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## 12. Silence as conflict management in fiction and drama: Pinter's *Betrayal* and a short story, "Great Wits"

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A recent collection of papers (Tannen and Saville-Troike, 1985) presents a range of investigations of the meanings and functions of silence in cross-cultural perspective. A number of papers in that collection demonstrate that silence can be associated with conflict or negative emotion. My own chapter (Tannen, 1985) suggests that many of the components of a conversational style I characterize as "high involvement" can be understood as ways of avoiding silence in casual conversation, since silence, for these speakers, is seen as evidence of lack of rapport.<sup>1</sup> Scollon (1985) surveys a broad range of research by others as well as himself to indicate that silence is often regarded negatively, metaphorically seen as a mechanical breakdown of a machine that should hum steadily along.

Saunders (1985) investigates the role of "Silence and noise as emotion management styles" in an Italian village. He suggests that "exuberant noise and grim silence are in some respects functional equivalents" as they both "may be used in the management of strong but problematic emotions . . ." Saunders finds that "in the Italian case, the more serious the potential for conflict, the more likely it is that people will choose the silent mode" (p. 165).

The main body of the present chapter shows how this perspective on silence provides the basis for understanding the use of silence – and minimal instances of silence, that is, pauses – in managing potential conflict in Harold Pinter's play, *Betrayal*. Analysis of the play supports Saunders' finding that silence and noisy speech can be functional equivalents. Whereas pauses written into the dialogue of *Betrayal* mark mounting conflict between characters, the playwright calls for silence at the points where potentially explosive information is confronted.

Following analysis of *Betrayal*, a somewhat briefer analysis is presented of silence as conflict management in another literary genre: a short story. In "Great Wits," by Alice Mattison, silence prevents conflict from erupting into damaging confrontation. When the young protagonist breaks the silence and openly expresses frustration with her parents, permanent damage results.

Before presentation of these analyses, a word is in order about the status of literary examples in the study of interaction.

### 1. The use of literary dialogue for analysis of interaction

Robin Lakoff (Lakoff and Tannen, 1984) suggests that literary dialogue – the dialogue in fiction and drama – constitutes a competence model for interaction. It is not equivalent to the dialogue spontaneously produced in interaction. Paradoxically, however, the dialogue in drama or fiction often strikes audiences as extremely realistic. For example, a reviewer (Kendrick, 1983) observes that in Judith Rossner's novel *August*, "The give-and-take of real conversation, its hesitations, repetitions, and Freudian slips – all are reproduced with exact fidelity." Yet a conversational analyst familiar with accurate transcriptions of conversations need only glance at the dialogue in that novel to see how different from real conversation it actually is, containing occasional rather than pervasive repetition, hesitations, slips, false starts, and so on. In contrast to the impression of realism made by the contrived dialogue of some fiction and drama, accurate transcripts of actual conversation often strike unaccustomed readers (as distinguished from professional conversational analysts) as repetitive, obscure, inarticulate, and generally unrealistic.

If audiences respond favorably to the contrived dialogue of literary productions, then such dialogue represents something that rings true to them. Lakoff suggests that, like the human ear and human memory, literary dialogue distills the wheat of conversation from the chaff of hesitations, fillers, hedges, and repetitions. In this spirit, the current chapter is offered as an analysis not of what actually occurs in human interaction – the relationship between the literary and the actual remains to be discovered and shown – but of a type of representation of human interaction that has at least symbolic significance for members of the culture that appreciate the artistic production.

### 2. Pauses and silences in the plays of Pinter

The plays of Harold Pinter make an art of silence as a way of masking (and, because the mask can be seen, revealing) strong unstated feelings. Whereas all plays make use of pauses and silences in their performance, Pinter's plays have pauses and silences printed in the dialogue.

Much has been written about pauses and silences in the works of Pinter. Donaldson (1985) has identified some key passages from commentaries as well as from remarks made by Pinter himself. I draw upon her excellent work in presenting two key accounts of pauses and silences in Pinter's plays. In examining Pinter's *Betrayal*, I found that the critics' accounts do not accurately describe the functions of pauses and silences. Rather, they

describe conventional wisdom: how most people think silences and pauses are used in conversation.

Esslin (1970) suggests:

When Pinter asks for a pause . . . he indicates that intense thought processes are continuing, that unspoken tensions are mounting, whereas silences are notations for the end of a movement, the beginning of another, as between the movements of a symphony. (Esslin, 1970: 237–8, cited in Donaldson, 1985: 9)

Hollis (1970) makes a similar observation:

There are many ways in which Pinter uses silences to articulate, but the first, and perhaps most common, is simply *the pause*. The pause occurs when the character has said what he has to say and is waiting for a response from the other side, or it occurs when he cannot find the words to say what he wants to say. . . . He is caught up short; he has reached the limits of language and now waits in silence for something to happen. . . . Although they may fill the air with words, *the silence of these characters is the result of their having nothing to say*. (Hollis, 1970: 14–15, emphasis his, cited in Donaldson, 1985: 9)

There is a satisfying scene in Woody Allen's film *Annie Hall* in which Allen, standing in line for a movie, overhears a man speaking authoritatively about the works of Marshal McLuhan. In the film, as rarely in life, Allen fishes the real McLuhan out from behind a billboard to pronounce the man's pronouncements nonsense. Without editorial comment, Donaldson manages a comparable feat, following these foolish accounts of Pinter's pauses and silences with a comment by Pinter himself, in response to a question by an interviewer who borrowed the interpretation of Esslin quoted above:

Interviewer: You're very clear about the differences between a pause and a silence. The silence is the end of a movement?

Pinter: Oh, no! These pauses and silences! I've been appalled. Occasionally when I've run into groups of actors, normally abroad, they say a silence is obviously longer than a pause. Right. O.K., so it is. They'll say, this is a pause, so we'll stop. And after the pause we'll start again. I'm sure this happens all over the place and thank goodness I don't know anything about it. From my point of view, these are not in any sense a formal kind of arrangement. The pause is a pause because of what has just happened in the minds and guts of the characters. They spring out of the text. They're not formal conveniences or stresses but part of the body of action. I'm simply suggesting that if they play it properly they will find that a pause – or whatever the hell it is – is inevitable. And a silence equally means that something has happened to create the impossibility of anyone speaking for a certain amount of time – until they recover from whatever happened before the silence. (Gussow, 1971: 132, cited in Donaldson, 1985: 9)

I was delighted to find this quote because it pulled Pinter out from behind a billboard to support what I had observed in his play: far from showing that the character is waiting, or has nothing to say, a pause shows that a character is reacting to what has been said, is feeling something. Put another way, rather than indicating that they can't find words to say what they want to say, pauses show that the characters do not want to say what they are thinking. In a sense, they show it by not saying anything else. And finally, far from representing the end of a movement, a silence represents climaxes of emotion in interaction, the point at which the most damaging information has just been introduced into the dialogue, directly or indirectly. In the context of potentially explosive conflict in *Betrayal*, pauses and silences prevent the conflict from exploding and destroying the possibility of continuing the relationship.

A final excerpt from Pinter himself draws a parallel similar to that of Saunders on the Italian cases: a functional equivalent of silence is a long outburst of words that stands out against the normally sparse turns at dialogue that make up the play:

There are two silences. One when no word is spoken. The other when perhaps a torrent of language is being employed. This speech is speaking of a language locked beneath it. That is its continual reference. The speech we hear is an indication of that which we don't hear. It is a necessary avoidance, a violent, sly, anguished, or mocking smoke screen which keeps the other in its place. When true silence falls we are still left with echo but are nearer nakedness. One way of looking at speech is to say that it is a constant stream to cover nakedness. (Pinter, 1964: 579, cited in Donaldson, 1985: 8–9)

The following discussion demonstrates the use of pauses and silences (including wordy silences) in Pinter's *Betrayal*.

### *Betrayal*

*Betrayal* is about a love triangle among Jerry, Emma, and Robert. The lovers are Jerry and Emma. Jerry, a literary agent, is the best friend and colleague of Emma's husband, Robert, a publisher. The most remarkable aspect of this play is that most of its action moves backward rather than forward in time, thus violating the conventions of dramatic art but paralleling the constraints of human memory. That is, the action depicted in the first scene of the play is chronologically the last: a meeting between Emma and Jerry two years after their love affair has ended. The last scene of the play depicts the earliest action: the beginning of their affair. Thus when the audience regards the moment at which the affair begins, they recognize it as such, seeing telescoped in this single and final cameo the subsequent affair and its complex consequences – just as one is able to look back, years later, on a first meeting from the perspective of later knowledge of the relationship that developed. This is in contrast to the limited knowledge that one has at the

moment of a meeting, or on viewing a first meeting in a play which is presented chronologically. T.S. Eliot observed in his poem "Portrait of a Lady" that "our beginnings never know our ends." By putting the beginning of Emma's and Jerry's affair at the end of his play, Pinter allows us to see its beginnings while knowing its ends.

As its title suggests, this play portrays a series of painful betrayals: hidden, revealed, and uncertain. Jerry betrays his best friend Robert by seducing Robert's wife, Emma. Jerry also betrays his own wife, as Emma betrays her husband. But Emma and Robert also betray Jerry: neither one tells him when Robert learns of the affair. Rather, the affair continues, and Jerry continues to socialize and work with Robert, compounding and dramatizing his betrayal of Robert because he believes Robert doesn't know about it.

At the end of the action (but the beginning of the play), Emma reports to Jerry that Robert just told her he has been betraying her for years. Since this is not seen, however, one cannot know whether Robert has told her the truth or has simply given her misinformation to hurt her and/or to ensure her agreement to a divorce. A motivation for such deception is that Emma is now having an affair with a writer named Casey, and Robert knows about it.

All these betrayals and their revelations take place without the raising of voices, without verbal expressions of emotion. The most emotionally tense scenes are distinguished not by yelling or running about the stage but by understatement and indirectness – the acute tension created by continual insignificant chatter in the face of emotionally explosive information – and the increased use of pauses and silence.

Appendix 1 provides a brief synopsis of scenes to make discussion comprehensible and to serve as a reference. As this appendix shows, most of the dialogue in the play consists of two-party conversations among dyads: Jerry and Emma, Robert and Emma, or Robert and Jerry. Only twice do all three interact on stage at once: for most of scene 4 and very briefly in scene 9, the last.

Simply counting the occurrences of *Pause* and *Silence*, as printed in italics in the screenplay (Pinter 1978), provides a barometer of the tension in the various scenes (see appendix 2). The last four scenes, which present the earlier action, include no instances of *Silence* (in scenes 6, 7 and 9) or a single one (in scene 8). In these scenes, Robert and Emma begin their affair, and are enjoying the early heady romance of it. Scene 4 also contains no *Silence*. This is the scene in which Jerry pays a surprise visit to Robert and Emma, and the talk is social chatter. The largest number of *Silences* occur in scenes 3, and 5. Scene 3, with seven silences but only twelve pauses, is the one in which Jerry and Emma end their seven-year affair. Scene 5, with six silences and twenty-two pauses, is the dramatic as well as numerical center of the play: the scene in which Robert learns that Emma has been having an affair with his best friend Jerry. Although this discovery does not lead to the immediate break-up of their marriage, it is a point of potential break-up and the revelation of

the most damaging and shocking betrayal. I am arguing that it is the silence itself that prevents this revelation from breaking up the marriage. Furthermore, it is Emma's and Robert's silence in not telling Jerry that Robert has learned about it that allows the affair to continue.

Let us now see how pauses and silences are used to manage (and reveal) conflict in *Betrayal*. First, I will consider the scenes which contain the greatest number of silences.

Scene 5 takes place in a hotel room in Venice, where Robert and Emma are on vacation. While in American Express the previous day, Robert was handed a letter addressed to Emma from Jerry. Robert has waited until this moment to tell her that he knows about the letter, which he left at American Express for her to retrieve. (Stage directions are rendered in italics, as in the script.)

#### *Silence*

ROBERT

By the way, I went into American Express yesterday.  
*She looks up.*

EMMA

Oh?

Indirectness and understatement are the dialect of this world. Knowing that she received a letter from Jerry in care of American Express, Emma has reasons to suspect that her affair with Jerry may now be known. But her response is limited to a terse movement ("*She looks up*") and a minimal response ("Oh?").

Robert then tells Emma that the employee at American Express had handed her letter to him. He explains that he declined to take it, and asks Emma whether she got it. His first response to her affirmative answer is understated and indirect. But after a pause (during which his emotions must be churning), he launches into a long burst of speech about the character of Italians who would give a letter to someone other than the addressee:

ROBERT

Oh well, I'm glad you got it.

*Pause*

To be honest, I was amazed that they suggested I take it. It could never happen in England. But these Italians . . . so free and easy. I mean, just because my name is Downs and your name is Downs doesn't mean that we're the Mr and Mrs Downs that they, in their laughing Mediterranean way, assume we are. We could be, and in fact are vastly more likely to be, total strangers. So let's say I, whom they laughingly assume to be your husband, had taken the letter, having declared myself to be your husband but in truth being a total stranger, and opened it, and read it, out of nothing more than idle curiosity, and then thrown it in a canal, you

would never have received it and would have been deprived of your legal right to open your own mail, and all this because of Venetian *je m'en foutisme*. I've a good mind to write to the Doge of Venice about it.

*Pause*

That's what stopped me taking it, by the way, and bringing it to you, the thought that I could very easily be a total stranger.

*Pause*

What they of course did not know, and had no way of knowing, was that I am your husband.

As noted earlier, such a long turn by a single speaker is extremely marked in the play and occurs only at points of maximum distress. As Pinter was quoted to observe, it is a variant of silence: a torrent of words that are not addressing the true issue, but are dramatizing it nonetheless. The invective aimed at the Italian national character is carrying the emotional burden more properly aimed at Emma. But expression of rage at Emma might unleash a comparably emotional response from her, and the ensuing exchange of recriminations might pose a threat to the continuation of their relationship on any terms. The expression of rage at the Italian employee at American Express has no consequences.

The drama is heightened by the *Pauses* which punctuate Robert's diatribe. Then comes the confrontation:

*Pause*

EMMA

It was from Jerry.

ROBERT

Yes, I recognised the handwriting.

*Pause*

How is he?

EMMA

Okay.

ROBERT

Good. And Judith?

EMMA

Fine.

*Pause*

ROBERT

What about the kids?

EMMA

I don't think he mentioned them.

ROBERT

They're probably all right, then. If they were ill or something he'd have probably mentioned it.

*Pause*

Any other news?

EMMA

No.

*Silence*

ROBERT

Are you looking forward to Torcello?

*Pause*

Each time Emma could be expected to tell Robert what was in the letter – or, more to the point, why she was receiving a letter from Jerry – there is a *Pause*. The tension mounts as the audience anticipates a confrontation, and builds further when no confrontation comes. The indirectness – that is, the not talking about what is obviously on both their minds – contributes to the tension. When all obvious diversions have been uttered (customary inquiries about the health of spouses and children – conventional chatter found throughout the play), the *Pauses* become *Silence*.

Robert then changes the apparent topic of talk, but the real topic (or subtext) is still the same, pursued indirectly through talk about Jerry. Once more the crescendo of the tension comes when *Pause* becomes *Silence*:

ROBERT

*Pause*

He wasn't the best man at our wedding, was he?

EMMA

You know he was.

ROBERT

Ah yes. Well, that's probably when I introduced him to you.

*Pause*

Was there any message for me, in his letter?

*Pause*

I mean in the line of business, to do with the world of publishing. Has he discovered any new and original talent? He's quite talented at uncovering talent, old Jerry.

EMMA

No message.

ROBERT

No message. Not even his love?

*Silence*

EMMA

We're lovers.

Emma utters the most damaging revelation of the play after the preceding silence makes clear that the information is there and can no longer be avoided, covered up by displaced anger or irrelevant commonplaces.

Rather than explode, Robert responds, civilly, "Ah. Yes. I thought it might be something like that." The strength of his emotion comes out soon after, in silence and repetition. Emma asks when Robert first suspected, and he replies, when he saw the letter in American Express. Then:

EMMA

Ah.  
Pause  
I'm sorry.

ROBERT

Sorry?  
Silence

In the movie version of *Betrayal*, the actor Ben Kingsley portrays the strength of Robert's emotions by the distraught expression on his face and a choking tone of repressed emotions on the point of explosion, in the way he utters the single word, "Sorry?" The implication is that the apology is shockingly inadequate, given the magnitude of the offense. The brink of emotional outburst here reached is maintained, but not crossed, by the maintenance of a state of not speaking: silence.

The effect of the pauses and silences on readers of the play depends on their imaginations. In performance, it is the job of the actors to portray strong emotions in their facial expressions and body movements, and in the quality of their voices when they utter their few words. Throughout, the pauses and silences work to cover up emotion – but also, paradoxically, to show that strong emotion is there to be covered up.

The other scene which is characterized by numerous *Silences* is scene 3, in which Emma and Jerry end their affair. They meet in the flat they had rented and furnished as a meeting place when their affair was in full swing. Acknowledging that they have not used the flat in months, they agree to give it up, thus officially ending their seven-year affair. The difficulty of such a separation is represented in the frequent silences which follow realizations that they had been very much in love but are no longer, that for years they met regularly to share love and will no more.

The scene opens, significantly, with a *Silence*. The next *Silence* occurs immediately following Emma's calling attention (indirectly) to the fact that the affair is over:

EMMA

We were going to get another electric fire.

JERRY

Yes, I never got that.

EMMA

Not much point in getting it if we're never here.

JERRY

We're here now.

EMMA

Not really.  
*Silence*

The silence is not a transition, but an action: Jerry and Emma are experiencing the loss of their love, the realization that although they are meeting in their flat, they are not meeting as lovers. Although space does not permit the presentation of the remaining five instances of *Silence* in this scene, they all follow the same pattern.

*Silence* appears with just the same function the only time it is used in scene 1. In this scene, Jerry and Emma meet alone for the first time in two years, that is, the first time since the events depicted in scene 3, just discussed. (Recall, however, that this scene has not yet been seen by the audience.) They meet in a pub, and Emma tells Jerry that she and Robert were up all night talking, that Robert told her he had been unfaithful to her for years, and that they are getting a divorce. In answer to Jerry's question, she tells him that she told Robert about their affair.

In this scene, Jerry and Emma have a wistful attitude toward each other and their past affair. But this emotional distance is disrupted, at one moment, by a memory which recalls to both of them their former intimacy. It is a memory from the height of their happiness, before Robert learned of their affair, when all of them – including their spouses and children – seemed to be a harmonious unit. The memory is described in scene 6, when Jerry and Emma are happily together in their flat:

JERRY

Listen. Do you remember, when was it, a few years ago, we were all in your kitchen, must have been Christmas or something, do you remember, all the kids were running about and suddenly I picked Charlotte up and lifted her high up, high up, and then down and up. Do you remember how she laughed?

EMMA

Everyone laughed.

JERRY

She was so light. And there was your husband and my wife and all the kids, all standing and laughing in your kitchen. I can't get rid of it.

EMMA

It was your kitchen, actually.  
He takes her hand. They stand. They go to bed and lie down.  
Why shouldn't you throw her up?  
She caresses him. They embrace.

Here, the memory of Jerry's and Emma's families blended together in a kitchen (whose kitchen is never known, contributing to the symbolic merging of their families) is integrated into their love for each other. His throwing her daughter up in the air seems to symbolize both the blending of their families and the easiness of their affair. When, in scene 1, after their affair has been over for two years, Jerry tells Emma that he saw her daughter Charlotte, now grown, he recalls the same event, and that recollection recalls their former intimacy and occasions a (painful) silence:

JERRY

*Pause*

Yes, everyone was there that day, standing around, your husband, my wife, all the kids, I remember.

EMMA

What day?

JERRY

When I threw her up. It was in your kitchen.

EMMA

It was in your kitchen.

*Silence*

JERRY

Darling.

EMMA

Don't say that.

Jerry's calling Emma "Darling" grows out of the memory of their intimacy, the recollection of which is represented by the silence.

The scene with the third largest number of *Silences* (three) is scene 2, in which Jerry learns that Robert has known for years about his affair with Emma. The number of silences indicates the significance of the emotional impact of Jerry's learning that he too was betrayed. Jerry thought he had carried on his affair with Emma in secret, whereas in fact Robert had learned about it four years earlier. In this sense, Jerry was betrayed by Robert and Emma. (This is dramatized in scene 4, in which Jerry pays them a surprise visit. Although everyone is labouring under heavy emotions, they all chatter sociably as if they were not. At the end of the scene, when Jerry leaves, Robert and Emma embrace, and he holds her as she weeps. Their shared knowledge is a bond from which Jerry is excluded by being kept in ignorance.)<sup>2</sup>

Scene 2 occurs because Jerry, believing that Emma has just told Robert about their seven-year affair, called Robert and asked him to come over. Whereas the silence in scene 3 represented Jerry's and Emma's realization of the loss of their love, the silences in scene 2 represent Jerry's realization that

he has been a fool, as well as a cad: for four years, while he acted like Robert's friend, Robert knew that Jerry was having an affair with his wife. The first *Silence* marks his receipt of this information:

JERRY

And she told you . . . last night . . . about her and me. Did she not?

ROBERT

No, she didn't. She didn't tell me about you and her last night. She told me about you and her four years ago.

*Pause.*

So she didn't have to tell me again last night. Because I knew. And she knew I knew because she told me herself four years ago.

*Silence*

JERRY

What?

The shocking quality of this information is evidenced not by shouting or talking but by Jerry's silence.

There follows an ironic role reversal in which it is Jerry who is emotionally distraught, feeling betrayed, whereas Robert takes the role of comforter:

JERRY

She told you . . . when?

ROBERT

Well, I found out. That's what happened. I told her I'd found out and then she . . . confirmed . . . the facts.

JERRY

When?

ROBERT

Oh, a long time ago, Jerry.

*Pause*

JERRY

But we've seen each other . . . a great deal . . . over the last four years. We've had lunch.

ROBERT

Never played squash though.

JERRY

I was your best friend.

ROBERT

Well, yes, sure.

*Jerry stares at him and then holds his head in his hands.*

Oh, don't get upset. There's no point.

*Silence*

Again, silence occurs at the point when the most damaging and potentially conflict-inducing information has been confronted.

Scene 1, the reunion between Emma and Jerry in the pub, has only one *Silence*, as discussed above. However it has a very large number of pauses: thirty six. This is partly because it is the longest scene in the play: nineteen pages of script. (The others are between nine and thirteen, with the exception of the last, with only five pages.) Even allowing for its length, it has a great many *Pauses*, as Jerry and Emma remember but do not talk about their former intimacy – emotionally loaded enough for pauses, but not cataclysmic enough for silences.

The scene with the next largest number of pauses is scene 2, in which Robert and Jerry, for the first time, confront the fact of Jerry's betrayal of Robert. The next is scene 5, the Venice scene, in which Robert and Emma confront this betrayal. Thus the number of pauses per scene provides an indication of the level of potential conflict portrayed in each scene.

A final example from *Betrayal* shows the second kind of silence discussed by Pinter: the use of excess verbiage about something other than what is at issue. (The same device is used in Ingmar Bergman's screenplay for his film *Scenes From a Marriage*, as shown and discussed in Lakoff and Tannen, 1984.) In scene 7, Robert meets Jerry for lunch, following his return from Venice. This is an emotionally laden encounter for Robert, who has learned in Venice that Jerry is having an affair with Emma, but not for Jerry, who does not know this. The scene is marked by no silences and only four pauses. Instead, Robert's distress is shown in a wordy silence: an outburst not about Jerry's affair with Emma but about books and publishing. For Robert, this is all bound up with Emma and Jerry: while in Venice, Emma was reading a novel by an author named Spinks whom Jerry had discovered and Robert had declined to publish and who has since become a great success. After noting this (financial) failure of judgment, Robert says,

ROBERT

I'm a bad publisher because I hate books. Or to be more precise, prose. Or to be even more precise, modern prose, I mean modern novels, first novels and second novels, all that promise and sensibility it falls upon me to judge, to put the firm's money on, and then to push for the third novel, see it done, see the dust jacket done, see the dinner for the national literary editors done, see the signing in Hatchards done, see the lucky author cook himself to death, all in the name of literature. You know what you and Emma have in common? You love literature. I mean you love modern prose literature, I mean you love the new novel by the new Casey or Spinks. It gives you both a thrill.

JERRY

You must be pissed.

ROBERT

Really? You mean you don't think it gives Emma a thrill?

JERRY

How do I know? She's your wife.

Pause

Robert here comes face to face with Jerry's dissembling. What "you and Emma have in common," he now knows but does not say, is far more than a love of literature. Robert soon launches a second, though shorter, diatribe, against the waiter and the restaurant, as he chooses not to confront his friend directly with the knowledge he has gained. If Robert confronted Jerry with this knowledge, he could not continue to be friends with him, so the silence is a way to manage the conflict and preserve the friendship. As Pinter observed, wordless silences are nearer "nakedness" than wordy ones. I suggest that this explains why Robert employs only the wordy type of silence in this scene with Jerry. Whereas Jerry realizes something is wrong ("You must be pissed," i.e. drunk), Robert's diatribe succeeds in throwing up "a smoke screen" which camouflages "the language locked beneath it" – the truth about his reaction to Jerry's betrayal. The outburst can be dismissed by Jerry as attributable to a physical condition: inebriation.

### 3. The cultural component in conflict management style

*Betrayal* is staggering in its contrast to contemporary American plays in which characters express strong negative emotion loudly and explicitly. (Two of the most popular contemporary American playwrights who come to mind are David Mamet and Sam Shepard.) The papers collected in Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985) demonstrate that the meanings and functions of pausing and silence vary widely across cultures. It is probably not by chance that Pinter, whose play uses silence as a substitute for direct expression of negative emotion in a conflict situation, is British. The British novelist, John Fowles, frequently contrasts American and British characters by the verbosity of the former and the taciturnity of the latter. In the novel *Daniel Martin* (Fowles, 1977: 139), the narrator observes of the British upper middle class, "No other caste in the world . . . are so certain that public decency and good breeding is silence." That the use of silence to manage conflict is partly culturally conditioned is suggested by Pinter's observation, quoted at the outset, that when he finds actors mistaking pauses and silences for breaks in the action, it is "normally abroad."

Though the particular guise of silence as conflict management in Pinter may be culturally related, the use of silence to manage potentially conflict-inducing emotion is certainly not limited to British culture. An American short story published in *The New Yorker* makes similar assumptions about the potentially destructive effect of expressing negative emotions. Whereas silence prevailed in *Betrayal* until the end of the action (but the beginning of

the play), "Great Wits" depicts a family drama in which silence gradually gives way to verbal expression of conflict which results in permanent hurt. Like Pinter, the author of this story highlights the role of silence by writing it into the dialogue.

#### 4. Silence as conflict management in fiction

"Great Wits" is a short story by Alice Mattison (1986) about a recollected conflict between a college student living at home, named Anne, and her parents. The first part of the story recounts Anne's mounting conflict with her mother, confrontations with whom are deflected by the strategic use of silence. The story's climax occurs when silence breaks down: at a party in their home, Anne's frustration with her father leads her to lose her temper and argue with him, provoking him to retort angrily and in turn leading her to say something whose damaging effects remain forever, along with Anne's regret for having said it.

The first instance of silence in this story occurs when Anne meets her mother in a Manhattan art gallery, eager to show her her favorite paintings. They meet following the mother's appointment with an eye doctor. Anne begins by inquiring about her mother's visit to the doctor.

"Does he think you need new glasses?"

"Yes, but I'm not going to get them," her mother said. "I don't like getting used to new glasses. And they're expensive."

"But if you need them?"

"Oh, I probably can do without them. I'm getting along now, after all."

Anne turned impatient. "Then why did you go to see him – if you weren't going to do what he said? What's the point?"

Her mother was silent. It was not a good start.

Anne's mother is modeling the use of silence to defuse conflict. Soon Anne herself uses silence in this way, when her mother does not display the expected appreciation of the paintings Anne shows her, but rather talks about other things or makes only vague comments:

Anne stopped in front of Vermeer's "Officer and Girl". . . . She waited for her mother to exclaim over the painting.

"I've been thinking about Daddy's study," her mother said. "I don't see how we can have all those people in, if he won't clean it up."

Anne persisted. She pointed out some of the details in the painting – the elegant design of the girl's sleeves, her happy eyes. It was her third-favorite painting in the collection, but she didn't feel able to say that.

"It's very real," said her mother tentatively.

. . .

They looked at several more paintings, but her mother didn't seem much interested, and finally Anne led her to a bench in the Garden Court, with its plants and skylight, and they sat down. "I'm tired," her mother said. Anne was silent. (p.35)

Anne's frustration mounts and the protective wall of silence begins to crumble when she "tried and failed not to answer":

Then her mother said, "How long do you think it will be before the drops wear off?"

"He put drops in your eyes?"

"Of course he did. How could he examine my eyes without putting drops in? My old ophthalmologist always put drops in."

"You mean you can't see?"

"Of course I can see," said her mother. "But things are blurry. I'd have told you, but I knew how much you wanted to show me the museum."

Anne tried and failed not to answer. "So if I took you dancing and you had a broken leg, I suppose you'd just dance?" she asked bitterly. "And if I cooked you a meal and you were throwing up –" She held back tears. "How old do you think I am? Three?"

In the next event in the story, the breaking of silence leads to confrontation. Anne's father has sent her to the New York Public Library to look up a fact for him. Anne had to request that the required book be brought from the stacks – a service to which college students, but not high-school students, were entitled. Angered by being asked to prove she was a college student, Anne refused to produce the I.D. she was carrying, arguing instead that she should not be singled out by being asked to produce it. She ended up shouting and then crying, making a scene in the library, but not getting the book.

This outburst, and its unproductive result, prefigures the story's denouement. At a long-awaited family party at their home, Anne joins a conversation in which her best friend Harriet is telling Anne's father about a teacher's reaction to something Harriet wrote. When her father offers an unlikely interpretation of why Harriet's written assignment sparked the teacher's response, Harriet responds, "Oh, no. I don't think so," and is "not much disturbed." But Anne is very much disturbed by what she perceives as her father's illogic:

But Anne, totally surprised, was almost incoherent. "How do you know what Harriet writes? How can you say such things?" she cried at her father. "And that's not what she means. You haven't even been listening. No wonder you think artists are crazy – you can't make any sense yourself."



Her father shouts in retort, accusing her: "You can't keep control of yourself – just like your mother."

The father goes on to refer to an earlier event: Her mother had bought a rose-colored dress to wear at the party, and had paid a seamstress to alter it, but decided not to wear it because her husband disapproved. The comparison with her mother further angers Anne, who protests in a way that insults her mother:

"Just like your mother," her father said. "Always losing control of herself. She buys a dress in a ridiculous color, designed for someone trying to attract a man—"

"I'm not the least bit like Mommy," Anne protested. "Just because you make some remark about her perfectly O.K. dress, she goes out among her guests in some dowdy old thing – I'd never do that. I'd never let you get to me like that." (p.42)

Anne did not really believe her mother looked dowdy; earlier that evening she had thought (to herself), "The brown dress, to tell the truth, was becoming to her" (p. 39). But the effect of the words spoken in anger was lasting, the fact that they were overheard giving them an undeserved air of truth: "In all the years since the party – almost fifteen years now – Anne's mother has never dropped the notion that she looked dowdy that night" (p. 42);<sup>3</sup> the memory remained, at the time of the story's narration, "still painful." Thus silence had been the cap on conflict. When it gave way to verbal expression, the conflict erupted with everlastingly destructive results.

## 5. Conclusion

The story "Great Wits" concerns family conflict of a less potentially cataclysmic nature than the adultery in Pinter's *Betrayal*. This may be seen to support Saunders' contention, based on his observation of Italian villagers, that the more potentially divisive the conflict, the more likely silence is to be used. In any case, the American short story supports the view of silence as conflict management found in the British play in that, in both works, disruption of relationships is avoided so long as silence rather than direct expression is the response to potential conflict. This may explain, as well, a scene that is portrayed in the movie version of *Betrayal*, but is not found in the printed screenplay – a scene which puzzled and disturbed me at first, since it seemed so out of keeping with the spirit of the rest of the play. The movie opens with a distant view (the camera's vantage point is outside the house, so the audience sees without hearing) of a party at Emma's and Robert's house. After the guests leave, Emma and Robert are shown to be having a violent argument, in which he strikes her. This violence contrasts sharply with the muted interchange in Venice when Robert discovered

Emma's affair with Jerry. Whereas the first revelation did not result in Robert and Emma separating, the violent argument does. The violence of this argument is out of keeping with the indirectness and suppressed emotion that characterizes the rest of the play, but it also provides an explanation, perhaps a motivation, for the break-up of the marriage which did not occur earlier, despite the betrayals that the play documents.

I do not wish to suggest that this pattern characterizes the function of pausing and silence in conflict management in all stories and plays, let alone in real interaction. I am suggesting only that this is the pattern found in these two literary representations of family conflict. The papers collected in Tannen and Saville-Troike (1985) make clear that conflict management is only one of many functions of silence, and there are certainly many means other than silence to manage conflict. The present analysis is proffered as an illustration of one means of managing conflict as found in two examples of literary discourse. The parallel of these findings with the conclusions of Saunders based on observation of real interaction suggests that literary dialogue can provide a useful symbolic representation of human communication.

## Appendix 1. Sequence of scenes in *Betrayal*

- Scene 1: 1977. Jerry and Emma meet in a pub. It is two years since their affair ended. Emma tells Jerry that she and her husband Robert are getting divorced, and that Robert has just told her that he has been betraying her for years and that she told him about her affair with Jerry.
- Scene 2: 1977. Time follows scene 1. Robert visits Jerry at home in response to Jerry's phone call. He tells Jerry that he has known about Jerry's affair with Emma for four years.
- Scene 3: 1975. Two years earlier. Emma and Jerry meet in their flat and agree to give it up (and end their seven-year affair).
- Scene 4: 1974. One year earlier. Jerry pays a surprise visit to Robert and Emma at their home.
- Scene 5: 1973. One year earlier. Venice. Robert and Emma are on vacation. Robert discovers that Emma is having an affair with Jerry.
- Scene 6: 1973. Time follows scene 5. Emma returns from Venice, meets Jerry in their flat, but does not tell him that Robert has learned of their affair.
- Scene 7: 1973. Time follows scene 6. Robert and Jerry meet in a restaurant for lunch.
- Scene 8: 1971. Two years earlier. Emma and Jerry meet in their flat. They are in love.
- Scene 9: 1968. Three years earlier. A party at Emma's and Robert's home. Jerry waylays Emma in her bedroom. He declares his love for her. Robert comes upon them but leaves shortly, suspecting nothing.

Appendix 2 Pauses and silences in *Betrayal*

Scene	Pauses				Silences			
	Robert	Emma	Jerry	TOTAL	Robert	Emma	Jerry	TOTAL
1 (Pub)	—	13	23	36	—	1	0	1
2 (Jerry's house)	20	—	8	28	3	—	0	3
3 (Flat: break-up)	—	6	6	12	—	4	2	6
4 (Robert and Emma's house)	2	1	3	6	0	0	0	0
5 (Venice)	18	4	—	22	4	2	—	6
6 (Flat: after Venice)	—	3	5	8	—	0	0	0
7 (Restaurant)	2	—	2	4	0	—	0	0
8 (Flat)	—	7	12	19	—	1	0	1
9 (Robert and Emma's house: affair begins)	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0

## Notes

Three dots indicate ellipsis, except in excerpts from *Betrayal*, where they are reproduced as in the original.

- 1 My book on conversational style (Tannen, 1984) has been criticized by some for explaining away conflict as misunderstandings resulting from style differences. In this chapter, I confront the issue of conflict head on, suggesting that there are stylistic differences in ways of dealing with potential conflict. Silence and pausing are presented as one such stylistic means.

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- 2 Goffman (1974: 172) discusses the paradoxically layered nature of betrayal in a love triangle so directly as to sound like a template for Pinter's

play: "Over time, the errant spouse is likely to find reason to goad her husband with what she has done, or, perhaps more commonly, to confess in order to provide evidence that a sincere effort is now being made to give the marital relationship another chance. This betrayal of the betrayal is sometimes not betrayed, in which case it is the lover, not his loved one's spouse, who ends up in the dark, not knowing who knows what."

- 3 Elsewhere (Tannen, 1986) I discuss the peculiar nature of overheard remarks, such that they seem to represent the real truth. Quite the contrary, their nature and impact are utterly distorted when they are perceived by a party and in a context other than the ones for which they were intended.

## Acknowledgement

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