

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Conversational silence, reconsidered

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Humanities**Abstract**

In ‘Conversational Pressure. Normativity in Speech Exchanges’ (2020), Sanford Goldberg discusses the significance of conversational silence, arguing that, absent certain defeating conditions, we have a general entitlement to assume that somebody who remains silent in a conversation doesn’t reject what was said. Call this ‘No-Silent-Rejection’ (NSR). I reconsider Goldberg’s account of conversational silence by arguing that silence cannot be explained via a universal claim like NSR: I show that there are at least some examples where, absent defeating conditions, silence doesn’t communicate assent—argue that my account of silent conversational implicature can meet and better capture the complexity of silences.

KEYWORDS

conversational implicature, conversational silence, No-Silent-Rejection, silent implicature

In his book ‘Conversational Pressure. Normativity in Speech Exchanges’ (2020), Sanford Goldberg discusses, among other things, the significance of conversational silence. His argument is, in short, that absent defeating conditions (like oppression or simply being preoccupied), we have an *entitlement* to assume that somebody who remains silent in a conversation *does not reject* what has been said (see Goldberg, 2020, p. 153). Rather, ‘[i]n speech exchanges, which are conversations in Grice’s sense, all competent language users enjoy a default (albeit defeasible) entitlement to expect that an audience who was manifestly silent in the face of a publicly made assertion has not rejected that assertion’ (ibid., p. 159). Call this the account of “No-Silent-Rejection” (NSR).

Goldberg defends his account against several counter-arguments, one of which he calls the ‘disaggregation view’. A defender of the ‘disaggregation view’ argues that silence cannot be explained via a universal claim about the nature of conversational silence. Instead, they ‘try to generate the warrant for the expectation of no silent rejection on a case-by-case basis, allowing that there can be different explanations in different cases’ (ibid., p. 183). In this paper, I defend a form of the disaggregation view by arguing that conversational silence is much more multifaceted than Goldberg allows. I argue that we can capture these facets by understanding silences via an extended account of conversational implicature.

The paper is structured as follows: I first reconstruct Goldberg’s account—how NSR works and can be defeated. In order to challenge NSR, I discuss several cases where silence

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As such, silence seems to have a ‘special’ communicative status, for Goldberg: It isn’t a speech act in itself, but it *can* nevertheless give rise to some kind of uptake in an audience. More specifically, not only should we realize that our audience has an entitlement to assume assent, or at least non-rejection, from our silence—remaining silent in a context where we disagree would be *uncooperative* and risk *epistemic harms*.

So, to account for the effects silence undoubtably has, he introduces NSR:

NSR: In speech exchanges which are conversations in Grice’s sense, all competent language users enjoy a default (albeit defeasible) entitlement to expect that an audience who was manifestly silent in the face of a publicly made assertion has not rejected that assertion.

(Goldberg, 2020, p. 159)

Connected to NSR are several claims ‘about the broad practice of assertion’ (ibid.). The normative claim (a) is that ‘under conditions of cooperation, silent rejection is normatively marked’ (ibid.), which means that we enjoy a general (though defeasible) entitlement to expect that our audience *will not* be silent in rejection. Another claim is empirical (b): According to Goldberg, it’s a ‘familiar fact’ that audiences will regard our silence as indicating acceptance (see ibid.). According to him, ‘participants in conversations have a generic pro tanto conversation-generated practical reason to give a public indication when they reject or harbour doubts about an assertion’ (ibid.).

Let’s look at (a) first, the idea that we are *entitled* to expect NSR: (1) A speaker is entitled to expect their audience to be cooperative, and (2) they are entitled to expect that their audience *utters their dissent explicitly*, should there be disagreement (ibid., 164). (1) means that we can usually assume that our interlocutors are cooperative as outlined in Grice’s cooperative principle: ‘Make your conversational contribution such as is required, at the stage at which it occurs, by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which you are engaged.’ (Grice, 1989, p. 26). In conversations covered by this, we are entitled to assume that all other conversational participants are cooperative, too. According to Goldberg, silent rejection would be uncooperative; however, because if you dissent, silence is *not* what is required of you in the exchange.

(2) Remaining silent when you are in *agreement*, however, *is* cooperative—which is why we can assume that somebody’s silence in the face of an assertion means they *haven’t rejected the assertion* (see Goldberg, 2020, p. 164). So, those who assert that *p* put their audience under some rational/epistemic pressure to *accept* that *p* (see ibid., pp. 160–162).

To say, then, that a silent rejection is *marked* is to register it as the *dispreferred* reaction, the reaction we *don’t* want our audience to have. An acceptance of the assertion, on the other hand, is *un-marked*—it is the one we *want* our audience to have (ibid., pp. 162–163). So, according to Goldberg, silence when we are in agreement is *cooperative*: ‘After all, in the joint action of the conversation, to accept an assertion (even silently) is to be aligned with the speaker and the other parties to the conversation on how to proceed’ (ibid., p. 163). When a reaction is marked and *dispreferred*, though, we have practical reasons to make this reaction explicit. So, anybody who is competent in the practice of assertion ‘is in a position to appreciate that silent rejection is uncooperative, hence marked; and so anyone competent in the practice will be in a position to appreciate that audience silence will be presumed to imply acceptance’ (ibid., p. 181).

In summary, silent rejection cannot meet (1), because a silent rejection is always uncooperative—and it cannot meet (2), because disagreeing silence violates the expectation to make such disagreement explicit. These two aspects make it so that a *silent rejection* of a publicly made assertion is *uncooperative* and should be *familiar as uncooperative* to all competent speakers (see ibid., pp. 161–3). And because this relates to how one *ought* to behave in

conversations, interlocutors are *morally entitled* to expect such behaviour. In short, we have a *moral entitlement to expect NSR*.

Let's apply this to an example:

- I. Charly and Burcu talk to each other about their mutually favourite band Queen. Charly makes the assertion 'Queen's best-selling single was *Killer Queen*.' Burcu knows, however, that Queen's best-selling single was *Bohemian Rhapsody*. What is expected of Burcu in this situation?

According to Goldberg, Charly has the *moral entitlement* to expect that Burcu *explicitly utters their dissent* if they disagree with him. Not only can Charly expect Burcu to respond, but Burcu also has some kind of normative duty to do so (ibid., p. 153). If Burcu remains silent in the context of Charly's assertion, Charly can assume that Burcu has *not rejected* their statement about Queen.

Goldberg argues further that silence not only signals non-rejection but can communicate as much as *acceptance*. Background to this view is the assumption that any assertion is simply either accepted or not (see ibid., p. 165):

NSR= In all speech exchanges which are Gricean conversations, all competent language users enjoy a default (albeit defeasible) entitlement to expect that an audience who was manifestly silent in the face of a publicly made assertion has **accepted** that assertion (ibid.) [emphasis mine].

According to this, then, in remaining silent, it's not only that Burcu doesn't *reject* the statement that *Killer Queen* is Queen's best-selling song, but that they *accept* it.

However, neither NSR nor NSR= entitle us to assume that our interlocutor's silence means that they *believe* what was asserted. This is why Goldberg introduces NSR+: In epistemically sober contexts (where the aim is to exchange reliable information and there's only updates to the common ground when there's an epistemic reason to do so), acceptance is warranted only when it is *epistemically warranted* (see ibid., p. 166):

NSR+ In all Gricean conversations in which the **presumption of epistemic sobriety** is reasonable, all competent language users enjoy a default (albeit defeasible) entitlement to expect that an audience who was manifestly silent in the face of a publicly made assertion **has assented** to that assertion (and so believes what was asserted) (ibid., p. 167).

Accordingly, Burcu's silence not only communicates that they *accept* Charly's assertion but also that they *assent* to the statement and *believe* it. These various forms of NSR are, according to Goldberg, part of our common practices of assertion (see ibid.).

(b), According to Goldberg, NSR is moreover generally backed by its empirical, psychological and social salience—the fact that audiences *will* regard our silence as indicating acceptance (see ibid., pp. 168–171). For example, many languages seem to have a 'familiar proverb to the effect that silence is tantamount to assent or acceptance' (ibid., p. 168).² Additionally, in contexts of injustice, silence is very often considered to mean *assent* to the injustice (ibid., pp. 169–170).

An example for the *social salience* of NSR can be found in practices such as the 'tactic acceptance procedure' in organizational contexts, where no objections equal an acceptance of a proposed item/statement/regulation (see ibid.).

²Goldberg lists 10: Latin, Persian, Russian, Dutch, Greek, Icelandic, Spanish, French, Portuguese and English (see ibid., p. 168).

And its *psychological salience* becomes apparent partly through the work of psychologists like Daniel Gilbert et al. (1993), whose work suggests that acceptance in itself is a psychological default. This, according to Goldberg, should lead us to conclude that silence as acceptance is *also* a psychological default—simply because rejection would require more conscious effort of evaluating the statement, context, etc. (see *ibid.*, p. 173).

This conclusion reinforces and backs up NSR (and NSR= and NSR+): Remaining silent in rejection is not *only* uncooperative but can also cause *epistemic harm* in misleading others (see *ibid.*, p. 174). Importantly, however, Goldberg holds that NSR can be defeated. Let's briefly look at this next.

1.2 | The defeasibility of NSR

Goldberg presents two potential defeaters of NSR: *Non-Conversation* and the *Outweighing Explanation* (see *ibid.*, p. 175).

Non-Conversation means that the 'particular speech exchange is not a conversation – it is not a cooperative exchange' (*ibid.*). The *Outweighing Explanation* applies when the 'best explanation of the audience's silence appeals to *other* practical reasons that audience has; these practical reasons outweigh the audience's *pro tanto* conversation-generated practical reason to be cooperative (and so morally permit the audience to remain silent *whether or not* he has accepted the assertion)' (*ibid.*, p. 175). The following are instances where either *Non-Conversation*, the *Outweighing Explanation* or a combination of the two hold, defeating NSR:

- It's *practically difficult* for a hearer to indicate her reaction (e.g. they are part of a huge crowd).
- It's *socially improper* to indicate a reaction (they are in a social situation with mutually known expectation of silence, politeness, etc.).
- There are *serious costs* to the hearer coming with objecting or manifesting rejection (e.g. speech under conditions of repression, etc.).
- *An assertion itself isn't reasonably regarded as part of a cooperative exchange* (the person sitting next to you on the train or bus won't stop talking).
- The matter under discussion is *trivial*, so one doesn't want to make the effort to object (e.g. whether it's potatoes or tomatoes that on sale at Aldi).
- The context characterized by sexism, racism or other forms of *oppression*, where people are or feel *silenced* (see *ibid.*, p. 177).

In short—in contexts where there's adequate evidence to think that one of these features holds, the conversational pressure to publicly signal rejection is defeated (see *ibid.*, p. 176).

While the defeaters are doing a lot of work for Goldberg, there are some ways in which we might disagree with their effectiveness.³ Indeed, one form of disagreement with NSR is expressed via a rejection of a 'universal' explanation of silence—the 'disaggregation objection.' I'll think about this in what follows.

³For example, we might say that his account is trivial (see *ibid.* p. 180) or that (despite allowing for defeasibility conditions) too many bad consequences could follow from this account. For example, a full endorsement of NSR could lead people to think that they have somebody's assent, when they in fact don't (see *ibid.*, p. 184). Jennifer Lackey, in *Silence and Objecting* (2018), makes the case that Goldberg's theory is relying on *ideal* theorizing and that we arrive at a different picture once we think about silence in non-ideal scenarios. Or, as Alessandra Tanesini (2018, p. 120) argues in *Eloquent Silence*, we should consider silences as *illocutions* in themselves. She further presents 'a non-exhaustive and partially overlapping taxonomy of eloquent silences as ways of expressing dissent'. Tanesini (2023) offers a further response to Goldberg's account, emphasising the role of power dynamics in conversational exchanges, and their impact on silence and silencing. While both Tanesini's and Lackey's arguments are very intriguing, I cannot discuss them in more detail here. Finally, Degerman and Bellazzi (2024) discuss the (epistemic) importance of a democratic right to silence - which could be seen as adding another defeater to the above list.

2 | DISAGGREGATING CONVERSATIONAL SILENCE?

As Goldberg holds, defenders of the disaggregation view argue that we need to ‘try to generate the warrant for the expectation of no silent rejection on a case-by-case basis’ (ibid., p. 182).

Goldberg attempts to disqualify this objection as follows: (1) While he concedes that we might be sceptical about the general entitlement connected to NSR given the *many* considerations that could defeat NSR (see ibid., p. 182–183), he stresses that there are plenty of *other* default entitlements we readily accept. For example, ‘the leading view in the epistemology of testimony, according to which hearers enjoy a default (epistemic) entitlement to accept what they are told, with defeat of this entitlement contingent on the presence of reasons to doubt the credibility of the telling itself’ (ibid., p. 183).

(2) Next, Goldberg says that ‘it will not do simply to say that we can generate the warrant for the expectation of no silent rejection on a case-by-case basis’ (ibid.) because his argument for NSR appeals to considerations that *are* generally applicable. It’s the burden of the disaggregation objection to explain how these features of assertion (e.g. that silence does, in fact, usually mean agreement or assent) do not apply generally, and to silence specifically.

And (3) ‘there is reason to doubt whether the proponent of the disaggregation objection *can* explain what needs to be explained on this score, without appeal to *the very features* that motivate NSR itself’ (ibid.)—as, so Goldberg, it is uncontroversial that there are cases where we have an expectation of NSR, and we are under pressure to make our dissent public.

The version of the disaggregation view I bring forward in the following, in the light of the previously provided examples, can meet these worries. If my argument is successful, we have a counterproposal to NSR, and with that an account that can capture the nuances of silence without having to appeal to a universal (albeit defeasible) interpretation of silence.

Specifically, I will show that assuming silence as indicating assent or agreement is not the common practice NSR makes it out to be. I provide a few examples where it’s clear that silence doesn’t mean and isn’t taken to mean assent, while none of Goldberg’s defeasibility conditions apply. I then suggest an alternative way of how silence can communicate, by introducing an extended account of conversational implicature. This allows us to understand the broad spectrum of conversational silence and enables us to see how it can communicate both dissent and assent and things that go beyond that, while thinking of conversational participants as cooperative. As we’ll see, the worries about the disaggregation view can be met: There *is* a way to explain conversational silence *other* than with a general default entitlement, my account makes no appeal to NSR *and* can still explain cases where we ought to assume that silence communicates assent.

3 | RECONSIDERING CONVERSATIONAL SILENCE

First, let me discuss the empirical salience of NSR. As we heard, Goldberg argues that one source of empirical evidence for NSR can be found in the existence of various proverbs across languages and historical contexts (see Goldberg, 2020, p. 169). The various proverbs Goldberg presents are seen as ‘a familiar part of our conversational practices’ (ibid., p. 168), showing that silence is, with some regularity, taken to mean acceptance.

However, it seems there are at least two problems with the idea that proverbs indicate, or even function as, reliable *empirical evidence* for silence being tantamount to acceptance: First, there are *other* proverbs about silence which do not explicitly connect silence and assent. Discussions on this can be found in Mompoloki Mmangaka Bagwasi’s research on the meanings and uses of silence in proverbs in Setswana, showing that there are various proverbs that connect silence with assent in some and dissent in other contexts (see Bagwasi 2012, pp. 187–188). Further, various familiar proverbs hint at a broader and more contextually dependent use of

silence. While sayings such as ‘Speaking is Silver, Silence is Golden’ or ‘If you don’t have anything nice to say, don’t say anything at all’ don’t indicate that silence usually communicates something *specific*, they do seem to support the idea that it is fruitful to evaluate the meaning of silence on a case-by-case basis. For example, the first one suggests that there are situations in which silence is *better* than or to be preferred *over* speaking. According to this, silence might be able to bring things across *better* than speech, or, in line with the second proverb, prevent somebody from hearing a harsh truth (out loud). Another interesting candidate is the saying ‘Still waters run deep’, which we might take to suggest that someone’s silence can indicate a lot more than merely going along with what is being said in a context.

At the same time, it is unclear how frequently used and accepted *any* of these proverbs are. In short, I don’t think that an appeal to the multiplicity of proverbs about silence *alone* can disqualify NSR. However, the fact that there *are* proverbs suggesting a broader use of silence seems to at least indicate that Goldberg’s strategy overlooks some things.

I do believe, however, that further support to reject NSR can be found in recent empirical research about silence in interactions, which doesn’t seem to suggest that silence in conversations *standardly* communicates assent. In a recently published book *When Conversation Lapses. The Public Accountability of Silent Copresence*, Elliot M. Hoey (2020) discusses *many different* ways that lapses in conversations (where speaking would have been possible) are socially relevant (see Hoey, 2020, p. 2). For example, he writes that ‘lapses are a place for participants to orient to the relevance of talking itself as a mode of participating in social interaction’ (ibid., p. 160). As such, silences are attempts to manage many different social situations, which doesn’t seem to suggest a *standard* understanding of silence as assent. Hoey also references research that suggests that certain ways of pausing are a way of delivering responses like disapproval (e.g. see Pomerantz (1984)). Further, research by Koudenburg et al. (2011) suggests that brief silences in group conversations very frequently *disrupt* social needs like ‘feelings of belonging, social validation, control and self-esteem’ (ibid., p. 512) and trigger feelings of rejection or even social exclusion (ibid., p. 514). And finally, Dalia Rodriguez (2011) in *Silence as Speech: Meanings of Silence for Students of Color in Predominantly White Classrooms* suggests that students of colour can *disrupt* white dominance in the classroom *both* through speaking *and* remaining silent. All of this raises questions about the empirical salience of NSR.

At the same time, none of this is to say that silence *never* indicates agreement. Goldberg rightly points out that, specifically in situations of injustice, we tend to see an absence of explicit dissent as some kind of agreement to the injustice we’re witnessing.⁴ However, we should still mention that there can be situations where especially privileged people *should* remain silent so to not speak *for* or *over* the marginalized. This, again, complicates the picture of what conversational silence can or cannot do. Simply because it *is* correct that a failure to speak up can amount to agreement with certain *injustices*, we shouldn’t conclude that in *every* situation (absent defeating conditions), silence will standardly be assumed to communicate assent.

This suspicion needs to be backed up. I now consider a few examples where silence doesn’t indicate assent, despite none of Goldberg’s defeasibility conditions being present. This shows that NSR can’t explain a variety of cases in which silence communicates either disagreement, or something else altogether:

- II. Ruth and Charly sit around the dinner table with Ruth’s father when Ruth makes an announcement: ‘We wanted to tell you something – we decided that we want to get married!’ Her father looks at Ruth and Charly for an uncomfortable amount of time, remaining silent. After a while Ruth says: ‘Dad, this is our decision! Whether you like it or not!’ He responds: ‘Okay, I don’t want to be mean, but let’s talk about this. You are so young!’

⁴Discussions of this specific issue can be found in Maitra (2012) or Ayala and Vasilyeva (2016).

Where are you planning to live? And please don't tell me you're pregnant!

This results in a longer discussion.⁵

- III. Maggie and Remi are in a relationship and have one of their fights. Things calm down a bit after a while, and Remi says: 'We'll be able to work through this, because we love each other!'

Maggie looks at Remi, remaining silent.

Remi: 'Right, okay. I think I finally see where the problem lies....'

- IV. In a scene in the TV show called *Dear White People*, Samantha White and Troy Fairbanks, a young couple, visit Troy's (strict and somewhat overprotective) father Walter Fairbanks in his office to tell him they are planning on taking a trip over their break. The following exchange happens:

Troy: So... We were thinking of taking a four-day weekend and heading up Toronto. See the sights. Do a little legal Canadian wine tasting.

Walter: [...].

Troy: looks resigned and down in his lap.

Samantha: Wait, what just happened? Are we still going?

Troy mumbles: We're not going.

(Pierce K., dir., 2017, Season 1 *Dear White People*, Episode 3, min 1:32–1:58).⁶

In none of these cases, it seems right to assume that the silence means assent. And it also seems like none of Goldberg's defeasibility conditions are present. This then would disqualify our entitlement to expect NSR.

I'll start with II: In this example, it's not *practically difficult* for Ruth's father to indicate his reaction (e.g. they are not part of a large crowd). It wouldn't be *socially improper* for him to say something—on the contrary, it seems like social norms seem to demand that he *does* say something (note that Goldberg says for NSR to be defeated *saying something* would be the improper thing, which is not the case here). There are no apparent *serious costs* in the relevant sense—surely, Ruth might end up being upset, and in general a father might want to avoid that.

⁵A somewhat personal sidenote that might interest the reader: This anecdote is based on my parents' experience announcing their plans to marry. In the real-life version, however, no discussion ensued, because my granddad was literally *just* silent. For the example here, this just seemed a bit too unrealistic. Also that, my parents ended up never getting married, with my mother citing her father's silent reaction as a crucial reason. They just simply never talked about it ever again.

⁶One might wonder whether Troy's statement, in this case, is actually an assertion or whether it is as an implicit question (NSR, after all, is specifically about silence in response to assertions). I do think that we can treat Troy's initial statement as an assertion for at least three reasons: First, there is some contextual indication. While Troy, in the context of the show, does suffer under the strictness of his dad, we get the impression that Walter is so strict precisely *because* Troy fails to 'catch on.' Troy takes his father's word seriously, but he doesn't seem to think to *ask* his dad before doing a certain thing—which is exactly why his dad is quite 'on him' to correct any possible missteps. Further, if Troy had thought to himself that he *has* to ask his dad (even if implicitly) before going on a trip with his girlfriend, he might not have made such detailed plans in advance. But, in fact, he seems to tell his dad about quite a few details of the trip. But of course we might still wonder—why doesn't Troy just say that he's not *asking* but merely *informing* him of his plans, and therefore, his dad cannot tell them not to go? The second contextual point is that it wouldn't make a difference if Troy responded that way, or at least so it seems. Walter, as a character, surely feels like he has the authority to tell his son what to do even if his son is only informing him of his plans—'If I disagree, it won't happen'. It seems to me that Walter's silence functions as a response to Troy's telling, one that suffices for Troy to understand that he ought to blow off his plans; otherwise, his father will create problems for him. But there is a third point: Troy's statement *does* have the structure of an assertion, even if we were to argue that there is something additional going on implicitly. There is little literature about how to understand assertions that are implicit requests—Goldberg certainly doesn't specify what happens to NSR if the relevant assertion has other functions too. It is worth noting, though, that Goldberg's broader discussion is, among other things, about the normativity of address, and the conversational *pressures* this creates. As Goldberg (2020, pp. 15–16 [his highlights]) points out, '[o]ne subject 'calls for' another's attention when she performs an act, manifestly directed at the individual(s) in question, whose salient social significance is to make manifest her intention to capture their attention, and therein to initiate a (possibly very brief) cooperative action with them, where these results are intended to be achieved by way of the target's recognition of this intention. *To perform an act which one manifestly intends to be taken as having this profile is to address another person*'. Troy *does* direct his statement at his dad, addresses him with his assertion *and* expects his father to respond in some way. It seems to me that there is room in Goldberg's overall account for interactions like the one between Troy and Walter, and given the reactions such assertions trigger, some of these exchanges might *look* like they involve implicit requests. So, for the current purposes and in the context of the example, I take it that Troy's statement fulfils the criteria we need it to for it to be relevant in the context of NSR. Note that I also discuss this example, in a different context, in Klieber (2024).

However, Ruth might be upset about anything but an explicit endorsement of her announcement. Again, Goldberg's condition refers to not being able to voice dissent explicitly due to serious costs, which can be avoided via remaining silent—something silence, I think, wouldn't be able to achieve in this case. The matter under discussion isn't *trivial*, and there is no *silencing*. Finally, the 'risk of epistemically misleading others' doesn't seem to be striking here. It seems that even bystanders who don't have full access to the context can understand that this silence doesn't mean 'assent'.

Let's go on to Case III: Again, it's not *practically difficult* for Maggie to say something explicitly. Maggie could say something like 'I'm so sorry, but we can't work this out because I don't love you anymore'. Further, we wouldn't consider it *socially improper* to indicate a reaction in this situation. Surely, it's not particularly nice for somebody to be told that they're not loved anymore and that things don't seem to work out anymore—and usually, we don't enjoy telling it to people either. But there's no strong norm around refraining from *saying* these words, specifically in a situation like the described. It would nevertheless be very strange if Remi considered Maggie's silence to communicate 'yes, I do still love you.' If anything, it seems like in this situation a confirmation of love would be required. Next, the condition of *serious costs* that would outweigh Maggie's motivation to voice her rejection explicitly doesn't seem to apply. Surely, Maggie communicating (with silence or explicitly) that she doesn't love Remi anymore will have the cost of probably leading to the end of the relationship. But it seems that might be a risk in any case, if the answer is something other than 'Of course I still do!' Finally, the matter under discussion is not *trivial*, and the context is not characterized by *oppression*—neither Remi nor Maggie is silenced.

And finally, Case IV: It wouldn't have been *practically difficult* for Walter to say 'You have finals after the break. I think you should use that time to study. You can go to Canada after you graduate' and it wouldn't have been *socially improper* to indicate such a reaction. With Sam present, Walter might not want to be too explicitly authoritative, but saying something like indicated above surely would be socially acceptable. Moreover, there would be no *serious costs to Walter* to say something explicitly, and the matter isn't *trivial* and beyond worth commenting on. And Walter isn't silenced or *oppressed* in this exchange.

We can also see that the above silences don't *just* communicate dissent. In each case, the things brought across via silence also communicate something broader. In Case III, it could be 'We cannot get over the fact that *I* don't love *you* anymore.' And in Case II, it could be 'Oh my god you are actually marrying this guy – I think this is such a bad idea!' In Case IV, it could be 'This is a very bad idea, you are underaged and should not drink, and you know how I feel about going away over short breaks when you really should focus on school'. While in all these cases a general disagreement with the asserted content is present, the arising silences are embedded in a rich conversational context. Similar things can be said, of course, for cases where somebody communicates assent with silence (again, I don't claim that we *can't* communicate assent with silence). Finally, a modified version of Case IV could also highlight how silences can have a neutral or non-committal character. A very laid-back parent may not have a very strong opinion about a trip like the one Troy is planning, where their silence simply means something like 'Noted', but not a judgement on whether they agree or disagree.⁷

In any case, it appears that silence is a richer and broader conversational tool than NSR seems to suggest.

So far, I haven't talked about the notion of cooperativity in these examples, and I'll show how all of these exchanges can be considered cooperative ones in the following. What should first be noted is that contrary to Goldberg's claims, silence in these exchanges *does* exhibit reflexive intentionality. Recall that according to Goldberg, an act has reflexive intentions when 'one performs an act *intending* one's audience to recognize one's communicative intention,

⁷Many thanks to an anonymous referee for urging me to make this point more explicit.

partly on the basis of their recognition of this very intention' (Goldberg, 2020, p. 155). This seems to be the case in the given examples. To stay with Case IV, Walter makes a silent conversational contribution *intending* his son to *recognize* the communicative intention that underlies him remaining silent (namely that Walter disagrees with Troy and Sam taking a trip), in part by Troy *recognizing this very intention*. But *even if* this convinces defenders of NSR that silence can, sometimes, exhibit reflexive intentionality, they still might not be convinced that the above examples actually *are* cooperative exchanges. I think that by taking another look at Grice's account we can clarify my point a bit more.

In his understanding of cooperation, Goldberg follows Grice (1989), who outlines the above mentioned Cooperative Principle in *Logic and Conversation*. As Grice notes, '[o]ur talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did' (Grice, 1989, p. 26). Rather, our cooperative efforts include that we are loosely following a common purpose or set of purposes in our exchange (see *ibid.*). This, however, is not *absolutely* fixed: It 'may be fixed from the start (e.g., by an initial proposal of a question for discussion), or it may evolve during the exchange; it may be fairly definite, or it may be so indefinite as to leave very considerable latitude to the participants (as in a casual conversation)' (*ibid.*). Some possible conversational moves would be excluded as unsuitable and hence uncooperative (see *ibid.*). According to Goldberg, silent rejection *specifically* would be such a move: It means that we don't make our disagreement clear, and dissent without providing content to draw on is uncooperative in a conversation.

This, however, doesn't apply for any of the examples given above. In Cases II–IV, we understand the silence to communicate something, draw on it in our further conversation and see it as a contribution to the conversation that fits with the overall direction of the talk exchange. In Grice's sense of cooperation, these contributions *can* be seen as cooperative ones. Just to make sure, let's look again at our examples.

In Case IV, the exchange is about a trip to Canada. With his silence, Walter *contributes* to the overall topic, even though he isn't in agreement. He actively wants Troy to understand something like 'No, you shouldn't go' and expects him to pick up this message and act accordingly. Walter thinks that his silent contribution to the conversation is required at the stage in the talk exchange in which it occurs, and is serving the purpose and direction of the exchange (see *ibid.*). Note again, that objecting doesn't have to be uncooperative as such. It could fit into the overall talk exchange to disagree about something—it doesn't mean that the cooperation is ended or derailed entirely. While I admit that in the given example it might be at least unclear whether the cooperation has ended, it is generally not difficult to imagine that it could *continue* on the basis of what the father contributed. For example, Troy might say 'Oh come on dad! We already planned for it', with Walter responding 'Why don't you just go to the theatre here, there's a nice play on right now!'

In the same way, even communicating 'We can't work this out because *I* don't love you anymore' with silence can fit into the overall exchange. Remi is able to recover what Maggie is bringing across with her silence: Remi asserts something, Maggie remains silent, Remi understands what Maggie communicates with her silence and draws his conclusion. In fact, Maggie may *want* Remi to understand her silence as a negative answer to his question. Moreover, the conversation could continue on the basis of what Maggie communicates with her silence. For example, Remi might ask why Maggie didn't say anything sooner or why she was holding out on talking about problems.

Finally, in Case II, Ruth's father intends her and Charly to take something from his silence—which, again, subsequently enters into the conversation and shapes it in certain ways. While silence in this situation *could* also be uncooperative (in the sense of ending a conversation), in the particular context, this is not what happens.

This brings me to the next point: The claim that silent rejections generally risk epistemic harm in misleading the audience doesn't extend to all cases of conversational silence. At least in

the examples that I gave above, it seems clear that silence rather unambiguously communicates *something other* than assent. Even *absent* defeating conditions it's not the case that the conversational silences are recovered as assent. In the light of these considerations, NSR doesn't hold.

What we have shown so far is that we don't *have* to appeal to NSR in order to be able to make sense of conversational silence. Indeed, there seem to be various cases that cannot be explained by NSR. One question remains, however. *How* do we communicate with silence, then? How do interlocutors recover what conversational silence communicates? In the following, I will introduce a form of the 'disaggregation view.'

4 | SILENT CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURE

Understanding silence with a revised notion of *conversational implicature* allows us to 'disaggregate' silence and can explain *both* cases where silence communicates something other than assent *and* where it does, in fact, communicate assent. This allows us to understand the complexities and context-dependencies in which silences occur in conversations on a case-by-case basis, while still having a theoretical framework to refer to—a framework that isn't grounded on NSR. In the following, I want to provide an assessment of what such an account could look like.

As Grice argues, conversations work because people tend to follow some default assumptions, which he states with his formulation of the *Cooperative Principle* we're already familiar with, as well as the *Conversational maxims*: Quantity, Quality, Relation and Manner (see *ibid.*, pp. 26–28). A conversational implicature can arise when these conversational rules are being followed, or when they are violated, flouted or clash with each other). As such, Grice gives his familiar three-clause definition of the notion of conversational implicature: Somebody,

who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that *p* has implicated that *q*, may be said to have conversationally implicated that *q*, provided that (1) he is to be presumed to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative Principle; (2) the supposition that he is aware that, or thinks that, *q* is required in order to make his saying or making as if to say *p* (or doing so in *those* terms) consistent with this presumption; and (3) the speaker thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that the speaker thinks) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required.

(Grice, 1989, p. 30)

According to this, *even though* somebody's utterance might violate the Maxims or the Cooperative Principle *on the level of what is said explicitly*, they can be thought of as cooperative when we take into account *the level of what is implicated*. Their contribution is still a *cooperative* contribution. For example, if C asks B whether there is ketchup on a table further away, and B answers by saying 'There is mayo', they might be taken to communicate that there is no ketchup. But on the level of what is explicit, they don't mention anything related to the asked question at all. *But* if C takes into account the level of what is implicated, the message is something like this: 'No, there is no ketchup, but there's mayo.' Further, according to Grice's condition of *Calculability*, the presence of an implicature 'must be capable of being worked out' (*ibid.*, p. 31), and we need to be able to give a reconstruction of how it might be calculated—even if we *grasp the implicature intuitively*. So, an implicature must be possible to work it out *in principle*, and we could give a picture of how it *could* be understood. Applied to our example—if C didn't get what B meant, B could explain the way in which they thought their statement would be interpreted and calculated—they are able to give a reasonable reconstruction of the implicature.

As it stands, Grice's above definition of implicature doesn't clearly include cases where somebody attempts to implicate with conversational silence. This means, if we want to claim that we can implicate with silence, we need to make some changes for implicature to be able to accommodate silence. My point is the following: While conversational silence in general *does* seem to violate the Cooperative principle (or conversational maxims) on the level of what is *said*—we can still *think of* conversational silence as cooperative if we take into account *the level of what is implicated*.⁸

I suggest that we redefine the previously outlined notion of conversational implicature (see Grice, 1989, pp. 30–31) as follows:

Somebody who, by (in, when) saying (or making as if to say) that *p* or by remaining conversationally silent has implicated that *q*, may be said to have conversationally implicated *q*, provided that

- (1) They are to be *presumed* to be observing the conversational maxims, or at least the Cooperative principle.
- (2) The supposition that they are aware that, or think that, *q* is required in order to make their saying, making as if to say *p* (or doing in *those* terms), or their remaining conversationally silent consistent with this presumption.
- (3) The person making the conversational contribution thinks (and would expect the hearer to think that they think) that it is within the competence of the hearer to work out, or grasp intuitively, that the supposition mentioned in (2) is required.

Let's apply this altered definition to an already familiar example:

IV. Troy: So... We were thinking of taking a four-day weekend and heading up Toronto. See the sights. Do a little legal Canadian wine tasting.

Walter: [...]

Troy: looks resigned and down in his lap.

Samantha: Wait, what just happened? Are we still going?

Troy mumbles: We're not going.

Case (see Season 1 *Dear White People*, Episode 3, min 1:32–1:58)

We might want to argue that here we have a violation of Grice's maxim of Quantity₁ ('your contribution should be *as* informative as required'). A flouting of Quantity consist in a failure to provide the appropriate amount of information on the level of *what is said* explicitly, while they can still be informative on the level of what is *implicated* (see Grice, 1989, p. 33).⁹ Indeed, many cases of conversational silence do seem to be violating Quantity₁ in a very straightforward sense: They indeed don't seem to provide the *amount* of information that is required in a talk exchange.

Applied to our example this means the following: Walter Fairbanks' silence violates Quantity because the answer he gives doesn't contain the *required information* Troy would have liked to hear—namely agreement to (or general interested in) their trip. If Quantity

⁸Note that I discuss the notion of silent conversational implicature in a different context in Klieber (2024). I first introduce the concept in my dissertation, Klieber (2021). Victor Tamburini (2023) also introduces the idea of implicatures from saying nothing.

⁹We also often encounter 'infringements' of Quantity₂ (=contribution shouldn't be *more* informative than required). Say C asks B whether there is ketchup on a table further away. If it's clear that C simply wants to know whether there's ketchup, but B gives a whole bunch of other information about ketchup (who invented it, when and where did they invent it, etc.), and what else I see sitting on the table, C's contribution is *more* informative than required.

requires us to give *as much* information as needed in the given exchange, Walter's response here certainly *doesn't* live up to that requirement: On the level of his *direct* contribution, his response doesn't really contain any information. It thereby flouts/infringes the maxim of Quantity and the Cooperative principle on the level of what is said. However, Walter can be thought of as communicating disapproval with his silence in a broadly cooperative way, if we take into account *the level of what is implicated*.

So, how could conversational silence be 'reconciled' so that the Cooperative Principle is observed overall (see Grice, 1989, p. 30) and Troy can think of his father as following the Quantity maxim at least on the level of what is implicated? It should be noted that according to Grice, calculating implicatures is a *rational* process of reconstruction. Nevertheless, as pointed out before, he didn't suppose that people always go through this reconstruction in an explicit or technical sense—implicatures can be 'grasped intuitively' (*ibid.*, 31). I nevertheless want to provide an approximation of such a reconstruction here, to illustrate how Troy might roughly calculate his father's silent implicature (even if understood intuitively).

Even if the precise reconstruction might differ slightly between audiences, I'm suggesting that the *overall* meaning of Walter's silence, in the given context, would be taken as follows:

Dad clearly wants me to know that he's not approving of that trip. I know him – if he was at least somewhat fine with us going he would say something superficially polite. But since he clearly heard me and knows what I'm talking about, his remaining silent in this case makes it clear to me that Sam and I can't go on that trip, and he clearly wants me to get that – and not go as a result.

If Troy reasons like this (or something similar), Walter's silent violation of Quantity succeeds in implicating something—in this case, disagreement with or dissent from his son's plans.

At this point, it might be worth coming briefly back to how 'what is said' is (or isn't) relevant here, specifically in the light of the discussion of (silent) implicature. As we've now seen again, in contrast with the traditional Gricean picture of implicature, in cases of silent implicature, *nothing is said*—there is a noticeable *absence* of an explicit statement. 'What is said' remains an interesting issue, however, in at least two respects: Given that the silence we're interested in is usually in reaction to something that *is* said, on the disaggregation view, what was said just before the silence seems relevant. I remain silent as a response to some statement or telling and thereby communicating something. For example, if Petra announces 'I went to the hairdresser yesterday!' (putting the conversational pressure on her audience to react in some way) and her friends remain completely silent as a response to *what was said*, Petra might come to think that they are, probably, not convinced that this visit was such a good idea. This also highlights that what Petra said is not unimportant for the interpretation of the friends' literal silence in the first case. We can see that the account of silent implicature does take into account the broader context of a conversation and exchange, including what is said *before* the silence, to understand the silence itself.

Let's now come back to Case IV, and some possible objections one might raise about the presented interpretation. For example, you might say that *even if* Walter manages to communicate something with his silence here that isn't assent, the silence *is* uncooperative. Further, you might worry that the calculation of Walter's silence could work out completely different and that it's unclear why it's *that* overall message that Troy recovers. And further, there remains the question of whether NSR is able to take into account the broader common ground between Walter and Troy (e.g. that Troy understands the silence because other contextual information and knowledge he has about his father). Let me address these concerns in turn.

Indeed, you might take Walter's silence as announcing that he doesn't want to engage in this discussion. But as I've argued above, it's clear that Troy takes a message from Walter's silence that *enters* the conversation. As we see, Troy's immediate reaction is to blow off the trip. Would

he have this reaction if Walter simply tried to end cooperation without communicating something to Troy? Why does it seem like Walter makes a silent conversational contribution with the *intention* that Troy recognizes that he, Walter, disagrees with the reported plans, partly by Troy recognizing that it is Walter's intention to communicate exactly that?

While it's true that we could, theoretically, communicate something by opting out and stopping the interaction through silence, this is not what's going on here: We can see that Walter's silent contribution isn't opting out in the sense of *ending* the conversation or *exiting* from it, because the conversation *can* quite smoothly continue on the basis of what was silently implicated. This could look like this:

- IV*. Troy: So... We were thinking of taking a four-day weekend and heading up Toronto. See the sights. Do a little legal Canadian wine tasting.
 Walter: [...].
 Troy: looks resigned and down in his lap.
 Samantha: What just happened? Are we still going?
 Troy mumbles: We're not going.
 Walter: There's great things to do here right on campus – where you can't legally drink. For another 3 years.
 Troy: I'm not sure what's on this weekend if I'm being honest.
 Walter: Why don't you hit the local theatre? I hear they have a great Romeo and Juliet interpretation going.
 Troy: Ahm, yeah. Sure, dad. Sounds like a good idea.

It is in this sense that even a dissident silence can be thought of as cooperative, as it functions as an intelligible contribution to the conversation. The conversation continues on the basis of what Troy takes from his father's silence. Walter's conversational silence wasn't intended as opting out, but to implicate something to as a contribution to the conversation (which again shows that Goldberg's defeater of Non-Conversation doesn't hold).

Another objection might be that we are confronted with a high degree of context dependence. The silence of a different parent, who isn't overprotective or strict, might correctly be recovered as 'Okay, noted', where that silence may communicate a kind of neutral attitude (as mentioned above). In these cases, you *will* need to take other things into account. That alone, however, isn't a problem, but a common thing we do in conversations: In some contexts, your saying 'It's wonderful weather today!' might be taken as irony, while in others it confirms that you also think that it's a good night for a summer party. So, it stands to reason that the same would go for silent implicature. When we implicate with silence in the course of a conversation, as response to an assertion, the silence doesn't just stand on its own. Because the silence appears *in* an exchange, there is shared background knowledge the interlocuters can draw on, even if that background knowledge only refers to the specific conversation and content that came *before* the somebody was silent as a response.

Finally, could a defender of NSR respond that, taking into account the broader common ground of the interaction, the silence could still be explained in the realms of the principle? In another piece, Goldberg (2016, p. 97) points out that '[w]hether and how one's silence is interpreted will depend on many factors: what the interpreter knows of one's background beliefs and behavioural dispositions, how others in the audience publicly respond to the assertion, the prevailing social norms in the community, what is (taken as) mutually presupposed in the context, and so forth.' However, I don't see how NSR, as it is presented in Goldberg (2020, 2016), can live up to this statement. We might wonder whether other contextual features about a situation (e.g. in the case of Troy and his father, their knowledge about each other's attitudes, opinions, background) might influence the interpretation of silence—but I don't see how, on Goldberg's account, this is a possibility, given how NSR is laid out. Silence, it seems, should

only be understood as rejection by an audience if the defeating conditions apply. Insofar as the defeating conditions influence the way in which we are entitled to infer assent from silence, NSR is also influenced by context. But while the defeating conditions include various aspects, they do not straightforwardly take into account what is more broadly known and presupposed by people in an interaction or understood as part of the common ground. Understanding silent contributions via conversational implicature, on the other hand, can better account for the actual reality of *how we practice* silence.

At this point, it should be noted that simply adding new defeating conditions to the list doesn't appear to help either. As Lackey (2018, 80) points out, '[d]efeating conditions ought to be such that they pick out the non-normal or unusual against a background of what is normal, the latter being the default.' However, it seems that there is such a high volume of instances where NSR doesn't apply and that adding new defeating conditions would weaken the principle further. So, if Goldberg were to add a clause that allowed him to take into account these relevant context dependencies and/or the common ground, with this move, NSR would risk collapsing altogether and could even start to look like a disaggregation view itself—having to evaluate, on a case-by-case basis, which defeating conditions apply, what is determined by the context and so forth. Silent conversational implicature, on the other hand, can both incorporate and explain the various interpretations and occurrences of silence we are faced with in our day-to-day interactions.

Two final notes: First, I want to make explicit that silent implicature *is* able to accommodate cases where silence does, in fact, mean assent. For example:

V. After finishing a long comment about the most recent Volvo on the market, Li says to their partner Angie: Hey, do you think I talk to much about cars?

Angie: [...]

The silence could be calculated as something like: 'Yes, you do talk too much about cars.' The account of silent conversational implicature does, very clearly, allow for interpretations of silences as assent. All I'm arguing is that this will not standardly be the case, even absent defeating conditions.¹⁰

Second, silent implicature could be extended to cases of silence that are not in response to assertions at all. While we see this in the previous example too (silence in response to a question), silence could even implicate something in cases where we have a conversation only in a very limited sense. Say politeness norms (which are, in general, important contextual features) demand that you greet an older person upon them entering the room. You don't. In this case, your silence may implicate disrespect, by flawing politeness norms more generally.¹¹

Let's take stock and see whether these arguments meet Goldberg's concerns by providing an answer to his above outlined worries (2) and (3). Let me outline (2) and (3) first.

¹⁰An anonymous referee raised another interesting point worth addressing here: Could silence amount to non-rejection or acceptance when there is *no* pressure that the conversational participants say something, but rejection when there is? In other words, when you don't *need* to say something then silence is agreement; when there is pressure to say something, it's not. While this is an appealing way to think about conversational pressures and how they interact with silence, I still don't think that this kind of case *generalizes* (even if it applies to some cases). After all, there can be cases where there *is* pressure on the conversational participant, and the silence *still* implies agreement (e.g. see Case V. Some cases of failures to speak up to injustices may have a similar character). My main point is that the pressures we put on others in our conversations are so multifaceted and complex that only a disaggregated understanding can account for the multitude of meanings and forces silences can take on.

¹¹Many thanks to the anonymous referee who suggested I include this example. I also want to briefly address another point they highlight—how the absence of a gesture (e.g. bowing to an older person) may implicate disrespect. I cannot here go into detail about whether implicature with body language is possible, but rather want to add that the *absence* of such a gesture could be understood as a different *kind* of silence. I think that there is large scope for investigating silences that go beyond the direct conversational realm (where these 'embodied' silences or absences still can *mean* things). I unfortunately do not have the space to go into detail with this specific point here.

With (2) and (3), Goldberg expresses that it will be difficult to explain silences on a case-by-case basis without relying on NSR. Because NSR is so generally applicable, according to him, a defender of the disaggregation view will have difficulties to come up with an account that doesn't make use of NSR—partly because there are many cases where it's uncontroversial that silence communicates assent (Goldberg, 2020, pp. 182–184). As we saw, however, the account of silent conversational implicature can meet this worry. For one, I showed that conversational silence as assent is not socially, empirically and psychologically salient in the way Goldberg claims it is, even *absent* defeating conditions. The account of silent implicature, then, is able to explain both how and what silences can communicate on a case-by-case basis, while still adhering to a theoretical framework that adheres to Grice's general assumptions about cooperativity in conversations. Silent conversational implicature can explain cases where silence communicates assent, dissent or something else altogether without appealing to anything like NSR.

5 | CONCLUSION

We do things with our silence, just like we do things with our words. Unlike Goldberg, I think that the things we do with our silence are on a much broader spectrum than an account that offers a 'universal' interpretation of silence (like NSR) suggests. In this paper, I argued that we shouldn't understand conversational silence as suggested by NSR.

Specifically, I argued for a different understanding of silence, by showing that we can think of several examples where silence seems to clearly communicate dissent, while none of Goldberg's defeating conditions apply. Understanding silence via conversational implicature can, unlike NSR, explain cases where silence communicates acceptance, rejection or something beyond that—and account for the multifaceted way in which we use conversational silence in our everyday exchanges.

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