated as extra linguistic phenomena. This presupposition fails to account for the fact that silence can itself be a communicative act, complete with intention, force, and effect. While scholars in pragmatics and discourse analysis have increasingly acknowledged the role of silence in conversation (Jaworski, 1993, p. 33; Saville-Troike, 1985, p. 7), the formal apparatus of speech act theory has yet to be consistently applied to silence as an illocutionary act.

This study addresses this theoretical gap by extending Searle's illocutionary framework to account for silence as a communicative act capable of fulfilling illocutionary functions. In formal institutional settings such as school assemblies in Kenyan high schools, silence is not merely the absence of speech; rather, it may signal agreement, dissent, resistance, deference, or even assert power depending on contextual

variables such as hierarchical relations, cultural norms and the sequential structure of the discourse. For instance, a teacher's silence in response to a principal's directive might function as reluctant acquiescence, strategic withdrawal, or subtle protest, each of which carries illocutionary force. Thus, silence in such settings may perform the same range of functions as verbal speech acts, such as asserting, declining, defying, or conceding.

Despite these developments, silence remains understudied in institutional discourse settings. In educational environments, silence has conventionally been interpreted as disengagement or compliance. Yet, as Hanna (2021, p. 1160) observes, silence in classrooms may instead serve pedagogical purposes, encourage reflection, deference or a form of cognitive processing. Similarly, Abiyo (2022, p. 88) shows how structured school routines produce patterned silences that encode respect and authority. However, little scholarly attention has been paid to silence in large-group educational discourse, such as school assemblies. Most analyses have concentrated on classroom talk, overlooking institutional rituals that rely heavily on structured silences.

In Kenyan secondary schools, assemblies are formal communicative events governed by ritual scripts. Students are expected to remain silent during national anthems, prayers and speeches by administrators and prefects. These silences are culturally and institutionally embedded and are shaped by language policy and school hierarchies. Teachers often switch between English and Kiswahili further marking and influencing the communicative terrain. However, the pragmatic role of silence in these multilingual, hierarchical contexts remains theoretically unexamined.

This omission forms the gap in this study. Although silence may be conventionally understood as respectful behavior or institutional conformity, it also appears to perform communicative functions which include expressing assent, dissent, resistance or reflection. For example, silence following a speech may imply approval, while silence during a moment when applause is expected may signal disapproval. These acts of withholding speech are intentional and socially recognized. This suggests the illocutionary potential of silence.

This paper therefore, seeks to theorize silence in the context of Kenyan high school assemblies as an illocutionary act. By applying speech-act theory to these structured institutional events, I will explore how silence enacts meaning beyond verbal expression. In doing so, I answer calls from scholars such as Jaworski (1993, p. 35) and Ephratt (2008, p. 1930) for a broader understanding of bimodal communication, one that recognizes both speech and silence as equally capable of performing pragmatic functions. My analysis aims to contribute to the expanding field of pragmatic inquiry by illuminating how silence can operate as a performative element in discourse, particularly in educational settings where nonverbal norms are often taken for granted. With this paper therefore, I aim to explore silence as an illocutionary act and uncover how silence operates meaningfully in interactions.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical foundation of this study is grounded in the theory of speech acts, a framework that reconceptualizes language not merely as a system of conveying information but as a medium of performing actions. Speech act theory was developed by the British philosopher J.L. Austin in his seminal lectures published posthumously in *How to Do Things with Words* (1962). Austin challenged the conventional view that the core function of language was to describe states of affairs or express propositions capable of truth

or falsity. Instead, he introduced the idea that utterances could perform actions. He termed them as 'performative utterances'. Such actions include promising, ordering, apologizing or naming. These utterances, according to Austin, do not simply state facts but enact something in the social world.

Austin divided the total speech act into three dimensions: the locutionary act (the act of producing meaningful utterances), the illocutionary act (the force or intention behind the utterance, such as asserting, requesting, or commanding), and the perlocutionary act (the effect the utterance has on the hearer, such as persuading or frightening). Of these, the illocutionary act became the cornerstone of later developments in speech act theory in the work of John Searle. Searle (1969, 1979) systematized and extended the theory into a more rigorous analytical model.

Searle sought to develop a taxonomy of illocutionary acts and to provide rules that explain how such acts are constituted. For him, every illocutionary act is governed by a set of constitutive rules that must be satisfied for an utterance to count as a particular kind of speech act. These include the illocutionary point, propositional content conditions, preparatory conditions, sincerity conditions, and essential conditions. Searle classified speech acts into five broad categories: representatives (assertions, claims), directives (commands, requests), Comissives (promises, offers), expressives (apologies, congratulations) and declarations (resignations, baptisms). Crucially, these categories articulate the performative nature of communication, and highlight the speaker's intention and the social function of the utterance.

The applicability of Searle's theory in this paper lies in its analytic precision and emphasis on intentionality, contextual appropriateness, and conventional force, features that are crucial to interpreting silence in structured, hierarchical interactions. By reconceptualizing silence as a mode of illocutionary action, my study contributes not only to expanding the scope of speech act theory but also to the broader field of pragmatics, where meaning is inferred from both what is said and what is strategically left unsaid. This theoretical orientation is thus well aligned with the objective of the study: to investigate silence as an illocutionary act in institutional discourse. It enables a principled analysis of silent moments as communicative moves, rather than incidental gaps, thereby providing a framework within which silence can be understood, categorized, and interpreted with analytic rigor.

Methodology

This study adopted a descriptive qualitative design to describe and interpret how silence functions in school assemblies. The population comprised public secondary schools in Meru County, with attention to morning assemblies that bring together principals, deputy principals, teachers, prefects, and students in a formal setting where silence co-occurs with speech. Using purposive sampling, four schools were selected to represent different categories. Each school represented different levels of high schools in Kenya [national, extra-county, county and sub-county/day school.] The unit of analysis was moments of silence occurring during assemblies. The study analyzed 32 moments of silence drawn from 12 recorded assemblies. Data was collected through non-participant observation of 12 assemblies and audio-visual recordings to capture gestures and audience reactions surrounding each silence. Data was coded using EXP for expressives, DIR for directives, ASS for assertives, COM for commissives, and DEC for declaratives. The data was analyzed thematically using Searle's Speech Act Theory to understand what each silence meant. Each moment was checked against its placement in discourse (before, during, or after an utterance), the speaker's intended purpose, and audience reactions such as stillness, bowed heads, or cessation of murmurs. Silences were

then classified into five ‘Searle’ categories: expressives (those that showed feelings, such as bowed heads after sad news), directives (pauses after warnings prompting compliance), commissives (silences during pledges or moral appeals), assertives (those that followed factual statements like exam dates), and declaratives (marking ceremonials, such as silence after the national anthem). Ethical protocols such as informed consent and confidentiality were strictly observed.

Data Presentation and Discussion

Silence as Expressive

Searle (1969) posits that expressives express a psychological state or attitude. Moments of silence communicate respect, grief and displeasure even more strongly than words. The following data showed silence performing expressive function.

EXP.i Prefect: *‘There are no lost-and-found items to announce today.’*
[Awkward silence follows.]

After the prefect’s announcement, an awkward silence follows. Although unintended, this silence is communicatively rich and functions as an expressive illocutionary act within Searle’s framework. It conveys unease or disruption of expected routine, especially since school assemblies typically involve a series of announcements. The silence fulfills the conditions of an illocutionary act: it is perceived, contextually interpreted, and inferentially meaningful. Listeners detect the break in rhythm and infer a lack of preparedness or surprise at the unusually short update. The silence communicates more than the spoken phrase. It projects social awkwardness and a break from what was expected. In this case, silence becomes the vehicle for conveying affective states and institutional norms and performs a communicative function in the absence of further utterance.

EXP.ii Deputy Principal: *‘Three boys were caught sneaking out of school...’* *[Pauses and scans the assembly].*
[Silence follows.]

The Deputy Principal pauses for few seconds while scanning the assembly. This deliberate silence serves as an illocutionary act that blends expressive and directive forces within Searle’s framework. Expressively, it communicates disapproval and institutional displeasure without needing explicit condemnation. Directively, it exerts pressure on the listeners, especially potential culprits, and urges self-regulation and internal moral appraisal. The silence satisfies the felicity conditions of a speech act by presupposing a shared moral code and the authority of the speaker to call it into focus. It becomes a communicative resource that disciplines through non-verbal tension and induces psychological discomfort and enacts authority through the absence of speech.

EXP.iii Prefect: *‘Today’s headcount showed four students missing from the dawn prep.’*
[Silence.] ‘No student is allowed to remain in the dorms after 4.30 AM.’

The silence between the announcement and the reinforcement of school policy functions as an expressive illocutionary act. Although no proposition is uttered during the pause, the silence conveys disapproval and social unease. It does not merely fill time, it communicates a non-verbal but socially legible stance, that absence from dawn prep constitutes an indiscipline act. This silence implicitly performs moral evaluation

and enables the audience to infer the seriousness of the issue. As such, it carries illocutionary force by provoking internal reflection, surfacing the school's norms and reinforcing the obligation to comply with the school requirements on attendance of preps. The pause becomes a discursive strategy that is intentionally designed to elicit uptake through emotional resonance and behavioral anticipation and makes silence not the absence of language, but language by other means.

EXP.iv Context: *[Choir ends performance] (silence follows)*

This moment of silence is affective and expressive. It acknowledges emotional resonance and appreciation without needing applause or verbal affirmation. From a speech act perspective, this is an expressive illocution whereby the audience communicates through collective silence, an emotional response: awe, respect and gratitude. Searle allows for expressives to be performative of psychological states, and here silence communicates those very states. The absence of clapping or speech was not a failure but rather, it seemed to be a fulfillment of communicative intent in a non-verbal mode shaped by shared contextual norms.

EXP.v Principal: *'Before we proceed to today's announcements, let us all observe a moment of silence in memory of one of our parents who passed away this week.'*
[A one minute moment of silence is observed]

The intentional call for silence in this instance serves as a performative utterance, whose execution enacts the very act it refers to; a moment of mourning and empathy. Using Searle's classification, the illocutionary force here is that of an expressive act as the silence conveys shared grief and solemnity and communicates what words could trivialize. The speaker's utterance functions as a directive that initiates the silence, but the silence itself becomes the illocutionary act by which the assembly collectively acknowledges the emotional weight of loss. In Austin's terms, this is not merely an absence of talk but a locutionary void filled with social meaning. The silence binds the audience emotionally and creates a shared emotional state, and this collective performance of grief would be communicatively incomplete without the silence. Thus, silence is not just part of the ceremony, it is the ceremony.

EXP.vi Deputy Principal: *'Today, I stand here not just as your Deputy Principal but as a concerned parent.'* *[Pauses for about 30 seconds. The assembly falls silent.] 'Why would a grown-up student conspire to....'*

The pause following the first utterance is a powerful expressive illocutionary act. It allows the audience to process the weight of the statement and anticipate the statement to follow. According to Searle, illocutionary acts require not just intention but the uptake by hearers. The silence here enables this uptake and signals a shift from institutional to personal register. It preconditions the audience to listen empathetically and foregrounds vulnerability as the deputy principal stands before the audience as a 'concerned parent'. This heightens the rhetorical impact of what follows. The silence communicates sincerity and seriousness of the matter at hand, qualities essential to expressive speech acts. It is also strategic and increases the perlocutionary potential of the message by emotionally priming the audience.

EXP.vii Deputy Principal: *'Some of you were seen loitering around the staffroom during class time yesterday even when the visitors from the ministry were still around...'*
[Silence lasting few seconds] 'Let that not happen again.'

The extended silence following the initial accusation is heavily loaded with judgment. Within the framework of Searle's theory, this silence fulfills the illocutionary function of disapproval and condemnation. It is not what is said but what is left unsaid that performs the communicative act here. Silence replaces the explicit reprimand and draws on shared contextual knowledge to complete the message. This act of withholding expected speech creates discomfort and functions as an indirect expressive illocutionary act. The audience is expected to supply the implied censure mentally. This makes the silence more rhetorically potent than explicit blame. This moment of silence aligns with the performative nature of illocutionary acts where silence, strategically placed, communicates moral judgment and implicitly calls for behavioral correction.

EXP.viii Teacher on Duty: *You are all aware of the state of our school compound after lunch break'*
[Silence] 'Do we want to live in a pigsty?'

This silence serves as a cognitive cue and a rhetorical 'placeholder' for judgment and 'shared guilt'. In speech act semantics, this momentary silence is not a void but an indirect performative act. It communicates reproach and shared responsibility of ensuring cleanliness of the school without the need for overt blame. Functioning as an expressive illocutionary act, the silence invites hearers to reflect on their ignorance of the state of the school and infer moral accountability. It elicits internalized response mechanisms among students and heightens engagement and internal correction. The rhetorical question that follows is framed and given force by the preceding pause thus making the silence an integral part of the full illocutionary performance.

Silence As a Directive Act

Directives attempt to get the hearer to do something. In this paper, any moment of silence that presupposed indirect command of attention, reflection or compliance without words was considered directive.

DIR.i Student: *'Let us humble ourselves for a word of prayer.'*
[Silence occurs] 'Our Father who art in heaven...'

This moment of silence functions as a preparatory illocutionary act. It is a condition-setting phase in which the speaker's utterance prepares the audience psychologically and socially for a collective act of devotion. According to Searle's Speech Act Theory, the instruction 'Let us humble ourselves...' constitutes an illocutionary act of a directive that compels hearers to act. However, the silence that follows is not passive or vacuous. It also performs a distinct communicative function. In this context, silence is performative. It conveys reverence, mental readiness and respect for prayers. This silent interlude is akin to a commiseration thus signaling a collective agreement to participate in the prayer ritual. Although no words are uttered, the silence is an illocutionary force because it commits the students and staff to a spiritual exercise. It also acts as a perlocutionary preparation to soften the environment to receive the prayer that follows. Silence here does not merely fill a gap, it also communicates collective consent, psychological readiness, and the school's ritual discipline. By acknowledging the prayer space nonverbally, the assembly signals cohesion, submission and respect. This makes silence a communicative act with intentionality thus aligning with Searle's view that illocutionary acts require intentional states that affect listener behavior.

DIR.ii Context: *A student from the journalism club stands at the podium, prepares to read the news. Before speaking, she waits for the restless crowd of students to quiet down. The crowd eventually silences without further instruction.*

DIR.iii Journalism Club Member: *[Silence of about 8 seconds]*
'Good morning, fellow students. This is the morning bulletin for Wednesday...'

This silence functions as a regulative illocutionary act. There is no preceding utterance demanding silence. However, the student's intentional delay in speech signals a desire for decorum. The pause projects authority and expectancy, which is an unspoken request for silence. Within Searle's taxonomy, although silence is not a typical speech act in the 'Austinian' tradition, it operates here as a directive illocution without locutionary form. Silence, in this case, commands attention and communicates that the speaker cannot begin speaking until the audience is ready to listen. This unvoiced but intention-loaded pause is perlocutionarily effective as it results in behavior change (students quiet down). The silent act is thus perlocutionary in effect, but illocutionary in intent. It reasserts the institutional hierarchy of speaker and hearer and frames the listener's role. This strategic deployment of silence highlights its potency as a non-verbal illocutionary device that invokes order, discipline, and audience responsibility. It achieves communicative goals traditionally assigned to speech and affirms my proposition that silence is not the absence of communication but its reconfiguration.

DIR.iv Preacher: *'Let us pause and consider whether we are living right with God.'*
[Silence ensues.]

After the preacher's utterance, a deliberate silence follows. This silence is not communicative absence but a full illocutionary act in itself. It functions primarily as a directive and secondarily as an expressive in Searle's typology. The directive force lies in prompting the congregation to engage in silent self-examination, while the expressive element communicates the preacher's solemn concern for 'spiritual integrity'. The silence meets Searle's felicity conditions as it is intentional, contextually appropriate, understood by the audience and its perlocutionary goal of moral introspection is inferable without further speech. Thus, silence performs a communicative act by substituting verbal content with a shared, culturally situated expectation of inner dialogue. This is a case where silence, considered in context and intention, becomes the very medium through which the sermonic message is internalized and responded to and thus constitutes a speech act without words.

DIR.v Teacher on Duty: *I want you to think very carefully about what I have just said.'*
[Silence follows].

After the Teacher on Duty makes this utterance, an 8-second silence follows. This silence is performative and performs a directive illocutionary act in Searle's taxonomy. Rather than issuing a direct command, the teacher withholds speech to compel mental action and urges the audience toward introspection. The silence satisfies the felicity conditions of a directive as it presupposes the hearers' capacity to reflect and intends to influence their internal cognition. It also carries expressive weight by signaling the gravity of what has just been announced. In this way, silence becomes the mode through which the teacher communicates urgency, seriousness, and the expectation of internal dialogue, enacting meaning beyond the spoken utterance.

DIR.vi Visiting Preacher: *'Brethren, the Word says in Psalm 46:10, 'be still and know that I am God.' Sometimes, we talk too much... (brief silence) ... but in silence, God speaks most clearly to our hearts.'*

In this instance, the pastor utilizes silence as a deliberate and strategic communicative act. The silence is not incidental as it is foregrounded as part of the sermon's rhetorical and spiritual climax. According to Searle's classification of illocutionary acts, this pause can be interpreted as a directive act and compels the listeners to introspect and reflect in accordance with the spiritual message. The speaker's silence operates as an implicit command, achieving what Austin termed as a perlocutionary effect. It encourages meditation and quietude in a religious context. The silence thus functions illocutionary to signal reverence, provoke thought, and emotionally align the audience with the sermon's moral instruction. It is an act of communication grounded in shared religious norms where silence itself is a speech act laden with theological implication.

DIR.vii Teacher: *'You have two choices... [Silence]... make the right one.'*

This type of pause works as a directive, specifically, a non-verbal push for decision-making. The silence here allows the audience to fill the gap with their own internal ethical deliberation. From a 'Searlean' lens, the speaker intends to get the hearer to do something, not just later, but immediately: to reflect. Thus, the illocutionary act is accomplished by allowing space for internalization. Silence is the directive medium that urges ethical choice without overt coercion. This demonstrates that silence can fulfil a communicative aim more powerfully than redundant verbal emphasis.

DIR.viii Teacher: *'Our national values must be seen in our discipline.'* [Pauses and scans the students.]

This silence embedded between ideological assertion and audience observation functions illocutionarily as a directive. Without uttering a command, the silence prompts students to internalize and reflect on the stated expectation, that their behavior must reflect national values. The gaze is combined with silence and enacts authority and challenges students to self-monitor their behaviour. Searle's felicity conditions for directives have been met by this moment of silence: the speaker believes the hearers can comply and the pause underscores the sincerity and urgency. This instance illustrates how silence, though devoid of content, is pragmatically rich. It forces cognitive engagement and behavior regulation, thus becoming a non-verbal command.

DIR.ix Teacher on duty: *Those who didn't complete their duties should see me after this.'* [Pauses. Some murmuring from the students dies down into silence.]

This instance features a silence that emerges organically as students realize the implication of the directive. The teacher does not reinforce the statement with more speech; instead, silence performs the remainder of the act and ensures students understand the seriousness of the remark. The emerging silence becomes a perlocutionary consequence of a directive illocution. It communicates compliance, internalization of threat and social pressure. The silence thus functions dialogically, answering the speech act not with speech but with tension and acknowledgment.

DIR.x Prefect: *'The principal has instructed that all students must be seated by 7:30 a.m. sharp.'*

[Brief silence] 'Any lateness will lead to being marked absent, and further disciplinary action may be taken.'

In this context, the brief silence between two related announcements acts as an illocutionary device of emphasis and an intensification of a threat. While Austin's initial framework prioritized explicit performatives, Searle's development of illocutionary force acknowledges that even non-verbal intervals like silence may convey forceful intent. Here, silence serves to heighten the seriousness of the announcement. The strategic pause encourages reflection and signals a shift from declarative to a warning. By withholding speech, the speaker enacts a psychological effect whereby the hearers are left in suspense, thereby deepening the perlocutionary potential of the utterance. Within Searle's taxonomy, this silence functions within the directive class, as it indirectly compels compliance through implied authority. It is not merely absence of speech but it is saturated with pragmatic force, inviting hearers to infer severity and urgency.

DIR.xi Principal: *'We received visitors from the Ministry of Education yesterday.'*
[Silence of 5 seconds] They were not pleased.'

This moment of silence carries high pragmatic value. It is used to build suspense and foreshadow negative feedback. Under Searle's theory, which recognizes indirect and nuanced forms of illocutionary force, the silence here performs the speech act of conveying disappointment and alerting the students to instill corrective measures. The hearers must infer the gravity of the situation from the speech-silence-speech pattern. The principal's reticence to immediately articulate the visitors' discontent adds weight to what follows. This is an indirect directive and expressive act where both warning and reproach are embedded in silence. The communicative power of the silence is intensified by its timing and placement. This transforms it into a functional speech act in itself.

DIR.xii Teacher on Duty: *Fours, the exam timetable is now final.'* *[Silence of 3 seconds]*
'Prepare yourselves accordingly.'

The silence between the declaration and the directive amplifies the finality and seriousness of the announcement. The illocutionary force here is both declarative and directive. By pausing, the teacher leverages silence to mark the transition from the school's official communication to student personal obligation. This aligns with Searle's model of illocutionary acts where speech is not only about conveying information but also about performing an action; in this case, calling for preparation and readiness. The silence serves as a cognitive boundary that compels attentiveness, thus performing the indirect illocutionary act of exhortation and psychological priming.

DIR.xiii Games Captain: *We lost a pair of football shoes yesterday. If anyone saw them...*
[Silence of 4 seconds] '...please return them to me.'

In this case, silence performs the speech act of soliciting honesty. The pause functions as a non-verbal nudge that indirectly appeals to the audience's moral compass. In Searle's taxonomy, this silence operates within the expressive and commissive categories. It indirectly requests confession or restitution without making an explicit accusation. The prefatory silence opens a space for self-reflection and possible voluntary action thus making it a strategic performative tool. This use of silence enhances the illocutionary potency

of the message and embeds it within a shared ethical framework that students are expected to recognize and respond to.

DIR.xiv Head Girl: *Some matters do not need to be said out loud. You know yourselves.'*
[Silence for 20 seconds. The audience remains still.]

This strategic use of silence by the head girl, framed by implication, is a classic example of an indirect illocutionary act. The speaker implicates certain students while preserving deniability and reducing direct confrontation. The silence that follows becomes a space of implied accusation, moral indictment, and communal reflection. According to Searle, indirect speech acts rely on shared context and presupposition, both of which are operative here. The pause allows the unspoken message to resonate, and its meaning is derived from the pragmatic context. This makes the silence not empty but thick with meaning and intention.

Silence as an Assertive Act

Assertives are speech acts that commit the speaker to the truth of a proposition. Silence that seemed to emphasize certainty and seriousness after an important statement was classified as assertive. This was as because such silence reinforces commitment to the truth of the proposition.

ASS.i Teacher on Duty: *'You will each receive your report forms by tomorrow.'*
[Silence then student's murmur.] 'For today, we shall proceed with supper and then entertainment.'

The silence following this announcement functions as an assertive illocutionary act. Assertives are meant to commit the speaker to the truth of the proposition. The TOD commits himself to the truth about the delivery of report forms by the following day. However, the silence that follows performs more than cognitive processing as it regulates reception and reinforces the weight of the utterance. The murmuring by students signals engagement, while the silence mediates between the speech and audience response. It allows the message to settle and creates an interpretive space in which the audience internalizes the forthcoming implications especially those tied to academic performance. This communicative pause operates as a pragmatic mechanism of uptake and ensures that the seriousness of the announcement is not diluted by immediacy. It also heightens anticipation, slightly cues discipline (as murmurs begin to subside), and to an extent bridges the administrative tone with the transition to informal routines. This silence, therefore, is not passive but performs a functional role of strengthening the illocutionary force of the prior utterance and ensuring it is meaningfully absorbed.

ASS.ii Principal: *'.... Therefore, I want to leave you with one thought... (Silence)... Your character is your destiny.'*

The silence preceding the climactic declaration of the principal's message dramatizes its force. It acts as a preparatory condition and heightens anticipation and engagement. This is clearly an assertive illocutionary act under Searle's classification where the speaker commits to the truth of a proposition. However, the preceding silence magnifies this act by creating a semiotic space in which the weight of the message settles before it arrives. The silence conditions the felicity of the illocutionary act whereby without it, the message would lose some of its gravity. Thus, silence becomes a co-constructor of meaning and communicates importance through absence and functions not merely as prelude, but as part of the act itself.

Silence as Commissive

Commissives commit the speaker to a future course of action. The following five moments were classified as commissives.

COM.i Principal: *‘Before I conclude, let us remember the value of discipline.’*
[Silence of 5 seconds.] ‘Just like our school motto reads ‘discipline does wonders’, let us always....’

The 5-second silence inserted after invoking the value of discipline functions as a powerful illocutionary act within the commissive category in Searle’s framework. The silence itself performs a communicative function by creating a solemn discursive space for internalization and ethical reflection. The principal’s pause is not empty as it intentionally frames the concluding message to amplify its moral weight. The silence tacitly invites students to reflect, commit and reaffirm alignment with the institutional ethos encapsulated in the school motto. It thereby satisfies the conditions of an illocutionary act by presupposing a shared moral code, assuming authority to reinforce it, and generating uptake in the form of mental or emotional response. Through this rhetorical stillness, the principal directs the assembly to internalize values and commit to behavioral discipline, thereby enacting institutional persuasion through strategic silence.

COM.ii Prefect: *‘We remind all students that littering in the compound is prohibited. [3-second silence] Failure to comply will result in disciplinary action.’*

The inter-sentential pause in this instance conveys a strategic emphasis. By pausing between the rule and the consequence, the prefect heightens the salience of the rule and foregrounds the gravity of the penalty. Under Searle’s taxonomy, this functions as a commissive act. Although no explicit commitment is uttered in the silence itself, the pause dramatizes the speaker’s alignment with institutional enforcement. Silence is communicative because it allows the listener to process the rule and anticipate the consequence with clarity and heightened sensitivity. Thus, the act of pausing becomes part of the linguistic force of the utterance and shapes its pragmatic interpretation.

COM.iii School Captain: *‘...Mobile phones found in school will be confiscated, [2-second pause] and returned only after form four.’*

Here, the pause sharpens the finality of the warning. It operates within a commissive act, implying the school’s commitment to enforcement. While the silence itself does not contain propositional content, its placement after the mention of the rule signals procedural seriousness. Drawing from Searle’s notion of force indicators, this pause increases the illocutionary strength of the commitment. Silence in this context augments the performative function of the rule and its consequence.

COM.iv Deputy Principal: *‘Some of you have not been attending morning prep sessions. This is not acceptable.’ [Silence follows, as the deputy principal looks pointedly at students for about 15 seconds.]*

This silence performs a commissive and expressive illocutionary function where the speaker, without saying more, conveys sternness, disapproval, and the expectation of behavioral change. Searle emphasizes that illocutionary acts can perform commitments, and here, the unspoken message suggests future disciplinary action if the behavior continues. The silence allows the uttered rebuke to resonate. Its duration

intensifies its gravity. The perlocutionary effect sought is self-reflection and a change in student conduct. The silence becomes the principal vehicle of meaning, where authority, discontent, and expectation converge to perform a speech act without further words.

COM.v Principal: *'The school bus left some students at the supermarket today. Do you want to explain that to your parents?'* [Silence ensues; no student responds.]

Here, silence is both elicited and performative. The rhetorical question seeks no answer as its power lies in the silence it generates. The silence is simultaneously a response and a commissive speech act by implication. It acknowledges guilt, enacts passive confession, and allows institutional power to linger without explicit accusation. Searle's framework supports indirect speech acts, and this is one. The silence becomes the students' indirect admission of guilt. According to Austin, the perlocutionary effect, shame, awareness, and possibly behavioral change, is achieved not through further speech but through enforced quietude. Thus, silence takes over the communicative load from speech.

COM.vi Principal: *... and remember, we are always watching.'*
[Silence as the principal leaves the podium.]

This closing line followed by silence operates as a threat and a warning, a commissive act cloaked in institutional surveillance discourse. The silence that follows is loaded with a performative warning as it amplifies the threat while denying immediate confrontation. Searle's theory accounts for such layered illocutions, where speech and silence interplay to create commitment and fear. The silence here ensures that the final utterance remains the last impression, dominating the cognitive environment of the hearers. It leaves a lingering illocutionary force and asserts institutional omnipresence without further elaboration.

Silence As a Declarative

Declaratives bring about change during school assemblies. Silence can signal a shift in activity. For instance, silence after inviting a new speaker marks a transition of speaking rights, a turn allocation moment, a declarative act through nonverbal means. The following three moments of silence assumed the role of declaratives.

DEC.i Deputy Principal: *'You are the future leaders of this country. The choices you make today... [7-second silence]... will determine where you'll stand tomorrow.'*

The deputy principal's pause occurs at a juncture between moral premise and a conclusion, functioning as a declarative speech act. According to Searle's theory, declaratives bring about change in social reality. Here, the silence helps establish a serious moral tone and provokes self-reflection. The pause is not ornamental as it carries the illocutionary force of urging responsibility. Within Austin's initial framework, such a pause would likely be seen as part of the force rather than the locution, but Searle's elaboration permits me to treat the silence itself as a component of force that reshapes the context. It is through the absence of speech that the illocutionary intent is more forcefully achieved thus creating not mere absence, but intensified presence.

DEC.ii Context: *National anthem being sung. After the last line, the assembly remains silent for 9 seconds.*

The post-anthem silence operates as a communal declarative. It symbolizes shared values, national reverence and collective identity. According to Searle, declaratives bring about change through institutional force. This silence is institutionally sanctioned and communicatively rich. It signals allegiance, closure and solemnity. The illocutionary force lies in the shared understanding that the silence is meaningful, that it is about something; memory, unity and reverence. It is a collective speech act, performed through silence, which reaffirms the group's belonging to a nation and its symbols.

DEC.iii Lead Journalist: *'I would now like to invite our journalism club member to take us through today's headlines.'*

[Journalism student walks to the podium. Silence for about 20 seconds as they settle and open their script.]

The brief silence here, though procedural, plays a pragmatic communicative role. It signals a transition between speakers and activities and thus performs a declarative illocutionary function and indicates a change in speech rights and the beginning of a new communicative phase. In Searle's terms, silence here complements the act of assigning the floor to another speaker. The audience interprets the pause not as hesitation or forgetfulness but as deliberate and expected and acknowledges institutional protocol. According to speech act theory, the preparatory conditions i.e., the audience's knowledge that a new speaker is expected and the sincerity conditions i.e., the belief that the silence is necessary for the transition are fulfilled. Therefore, silence here actualizes the organizational flow and reaffirms institutional order within the assembly's discourse.

Conclusion

This paper analyzed 32 moments of silence observed in the selected Kenyan high school assembly grounds to determine their illocutionary roles using Searle's speech act taxonomy. The silences were classified into five categories: Directives, Expressives, Commissives, Declaratives, and Assertives. The table below summarizes the results of this study.

Table 1

No.	Moment of silence	Context of occurrence	Reaction	Category & Rationale for classification
DIR I	Student: 'Let us humble ourselves for a word of prayer.' [Silence]	Before prayer	Students bow heads	Directive – Silence enforces prayer compliance
DIR II	Journalism Club Member waits silently before speaking.	Before news reading	Students quiet down	Directive – Silence compels order and attention
DIR III	Preacher: 'Let us pause and consider whether we are living right with God.' [Silence]	During sermon	Students reflect	Directive – Silence prompts self-examination
DIR IV	Teacher on Duty: 'Think very carefully about what I have just said.' [Silence]	After caution	Students remain quiet	Directive – Silence enforces reflection
DIR V	Visiting Preacher uses silence after quoting scripture.	During sermon	Students listen attentively	Directive – Silence induces meditation

DIR VI	Teacher: 'You have two choices...' [Silence]	During moral lesson	Students remain quiet	Directive – Silence urges decision-making
DIR VII	Teacher: 'Our national values must be seen in our discipline.' [Silence]	Moral instruction	Students attentive	Directive – Silence enforces moral reflection
DIR VIII	Teacher warns students about duties. [Silence]	After warning	Murmurs die down	Directive – Silence reinforces seriousness
DIR IX	Prefect warns about punctuality. [Brief silence]	Morning assembly	Students remain silent	Directive – Silence emphasizes importance
DIR X	Principal mentions visitors then pauses. [Silence]	Feedback on visit	Students tense	Directive – Silence signals disapproval
DIR XI	Teacher: 'Form Fours, the exam timetable is now final.' [Silence]	Before exam	Students attentive	Directive – Silence signals readiness expectation
DIR XII	Games captain reports lost shoes. [Silence]	After appeal	Students reflect	Directive – Silence seeks honesty
DIR XIII	Head girl: 'Some matters do not need to be said out loud.' [Silence]	After warning	Audience still	Directive – Silence implies guilt and self-awareness
EXP I	Prefect: 'No lost-and-found items today.' [Awkward silence]	After announcement	Students confused	Expressive – Silence signals awkwardness
EXP II	Deputy Principal pauses after mentioning indiscipline.	During address	Students uneasy	Expressive – Silence shows displeasure
EXP III	Prefect: 'Four students missing from prep.' [Silence]	After report	Students quiet	Expressive – Silence shows seriousness
EXP IV	[Choir ends performance] [Silence]	After performance	Audience quiet	Expressive – Silence shows awe/respect
EXP V	Principal calls for moment of silence for deceased parent.	During mourning	Assembly bows heads	Expressive – Silence expresses grief
EXP VI	Deputy Principal pauses 30 seconds before moral talk.	During address	Audience attentive	Expressive – Silence conveys sincerity
EXP VII	Deputy Principal accuses loitering students then pauses.	After rebuke	Students tense	Expressive – Silence signals condemnation
EXP VIII	Teacher mentions dirty compound then pauses.	During assembly	Students silent	Expressive – Silence shows reproach
COM I	Principal mentions discipline value then pauses.	Closing remarks	Students reflect	Commissive – Silence reinforces commitment
COM II	Prefect warns against littering then pauses.	Rule reminder	Students quiet	Commissive – Silence emphasizes seriousness
COM III	School captain warns about confiscating phones.	Disciplinary warning	Students quiet	Commissive – Silence shows enforcement
COM IV	Deputy Principal condemns absenteeism then stares silently.	Morning assembly	Students tense	Commissive – Silence signals threat

COM V	Principal rebukes about supermarket incident then pauses.	After rebuke	Students silent	Commissive – Silence implies confession
COM VI	Principal ends with ‘we are always watching’ then silence.	End of assembly	Students quiet	Commissive – Silence conveys warning
ASS I	Teacher on Duty assures report forms delivery then pauses.	After announcement	Students murmur	Assertive – Silence reinforces truth of statement
ASS II	Principal pauses before moral climax: ‘Your character is your destiny.’	Closing speech	Audience attentive	Assertive – Silence dramatizes commitment
DEC I	Deputy Principal pauses during motivational message.	Mid-speech	Audience silent	Declarative – Silence frames moral tone
DEC II	National anthem ends, followed by silence.	Post-anthem	Students remain still	Declarative – Silence signals respect
DEC III	Lead journalist calls next speaker, then silence.	Transition	Audience waits	Declarative – Silence marks floor shift

From the above summary, the occurrence was as follows:

Table 2

Illocutionary Category	Number of Instances	Percentage
Directives	13	40.6%
Expressives	8	25%
Commissives	6	18.8%
Declaratives	3	9.4%
Assertives	2	6.3%
Total	32	100%

From the table, it is evident that directive silences dominated the data. This indicates that school assemblies frequently used silence as a deliberate tool for behavioral control, compliance and reflection rather than as incidental pauses.

The analysis revealed that directive silences were the most frequent and functioned as non-verbal commands that compelled students to reflect, remain orderly, or prepare for activities such as prayer. Silence here was a strategic act that achieved what words might fail to accomplish by exerting pressure through authority.

Expressive silences occurred mainly during solemn or ceremonial moments such as mourning or after the national anthem where they communicate shared emotions of grief, respect, or awe. These silences reinforced shared values and solidarity. This shows that absence of speech can powerfully convey affective meaning.

Commissive silences emphasized commitment to future actions particularly after warnings or threats. Pauses following statements such as those touching on discipline or enforcement dramatized resolve and signaled that the authority intended to act. Such silences strengthened the psychological force of promises and threats without further elaboration.

Declarative silences were observed in ritual or transitional contexts such as after singing the national anthem or before inviting a new speaker, where silence marked a shift in institutional roles or enacted the closure of a formal act. These moments confirmed that silence can serve a constitutive function in shaping order.

Although the least frequent, assertive silences reinforced the truth of statements, particularly after factual announcements such as exam dates or rules. These pauses heighten the seriousness of the information and ensure uptake and signal certainty and authority.

Therefore, I argue that silence is not accidental but systematically functional and operates across all five speech act categories identified by Searle. Its dominance as a directive act echoes the hierarchical and disciplinary nature of the formal school setting, while expressive, commissive, declarative, and assertive silences sustain its practices, values and commitments. Silence should therefore be recognized as an integral component of institutional discourse and a communicative resource capable of ‘doing things’ without words just as Austin (1962) spoke of doing things with words. My study demonstrates that illocutionary force does not depend on speech alone but rather, silence, when contextually framed and socially interpreted, serves as a powerful mode of action, at times better than words.

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