

Strategic Silence in Iraqi Political Discourse: A Rhetorical-Pragmatic Analysis

Prof. Dr. Hashim A. M. Al-Husseini^{1*}, Ayat Emad Jasim Al-Obaidi¹

¹Department of English, College of Education for Human Sciences, Wasit University, Wasit, Iraq

¹ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0000-0001-9249-5909> | Email: hilewi@uowasit.edu.iq

¹Email: ayatemadjassim@gmail.com

***Corresponding Author:** Prof. Dr. Hashim A. M. Al-Husseini | Email: hilewi@uowasit.edu.iq | Phone: 009647718193792

Abstract

Strategic silence in the Iraqi political discourse is not a personal communicative choice, but a structural practice, which is determined by the power-sharing system. This study aims to examine the rhetorical and pragmatic mechanisms by which such silence is systematically constructed. The study adopts a qualitative rhetorical-pragmatic framework. From a rhetorical perspective, it employs Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity, while pragmatically it draws on Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle, with particular emphasis on the flouting of conversational maxims. The data includes four interview extracts selected from four Iraqi political leaders representing different ethnic groups. The findings indicate that the chosen politicians rhetorically create silence with the help of polysemy, interpretive communities, and communicative advantage, which allow them to criticise indirectly without direct attribution. Pragmatically, silence is achieved by violating the maxims of quantity, quality, relation and manner of Grice where the underspecification, vagueness and indirectness create implicatures that convey meaning without making one directly accountable. The study reveals that silence in Iraqi political discourse is not merely a lack of speech, but a strategic communicative practice. Its recurrence across politicians of different sectarian, temporal, and institutional standpoints indicates that it is structurally determined by the Iraqi political system, rather than individual choice.

Keywords: silence, rhetoric, pragmatics, strategic ambiguity, cooperative principle.

1. Introduction

The silence in the Iraqi political discourse is not well studied, even though it plays a central part in the constitution, negotiation and denial of political meaning in the Iraqi political system. Instead of being a simple lack of speech, silence serves as a rhetorical asset whereby political actors express strategically implicit meanings (Gendron, 2011). What is not said can have more than what is said (Beard, 2000). Since the political transition in 2003, the Iraqi political system has evolved to a type of shared governance that is negotiated, ambiguous and strategic in communication. In this regard, direct expression can involve political risks and therefore silence can be a more effective communicative strategy (Noman, 2020; Sharhan, 2017).

Although there is an increasing interest in the study of political discourse, there is a gap in the literature on the issue of silence as an integrated rhetorical-pragmatic approach, especially in the context of Iraqi political discourse. Silence has been either considered as a rhetorical tool or a practical phenomenon, without considering how it is systematically constructed and understood as part of recognisable linguistic mechanisms. Accordingly, the present study aims to explore how the selected politicians use strategic ambiguity and flout the maxims of cooperative principle. To fill this gap, it adopts a dual analytical framework that integrates rhetorical and pragmatic perspectives. At the rhetorical level, Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity is selected for its capacity to account for how ambiguity is deliberately constructed and received across different audiences. At the pragmatic level, the study adopts Grice's (1975) flouting of the maxims of the cooperative principle for its ability to explain how meaning is generated beyond what is explicitly stated.

2. Literature Review

2.1 The Concept of Silence

Although the concept of silence is mostly understood as the absence of speech, the scholars stress that it cannot be perceived as the lack of verbal expression only, it is also a form of

communication (Bao, 2023). Accordingly, silence cannot be merely interpreted as miscommunication or the lack of meaning, as the meaningful silences operate within discourse and interaction (Glenn, 2004). Therefore, silence should not be considered the lack of communication but rather an important communicative resource which works within discourse and social interaction (Mateus, 2020).

2.2 Silence as a Rhetorical Strategy

Behnam and Nosratzadegan (2014) illustrated that some people believe that silence is communicative, while others believe that it is non-communicative. Non-communicative silence and communicative silence are different. The former was referred to as rhetorical silence. This type of silence is sometimes referred to as active means since it is selected by the speaker in order to deliver his or her message. Ephratt (2008) emphasised that rhetorical silence is silences that are deliberately chosen by the speaker and in fact, it is a decision made by the speaker himself. In this regard, Behnam and Nosratzadegan (2014) argued that rhetorical silence is the intentional silence that aims to create a specific effect or emotional reaction. Rhetorical silence is not accidental but meaningful, as it is a special approach to emphasise certain problems.

In this context, Grasso (2003) stated that rhetoric is relevant to the study of discourse in general since rhetoric is a subdiscipline of discourse studies that depends on the use of specific rhetorical structures in any discourse to produce some effects, including persuasion. Turner (1991) claimed that such assessments cannot be limited to those structures only. They also include cognitive modelling and cultural effects of language use on the listeners or readers, along with the overall context of communication.

2.3 Silence as a Pragmatic Aspect

Silence is a valid and important subject of pragmatic enquiry. Until recently, most of the early history of linguistics has regarded silence as a non-phenomenon, one of negativity, passivity and simply the absence of speech (Ephratt, 2008). This perception however changed fundamentally in the mid-1970s as scholars started to see silence as a form of eloquent communication where meaning is communicated without sound (Pinker, 1994). Moghaddam et al. (2014) explained that silence is a real communicative phenomenon, whose meaning differs depending on the culture and context. Poyatos (2002) also observed that in spite of these developments, silence is still an under researched field in communicative linguistics. AL-Harabsheh (2013) pointed out that its interpretation requires a deep knowledge of the social and cultural context in which the discourse in question is located.

From a pragmatic perspective, silence is not merely the absence of speech but may arise from the deliberate non-observance of Grice's (1975) cooperative principle. When speakers withhold information or avoid direct responses, hearers are encouraged to infer implied meanings from what remains unsaid. In this sense, silence functions as a communicative resource that contributes to meaning construction within discourse.

2.4 Silence in Political Discourse

Van Dijk (1997) emphasised that political discourse is shaped by who is talking to whom in what occasion with which intentions rather than what is said and how it is said. In this regard, Language is a communicative and interactional practice, where a manipulator practices control over other people, typically without their consent, or contrary to their interests (Van Dijk, 2006, pp. 360-361, as cited in Al-Husseini, 2020, p. 498). Wardy (2005) asserted that language allows politicians to pursue their objectives with the aid of rhetoric. In this context, Obeng (1997) argued that silence is a deliberate rhetorical choice in political communications where politicians resort to ambiguity and obscurity because of the risky nature of politics. He clarified that politicians use silence for avoiding crises, minimise risk, maintain dignity, advance career, protect their parties and governments.

3. Methodology

The present study adopts a qualitative research methodology to examine the operation of silence in Iraqi political discourse. It is based on a rhetorical-pragmatic analytical framework. At the rhetorical level, this study adopts Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity. At the pragmatic level, it adopts Grice's (1975) cooperative principle through the flouting of maxims.

The data consist of four selected extracts drawn from publicly available interviews with Iraqi political figures. The aim is not to compare the political figures, but to show that similar communicative mechanisms are used across various denomination and political positions within the Muhasasa system, i.e., "Iraq's sectarian power-sharing system" Alkhudary (2024, p. 145). They were selected from interviews broadcast on official and widely recognised media platforms, including Reuters, Kurdistan TV, and CNN. These outlets were selected on the grounds that they provide reliable transcripts and verifiable records of political speech. The political texts included in the study were chosen based on four criteria: (1) institutional representativeness in the Iraqi

governing structure, ensuring coverage of political actors positioned within the post-2003 power-sharing system; (2) relevance to accountability-sensitive political issues, whereby direct attribution may generate political, sectarian or institutional risk; (3) clear manifestation of indirect silence, especially through different forms of silence; and (4) availability through publicly accessible and verifiable sources.

3.1 Procedures of Analysis

The researcher followed a set of steps for data analysis, which are summarised as follows:

1. Identifying and organising the selected political texts according to their institutional and political contexts in the power-sharing structure of Iraq in order to ensure clarity in the selected data.
2. Applying Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity to analyse silence rhetorically through polysemy, interpretive communities and communicative advantage.
3. Applying pragmatic analysis through Grice's (1975) flouting of the maxims of the cooperative principle, namely quantity, quality, relation, and manner.
4. Discussing the findings and drawing conclusions based on the results of the analysis.

3.2 Theoretical Framework

An eclectic theoretical framework is adopted in the present study to examine the rhetoric of silence in Iraqi political discourse. The framework is based on two complementary approaches that are rhetoric and pragmatics. Within the rhetorical framework, the study adopts Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity, which reflects ambiguity as a polysemic message that allows for several interpretations, targets various interpretive communities and offers strategic advantage for the communicator. This model is adopted because it clarifies how politicians willfully leave meanings open and evade explicit commitments, which directly serves the aim of the present study to analyse the rhetorical silence in Iraqi political discourse.

Within the pragmatic framework, the study adopts Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, specifically concerned with the flouting of conversational maxims. This framework is applied to discuss how silence generates meaning through the deliberate flouting of communicative norms, especially in terms of quantity, quality, relation, and manner, and how politicians may appear cooperative and informative while strategically avoiding explicit commitment, direct attribution, or enforceable accountability. It is necessary to mention that Grice's model is used selectively but not exhaustively in the present study. Not all maxims are necessarily flouted in every extract; rather, as the data itself defines which elements of the model are analytically relevant. Collectively, they offer a combined analytical framework, and rather explains how it is rhetorically produced via strategic ambiguity by Bach et al. (2025), how it is pragmatically interpreted through Grice's (1975) cooperative principle through the flouting of maxims to interpret its implied meanings, all within the politically constrained environment of Iraq.

Figure 1:

Theoretical Framework of the Study Adopted from Bach et al.'s (2025) Strategic Ambiguity in Political Communication, and Grice's (1975) Cooperative Principle



4. Data Analysis

This section analyses four selected extracts of Iraqi political discourse through a dual rhetorical–pragmatic framework. Each extract is analysed at two levels: rhetorically, through Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity. Pragmatically, Grice's (1975) maxim flouting is adopted, to determine the linguistic mechanisms by which silence is created as a communicative strategy.

4.1 Analysis of Ayad Allawi's Extract (1)

This extract is drawn from an interview with Iraqi former interim Prime Minister Ayad Allawi. The interview was conducted on CNN programme Late Edition with Wolf Blitzer (26 August 2007). Titled *"Interview With Ayad Allawi; Interview With Bill Richardson."* During the interview, Blitzer asked Allawi: "Why have you lost all your confidence in the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki?" (CNN, 2007, para. 1). Allawi stated:

I lost my confidence, Wolf, really, in the process which is ongoing in Iraq, which is based on sectarianism. It's based on supporting militias to take the rule of law in their hands, ... Unless the government decides to embark on a course of national unity or national reconciliation, on getting away from sectarianism, which is crushing the Iraqi people, it's very difficult to rejoin the government. ... It's not the person, Wolf, it's the system – the system of running the government on sectarian basis, the system of running the government on non-reconciliation with the various groups in Iraq. ... I am not doubting whether he's a good guy or not a good guy. ... I am not seeing that we are getting closer to having an assertive policies, foreign policies, which would not allow Iran to intervene in Iraqi affairs. (CNN, 2007, paras. 1,3,5,8)

4.1.1 Rhetorical Analysis

According to Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity, the analysis proceeds through three dimensions: polysemy, interpretive communities, and communicative advantage. The interview began with the question of Wolf Blitzer: Why have you lost confidence in prime minister Nouri al-Maliki?. The question explicitly referred to the prime minister and requested a personalised response. The response of Allawi shifted out of this personal framing, providing the starting point for analysing the operation of strategic ambiguity in the discourse.

The analysis starts with polysemy, where criticism is conveyed through linguistically elastic language which allows different interpretations. This ambiguity is illustrated by the statement "the process which is ongoing in Iraq." It may be a reference to the governing practices associated with the prime minister, as suggested by the interviewer's question, or more generally to the post-2003 political system. Because neither interpretation is made explicit, the expression enables dissatisfaction to be expressed without reference to the political actor, creating non-naming silence.

The same mechanism is present in the sentence "it's not the person, Wolf, it's the system," where the discourse is explicit in shifting the criticism out of the individual level to an abstract structural realm. The word "system" is strategically polysemous, which may be alluding to the institutional structure of post-2003 power-sharing governance, and at the same time, permitting an indirect criticism of the prime minister's mode of governance. This semantic elasticity allows the discourse to suspend direct criticism without naming individuals. Rather than presenting failure as the responsibility of a single political actor, the discourse depersonalises the crisis and reconstructs it as a systemic condition embedded within the governing structure itself.

The disclaimer "I am not doubting whether he's a good guy or not a good guy" offers another degree of rhetorical ambiguity. As much as it seems to be an expression of fairness, it puts the speaker outside the circle of personal judgment, but preserves the structural criticism. The discourse leaves the personal evaluation unresolved and creates endpoint silence by the fact that it does not provide an explicit moral evaluation. In the sentence "foreign policies which would not allow Iran to intervene," unlike the internal actors, which are kept in the abstract through terms such as "system" or "militias," Iran is explicitly mentioned. This contrast shows selective attribution which is externally attributed, and internal responsibility remains implicit.

The interpretive communities evoked by the language of Allawi is not incidental but structurally determined by an imbalance of political knowledge between his two audiences. For the international CNN audience, the terms such as "the system" and "sectarianism" serve as indicators of statesmanlike moderation: the speaker is not going to personalise a structural crisis, but instead place himself above the politics of faction. The identical expressions can be read as political code to local political actors. The reference accuracy of the terms such as "militias," and "non-reconciliation," are applicable in the Iraqi power-sharing system that is closed to the external viewers. This epistemic gap is then taken advantage of by strategic ambiguity: the discourse is producing two consistent readings that do not contradict each other. What is taken as diplomatic ambiguity in the international scene is taken as stinging political critique in the domestic scene.

This dual legibility is not a rhetorical accident but a communicative design that depends on the unequal distribution of contextual knowledge across audiences.

At the level of communicative advantage, the presentation of criticism in expressions like the "system" and "sectarianism" takes the debate off the issue of personal competition and focuses it on the larger governance issues. This rhetorical repositioning will help the speaker to come across as principled and not partisan. Therefore, the speaker gains discursive power by acting not to but by acting to restrain overt confrontation. In addition, the sentence "unless the government decides... it's very difficult to rejoin" maintains the political maneuverability as it turns opposition into a bargaining point as opposed to a clean break. The criticism, therefore, plays the purpose of political pressure, whereby the possibility of future institutional adjustment is open.

4.1.2 Pragmatic Analysis

According to Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, the most significant flouting in this extract operates at the level of the maxim of relation. The question posed by Blitzler directly addresses a specified person "Why have you lost all your confidence in the prime minister, Nouri al-Maliki?," but the whole answer by Allawi does not address this personal framing. Rather than responding to the question of why he lost faith in Maliki, he shifted to the subject of "the process," "the system" and "sectarianism." The answer is responsive enough to maintain the conversation, but deflected enough to avoid giving a specific answer, creating silence where the referent of the question named in the answer is lost in the answer altogether.

The maxim of quantity is flouted in expressions such as "supporting militias to take the rule of law in their hands" and "crushing the Iraqi people," where the evaluative content is strong but the agents are withheld. The information given is less than the situation of communication needs, the audience is aware that wrongdoing is being explained but is given no textual foundation on which to attribute it. This transfers the burden of inference to the hearer, who has to rely on prior knowledge of politics to place responsibility, so that he can make an implicit accusation without direct responsibility.

The maxim of quality is flouted in the unsolicited disclaimer "I am not doubting whether he's a good guy or not a good guy." The utterance is paradoxical in that it attracts attention to the personal judgment that it claims to suspend by foregrounding what it is not claiming. The denial itself implies the suppressed evaluation. The disclaimer transforms evaluation into an interpretive possibility recoverable by the audience without being textually asserted. This creates endpoint silence in which personal judgment is not given, but the implication of criticism is made.

4.2 Analysis of Saleh Al-Mutlaq's Extract (2)

This extract is drawn from a transcript of an interview with Iraqi Deputy Prime Minister Saleh Al-Mutlaq on CNN and published on 25 May 2015. Titled "*Iraqi army conduct in Ramadi surprised all of us.*" Al-Mutlaq stated:

First you should not dissolve the Iraqi army, and the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army. And then, we said since you have already decided to dissolve the Iraqi army, now you have to build a national army, which is not sectarian, which is a professional army. But unfortunately, the army was built in a way that the militias was entered in it, and also it was not built on a national basis, but on a sectarian one. Unfortunately, the withdrawal was not in a responsible way. So the occupation was wrong, and the withdrawal was wrong also. Now we have to act immediately. (CNN, 2015, paras. 1-5)

4.2.1 Rhetorical Analysis

Based on the conceptualisation of strategic ambiguity provided by Bach et al. (2025), the opening sentence "the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army" can be interpreted as assignment of blame on an external agent. On the other hand, it can be a rhetorical redirection that shifts the focus to the domestic actors. By referring to the external decision, the speaker does not have to refer to the actors who subsequently influenced the institution. This ambiguity makes it possible to criticise the dissolution of the army but not mention Iraqi political actors that took part in the further reorganisation of the army.

The sentence "we said since you have already decided to dissolve the Iraqi army, now you have to build a national army, which is not sectarian, which is a professional army". The pronoun "we," whose reference is not clear, generates ambiguity. It may refer to the political bloc of the speaker, the broader Iraqi political group or political actors in general. This ambiguity generates non-naming silence, since the actors who are advising are not named, thus spreading the responsibility of the claim.

The statement "the army was built in a way that the militias was entered in it, and also it was not built on a national basis, but on a sectarian one" depends on passive constructions such as "was built" and "was entered." These structures eliminate the actor who took the action and the institutional change is explained without mentioning the person who facilitated it. This linguistic

option generates procedural silence. The procedure is recognised, but the actors are not named. This formulation enables the speaker to condemn the sectarian reorganisation of the army without mentioning the political players in the integration of militias into the security institutions.

The sentence "the occupation was wrong, and the withdrawal was wrong also. Both are wrong steps, which led to what we are now" is a failure in general and broad terms and not in particular decision-makers. The statement "what we are now" is polysemous, in that it may refer to security collapse, political fragmentation, or institutional weakness without reference to any one of them. Such formulation produces silence on generalisation, as the crisis is acknowledged but no mention of the inner agents and causes is made.

On the level of interpretive communities, the analysis shows that the explicit reference to American decisions in "the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army" and the claim that "the occupation was wrong, and the withdrawal was wrong also" can be interpreted by foreign readers as a direct critique of the U.S. policy, and the speaker appears as an uninhibited foreign critic. Simultaneously, to the domestic Iraqi audiences, the same formulation can shift the focus to the internal repercussions of these decisions without necessarily mentioning the perpetrators. Similarly, the appeal to construct "a national army, which is not sectarian, which is a professional army" may appear to international listeners as a normative institutional vision, and to Iraqi political listeners as an implicit indication of the sectarianisation of the security sector that is well known.

On the communicative advantage level, the analysis indicates that this discourse operates through explicit attribution in "the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army", making the speaker an observable critic and shifting the blame outward. In addition, the passive forms in "the army was built" and "the militias was entered in it" enable the speaker to explain institutional failure without identifying the actors who facilitated it, creating procedural silence, which does not confront local political actors directly. The statement "Now we have to act immediately" expresses a sense of urgency and political determination, but the action is not mentioned. This silence keeps the commitment open and it gives an impression of decisiveness.

4.2.2 Pragmatic Analysis

Drawing on Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, the extract starts with the flouting of the maxim of quantity. With regard to external actors, information is displayed in an apparent way specificity in the utterance "the Americans did dissolve the Iraqi army," which provides a direct and recognisable attribution. When the discussion turns to internal developments. However, the same maxim is flouted in utterance "the army was built in a way that the militias was entered in it." In this case, the process is described, but the actors responsible for constructing the army in this way are not specified.

The maxim of relation is flouted in that the discussion of the crisis is turned back to the past historical decision, especially the dissolution of the army. The discourse foregrounds the earlier decision of external actors rather than addressing the current institutional situation. This shift does not completely break the relevance, but reframes the explanation of the crisis as a matter of historical causation, as opposed to contemporary decision-making. In this context, the responsibility for subsequent institutional developments is linguistically backgrounded, producing a form of procedural silence with regard to the internal determinations that shaped the security apparatus.

The maxim of manner is flouted by the regular alternation of active and passive forms. Active voice is used in connection with external agency, as in "the Americans did dissolve," the discourse turns to internal processes, the discussion turns to passive forms "the army was built" and "militias was entered." Such grammatical asymmetry creates an effect of clarity regarding external actors and ambiguity with regard to internal actors. The pragmatic effect is, a form of procedural silence, achieved syntactically through sentence structure rather than lexical omission. The silence, therefore, is embedded not only in what the discourse says, but in how grammatical structure organises visibility and concealment.

4.3 Analysis of Masoud Barzani's Extract (3)

This extract is taken from an interview with Masoud Barzani, President of the Kurdistan Region. Conducted by Reuters and published on 6 July 2017. Titled "*Interview: Iraqi Kurdish leader says no turning back on independence bid.*" Barzani asserted:

For 14 years we have been waiting and we have been discussing this partnership but we have always been told it's not a good time and it's not acceptable timing so my question is, when is the right time? ... We have to rectify the history of mistreatment of our people and those who are saying that independence is not good, our question to them is, if it's not good for us, why is it good for you? ... The legitimacy of the people is bigger than the legitimacy of any of the political parties or any of the external interventions. I don't think anybody can stand against the big wave of the people of Kurdistan when they decide their

destiny. Maybe there will be some attempts to foil (it)... We will try our best not to allow that to happen. ... I warned if you are not going to have this political plan, the situation will reverse. (Reuters, 2017, paras. 13-15)

4.3.1 Rhetorical Analysis

Based on Bach et al.'s (2025) model of strategic ambiguity, the analysis starts with polysemy. The rhetorical question "for 14 years we have been waiting... when is the right time?" is polysemous at several levels simultaneously. On the surface, it can be understood as a genuine inquiry, a call to nameless actors to explain the conditions under which independence would be a welcome. At a second level, it serves as an accusation in which fourteen years of waiting is evidence that no timing will ever be acceptable and thus the question is the argument. The discourse in this construction forms non-naming silence in which political opposition is suggested but not directly stated. A similar pattern appears in "if it's not good for us, why is it good for you?" the pronoun "you" is a purposefully ambiguous referent that may refer to a number of potential actors, such as the Iraqi federal government, neighbouring state actors, or international political actors who were against Kurdish independence.

The statement "the legitimacy of the people is bigger than the legitimacy of any of the political parties or any of the external interventions" introduces a broader discursive shift where opposition is defined by abstract categories rather than recognisable actors. The mention of "political parties" and "external interventions" expands the list of potential opponents, but it is not mentioned. Rhetorically, this creates silence through generalisation, which does not allow the development of a direct political confrontation.

The threat in the sentence "I warned if you are not going to have this political plan, the situation will reverse" does not define the consequences intentionally. The discourse is an indication of the potential of political escalation but fails to indicate the nature of such a reversal and the people who would be affected by it. By so doing, the statement produced endpoint silence, an effect brought about rhetorically but whose meaning is not specified.

At the level of interpretive communities, for the Kurdish domestic audience, the statement "for 14 years we have been waiting" and the reference to "rectifying the history of mistreatment of our people" reinforce a narrative of collective patience and historical grievance, strengthening internal political solidarity. The expression "the big wave of the people of Kurdistan when they decide their destiny" further frames independence as the inevitable outcome of popular will. For international and regional audiences, however, statements such as "we will try our best not to allow that to happen" and the question "when is the right time?" may appear as calls for political dialogue rather than confrontation. Since there is no direct mention of opponents, the discourse can be both domestic mobilisation and international moderation.

At the communicative advantage level, The discourse shifts the emphasis from the political choice to conduct a referendum to the wider principle of democratic self-determination by putting the issue in terms of timing and popular legitimacy. The frequent mention of long waiting lines creates the speaker as patient and reasonable and implicitly delegitimises nameless actors who still resist the process. Meanwhile, the lack of clearly defined opponents and outcomes enables the warning to be conveyed to various audiences without the speaker being bound to a particular political conflict. By so doing, the rhetoric balances between the decisiveness of the public and the flexibility of the strategies in the disputed political landscape that is informed by the Iraqi power-sharing system. Therefore, silence in this case is not protective withdrawal, but a form of provocation, a rhetorical formation whereby the warning is issued precisely because the target is not named.

4.3.2 Pragmatic Analysis

Drawing on Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, the maxim of quantity is flouted through the question "when is the right time?" refers to the recurring objections to Kurdish independence without stating who has made them. Similarly, "any of the political parties or any of the external interventions" appeals to opposition without giving its institutional identity. The statement "maybe there will be some attempts to foil (it)" acknowledges potential obstruction while leaving both the agents and the methods unspecified, and the warning that "the situation will reverse" introduces a potential outcome without clarifying what that outcome entails. Pragmatically, these gaps stimulate the audience to provide the referents that are missing with the help of common political knowledge. The targeted audiences can still be recognised to knowledgeable audiences although they are never directly named, producing an effect of non-naming silence which allows the speaker to denote confrontation without being politically deniable.

The maxim of relation is flouted through a strategic change from declarative statements to interrogative framing. Instead of stating outright that the independence of the Kurds has been unreasonably postponed, the speaker asked a question, "when is the right time?". This rhetorical

question seems to be applicable to the debate on independence but in practice, it transfers the responsibility of explanation to unnamed opponents who have continually postponed the decision. Similarly, "if it's not good for us, why is it good for you?" reframes the question as an asymmetry of political judgement. The statement creates an implicit opposition between Kurdish interests and those of unspecified others, instead of determining particular actors who gain in blocking independence. By this redirection, the discourse remains relevant and generates conditional silence of the political actors whose interests are implicitly criticised.

The maxim of manner is flouted in expressions such as "the history of mistreatment of our people" and "the big wave of the people of Kurdistan" are lived and emotionally charged, and they introduce the independence project as the expression of collective grievance and popular wave. Conversely, the actors that may be against this movement are only characterised using abstract such as "political parties" or "external interventions." This specificity of emotions and vagueness of institutions forms a pragmatic asymmetry, the validity of the demand of independence seems to be tangible and immediate, and the political institutions that stand against it remain vague. The discourse foregrounds the moral clarity of the speaker's position while sustaining procedural silence regarding the precise institutional dynamics through which opposition might operate.

4.4 Analysis of Vian Dakhil's Extract (4)

This extract is drawn from a speech by Vian Dakhil, Iraqi MP and spokesperson for the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) parliamentary faction, held in Duhok on 29 April 2025. The speech was covered by Kurdistan24 in an article by Dler Mohammed titled *"Kurdish MP Vian Dakhil Slams Iraqi Parliament for Ignoring Yazidis: 'Our Case Means Nothing to Them.'"* Dakhil asserted:

In the Iraqi Parliament, Yazidis are not given any attention our issue is considered unimportant. ... Many MPs were confused and asked, What is a Yazidi? They had never even heard of us. ... It doesn't matter whether you know who the Yazidis are. What matters is what rights you, as a government, as a state, have granted them. ... We have posed our questions to Baghdad countless times, and each time we receive no real answers. ... All that remains is to carry it out — rebuild homes, ensure security, and return the displaced to their towns. But Baghdad continues to sideline our case, treating Yazidi suffering as peripheral. (Kurdistan24, 2025, paras. 3–6)

4.4.1 Rhetorical Analysis

According to Bach et al.'s (2025) conceptualisation of strategic ambiguity, the opening statement "our issue is considered unimportant" introduces ambiguity through the use of passive construction. The statement introduces the Yazidi problem as institutionally marginalised without indicating the agents of this determination. The formulation can be read in two ways. It may reflect a broader culture of institutional negligence in parliamentary practice. Alternatively, it may implicitly accuse specific political actors who have decided to prioritise Yazidi interests less. This ambiguity of agency creates non-naming silence, in which the responsibility is implied but not directly attributed.

A similar pattern appears in the statement "many MPs were confused and asked, 'What is a Yazidi?' They had never even heard of us" which gives testimony to ignorance in the institution and the MPs who put the question are not named. By means of this construction, the question "What is a Yazidi?" serves not only as a personal misconception but also as rhetorical testimony to the marginalisation of the system. The strategy therefore produces an evidential silence in which institutional failure is proved by an example and the actors responsible remain implicit. Such formulation rhetorically reveals institutional exclusion without confronting members of parliament.

The sentence "It doesn't matter whether you know who the Yazidis are. What matters is what rights you, as a government, as a state, have granted them" perpetuates polysemy in a various ways: it can be a general statement about the duty of government, and at the same time, it can be an implicit criticism of the Iraqi state. This construction thus creates institutional silence, whereby the responsibility is channelled to the institution as a whole and the actors that work within the institution are not named. This kind of formulation allows the speaker to criticise the performance of the state without attacking certain political groups within the muhasasa system.

The sentence "All that remains is to carry it out rebuild homes, ensure security, and return the displaced to their towns" leaves out the actors who will carry out these actions, the time frame and enforcement mechanisms needed to implement them. This rhetorical construction thus creates endpoint silence, where the intended end result is pronounced and the roadmap to that end result is not spelled out.

At the interpretive communities level, for a foreign audience, the statement "it doesn't matter whether you know who the Yazidis are. What matters is what rights you, as a government, as a state, have granted them" can be interpreted as a general human-rights argument, placing

the Yazidi case within a larger principle of state responsibility towards minority rights. However, for domestic Iraqi political audiences, the statements "we have posed our questions to Baghdad countless times" and "Baghdad continues to sideline our case" acquire a more specific resonance. In the Iraqi political context, the institutional centre of decision-making authority is represented by Baghdad, whereas the individual actors of power are safeguarded by institutional framing.

Finally, at the communicative advantage level, the statement "it doesn't matter whether you know who the Yazidis are. What matters is what rights you, as a government, as a state, have granted them" moves the discussion out of the area of identity recognition to the quantifiable arena of rights and state accountability, and thus eliminates any defense of ignorance. The construction "we have posed our questions to Baghdad countless times" documents a pattern of institutional non-response, but leaves the instances and actors to be left out, letting the cumulative power of "countless times" serve as rhetoric evidence that cannot be refuted. Moreover, the claim "the agreement is signed. All that remains is to carry it out" presents the speaker as knowledgeable about existing political commitments while endpoint silence on implementation mechanisms leaves the accountability gap intact.

4.4.2 Pragmatic Analysis

Within Grice's (1975) cooperative principle, the extract starts with the flouting of the quantity maxim through the combination of strong claims and missing details. In the utterance "we have posed our questions to Baghdad countless times, and each time we receive no real answers," the speaker focuses on repetition and persistence through the expression "countless times," but the questions, the instances when they were posed, and the authorities responding to them are not mentioned. This creates the implicature that the pattern of institutional silence is already known to the audience. A similar pattern appears in "all that remains is to carry it out rebuild homes, ensure security, and return the displaced to their towns." The tasks are well enumerated, but the institutions that are to implement them and the schedule of implementation are not stated.

The maxim of relation is flouted through the utterance "it doesn't matter whether you know who the Yazidis are. What matters is what rights you, as a government, as a state, have granted them." Instead of furthering the debate on Yazidi identity, the speaker changes the subject to the responsibilities of the state. The implicature here is that it is not the recognition or awareness of the Yazidis that is the issue, rather, it is whether the state has done what it is supposed to do for the Yazidis. This shift moves the debate from cultural identity to political responsibility.

The maxim of manner is flouted in the sentence "many MPs were confused and asked, 'What is a Yazidi?' They had never even heard of us." The example is concrete in that it includes a reported question, but it is vague in several important respects. The term "many MPs" does not specify who these MPs are and the question is not attributed to any particular individual. This creates the illusion of evidence and leaves the actors involved unspecified. Pragmatically, this statement is a symbolic example of institutional ignorance rather than a report of a particular event.

5. Conclusions

The present study aims to examine the construction of silence as a communicative strategy in Iraqi political discourse, using a dual rhetorical-pragmatic framework. The analysis shows that Iraqi politicians employ strategic ambiguity through polysemy, interpretive communities, and communicative advantage to generate silence rhetorically. Pragmatically, the realisation of silence is achieved by the flouting of the maxims of quality, quantity, manner and relation, which allow indirect criticism without direct naming. These mechanisms are repeated in all four extracts, which proves that silence is not a personal style but a conditioned communicative practice that is determined by the limitations of the Iraqi system of power sharing. The findings of this study add to the linguistic research on political discourse by placing silence as a focal and analysable meaning-making category as opposed to a marginal phenomenon. They further show that strategic ambiguity and maxim flouting operate as complementary mechanisms through which political actors navigate the structural limits of what can be said within a system that demands coexistence despite persistent disagreement. Here, silence is a communicative practice that is determined by the political system. Future research can build on this framework to other politically constrained systems or look at silence in other genres of Iraqi political communication, including parliamentary speech or official statements.

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