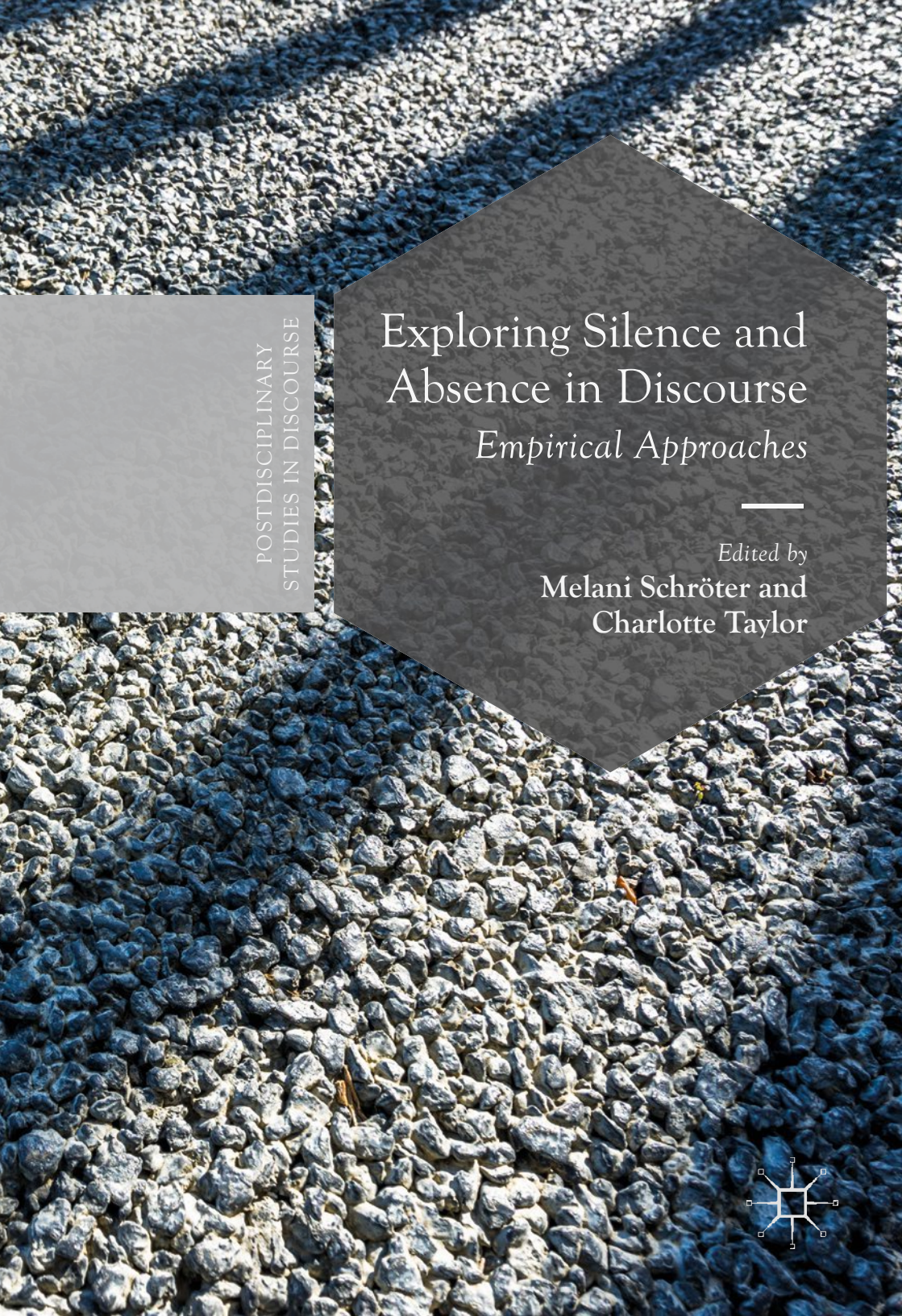

Exploring Silence and Absence in Discourse

Empirical Approaches

Edited by

Melani Schröter and Charlotte Taylor

Postdisciplinary Studies in Discourse

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Editors

Exploring Silence and Absence in Discourse

Empirical Approaches

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Introduction

Melani Schröter and Charlotte Taylor

This edited collection aims to fill a gap in the field of discourse studies by addressing the issue of silence and absence in discourses and by introducing routes into the empirical analysis of what is absent in discourses. While (critical) discourse analysis has been interested in the phenomena of absence (for example, hiding agency through the use of the passive voice), little attention has been devoted to how we can systematically identify and analyse absences more broadly. How do we come to notice absences? How can we argue the existence of absences, what shapes they take, where and why they occur? What sense can we make of them, how do they determine what is present? Are they entailed in what is semiotically perceptible to us, or how are absences determined by what is semiotically present? Can we analyse them empirically in a way that is systematic and methodologically sound?

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What arises from questions like these is, first of all, the need for more conceptualisation of how and why silence and absence in discourse can be meaningful and, second, how we can identify and analyse what is absent in discourse. By assembling contributions that use different methodological approaches to analysing silence and absence, the volume seeks to promote the empirical study of phenomena of discursive absences and to incorporate silence and absence as a line of enquiry in discourse studies.

The contributions in this volume therefore do not so much pursue the conceptualisation or theorisation of silence and absence, but suggest approaches to the empirical analysis of absences. Taken together, they contribute to the aim of this volume to provide an initial toolkit for anyone who wishes to pursue the study of silence and absence in discourse.

There is still a lack of empiricism when it comes to the study of silence and absence especially from a (critical) discourse analysis viewpoint. This lack first of all prevents a better understanding of phenomena of absence in discourse and communication and, second, it prevents a better understanding of discourse itself.

Regarding the first point, until now many pragmatic, sociolinguistic or discourse-oriented studies on silence have either mapped out different types, meanings and functions of silence on the basis of either constructed or context-isolated examples (e.g. Bruneau, 1973; Ephratt, 2008; Jaworski, 1993; Kurzon, 2007; Tannen & Troike, 1985)—contributing more to conceptualising, classifying and theorising silence—or they aim to situate the phenomena of silence within the study of language/discourse (e.g. Achino-Loeb, 2006; Glenn, 2004), again discussing various aspects of silence illustrated with examples, rather than letting them emerge from an analysis of silence in particular discourse contexts. Where there is a focus on specific discourse contexts, the focus on silence/absence can be partly lost, and methodologies of tackling absence are not deliberately explored, discussed or explicated. However, the ambiguity and context-dependency of silence have often been noted (Bergmann, 1982; Clair, 1998; Jensen, 1973; Sifianou, 1997). It therefore seems all the more important to build a pool of empirical studies of silence and absence in specific contexts. Bergmann (1982) argues that within an ethnographic framework, the "context and placing of stretches of silence need to be

understood as resources for interpretation for the interactants themselves, and need to be analysed as such" (145, translated MS). This is in line with van Dijk's (2008) socio-cognitive conceptualisation of context, as well as with Blommaert's (2005) premise that when analysing language in social contexts, "the focus should be on *what language* [and the absence thereof, MS/CT] *means to its users*" (14; italics in the original).

Regarding the second point, the focus on discourse in this volume brings with it a focus on socio-political contexts, on patterns of and resources for social interaction, on representation (including the notion of foregrounding and backgrounding) and on power/hegemony. Important questions have been raised as to how silence and absence relate to these, but have yet to be addressed. Regarding contexts that structure discourse, and patterns and resources available for interaction, Blommaert remarks that

> [t]he emphasis on linguistic analysis implies an emphasis on available discourse, discourse which is there. There is no way in which we can linguistically investigate discourses that are absent, even if such analyses would tell us an enormous amount about the conditions under which discourses are being produced (by whom? When? For what purpose?) and circulated (who has access to them and who doesn't?). It also means that discourse analysis starts from the moment that there is linguistically encoded discourse, bypassing the ways in which society operates on language users and influences what they can accomplish in language long before they open their mouths, so to speak. (2005, p. 35)

The question of power and hegemony is closely related to this since "[t]he road to overt ideological domination rests on a bedrock of silence running through different layers of suppression that […] begin at selective perception of significance and end in the consensus that […] is the necessary condition for the effective wielding of power" (Achino-Loeb, 2006, p. 13f.). The conditions for accessing, producing, receiving and participating in discourse are not afforded randomly, but interact with social status, resulting in "*differential access to forms*, to linguistic/communicative resources, resulting in differential capacities to accomplish certain functions" and in "*differential access to contextual spaces*, i.e. spaces of meaning ratification where specific forms conventionally receive specific functions" (Blommaert, 2005, p. 76; italics in the original).

This is relevant for silence and absence since "[s]ignificance involves something other than mechanical registering; it involves a selection of sorts […]. Therefore, at the heart of our meaning construction process is an act of suppression: hence the need to look at agency in such a process" (Achino-Loeb, 2006, p. 38). Once established, "hegemonic discourse can be at its most powerful when it does not have to be invoked, because it is just taken for granted" (Baker, 2006, p. 19). Unless social contexts change, it can be very difficult to resist the suppression of alternative versions of social reality, of the viewpoints of marginalised groups, of tabooed narratives.

Regarding representation, the discursive construction of reality in "discourse which is there", critical discourse analysis has often considered the question of "which elements of events or events in a chain of events are present/absent, prominent/backgrounded" (Fairclough, 2003, p. 139). Systemic functional linguistics (Halliday, 1994), social actor analysis (van Leeuwen, 2008) and the notion of conceptual metaphor since Lakoff and Johnson (1980) all help identify which aspects are foregrounded and backgrounded aspects in discourses, for example, hiding individual agency by use of the passive voice, by vague characterisation of social actors or by metaphorically conceptualising events which involve human agency as natural catastrophes. However, tools like these are hardly ever employed to decidedly shed a light on silence, and they are hardly ever drawn together in order to decidedly carve out what is arguably absent in any given text.

In the following, the Introduction will serve to propose some conceptual clarification, not least a differentiation between silence and absence in so far as they can be regarded as relevant for linguistic and discourse analysis (Sect. 1.1). This differentiation, however, focuses on the scope and aims of this volume and does not aim to provide an all-purpose definition of discursive absence. We will also discuss a variety of manifestations of silence that are relevant to discourse analysts and which have been noted in previous literature on the subject (Sect. 1.2) as it helps to develop our proposal of how to differentiate between silence and absence and how both can be meaningful in discourse. Following this, empirical approaches to the study of silence and absence as presented in this volume will be outlined, with reference to similar approaches in selected previous studies (Sect. 1.3). The aim of the following is to point out the

contribution made with this volume to (1) the study of silence from a discourse analysis angle (Sects. 1.1 and 1.2); and (2) the development of a methodological toolkit to analyse silence and absence which this volume aims to inaugurate (Sect. 1.3).

1.1 Conceptualising Meaningful Silence and Absence in Discourse

The heading for this sub-section already suggests a delimitation of the phenomena that we seek to specify in the following, and it is an important one to begin with. For the purposes of linguistic and discourse analytic enquiry, what we are concerned with are signs that carry meaning. On this basis, we enquire in various ways how such signs are structured and how meaning is assigned to them. If a sign did not carry any meaning whatsoever, it would not even only be a meaningless sign—it would not be a signifier that we are concerned with, it would be uninterpretable. We do not have to understand signs (e.g. foreign languages or scriptures) to acknowledge their signifying potential and interpretability—even if we are unable to 'read' their meaning. When we perceive something as a sign, we take into account that 'it means', even if a given sign does not mean anything to us at a given point in time. Conversely, we will only perceive absences when there is a potential for them to be significant and, therefore, meaningful. Where this is not the case, we seem to be dealing with what Dieckmann describes as follows:

> "[...][A] kind of inexpressive, 'concealed' silence that does not want to say anything and for which—because of its paradoxical nature—we do not even seem to have a name, or not have a name anymore: silence at the border and as the border of language, to which we cannot get any closer by reading from reality […]" (Dieckmann, 1992, translated MS).

It seems that only when we can hold non-occurrence of speech against the possibility of occurring, and only when we can hold something that gets not said against the possibility of saying it, are we dealing with epistemologically salient cases of absence. The contributions in this book are

limited to such cases. Silence and absence are of interest to us in that they can be interpreted, and this is only possible if they are relatable to an alternative presence that can be spelled out. "In general, for each possibly relevant thing, there is a corresponding anti-thing, an absence. In its particularity, this anti-thing is not at all equivalent to no-thing, although it may look the same" (Bilmes, 1994, p. 73). Whatever signs we are exposed to will always be a fraction of what is possible, so there is a plethora of absences around whatever is given, and we do not usually notice any absences that can be related to what is phenomenologically manifest to us. Only when a thinkable alternative occurs to us will we begin to perceive its absence as meaningful. Wherever this is not the case, absences remain unnoticed because they are meaningless, and meaningless absences are outside of human perception. We would not notice the existence of an absence outside of a perceptive framework that renders them meaningful on the basis of an imaginable alternative of presence.

This is a very provisional and much too brief claim for the broad question about human perception lurking behind it. However, the point that we are trying to make is that as linguists and discourse analysts, we only need to be concerned with *meaningful* absences and that for absences to be meaningful, they require an arguable alternative of presence.

To help distinguish between absence and silence, it is useful to refer to the notion of discourse that is most prevalent in Critical Discourse Studies, i.e. discourse as ways of speaking that are determined by and which at the same time reflect social, political, historical and cultural contexts (cf. Fairclough, Mulderrig, & Wodak, 2011). Following this line of thinking, which is broadly based on Foucault's works, such contexts determine what is thinkable and speakable, and they determine what, out of the speakable, is considered more or less salient and which ways of saying are more or less socially acceptable at a given time and place. In this view, choices of individual speakers are predetermined by the discursive contexts in which they find themselves, which make certain topics, propositions and perspectives more likely than others. Following this line of thought, the focus moves from the agency of individual speakers to the discursive constellations around them, even though one line of enquiry might be to what extent individual speakers reproduce or resist preformed patterns especially of hegemonic discourse. It would also be important to

investigate development and emergences of discourse and to look at processes of narrowing down and ordering of discourse, considering the exclusions involved in this process. When it comes to agency in the establishment of hegemony, it would be more suitable to assume, rather than intentionality, constellations of self-interests (cf. Achino-Loeb, 2006, p. 13) that are pursued 'naturally' and not with the conscious aim of producing a discourse that is shaped in a certain way.

We consider *absence* in two ways: first, as an umbrella term to contain all forms of perceptible and meaningful absences in discourse and communication, including the various forms of silences discussed in the following. Second, and more specifically, absence is what arises from discursive constellations as sketched above. Studying absence in discourse therefore requires a framework that allows us to reconstruct, to re-think what is given (cf. von Münchow in Chap. 8 in this volume) with a view on alternatives afforded by, but possibly also beyond the determining contexts (e.g. when using comparisons to different contexts). Achino-Loeb (2006) points out the role of selectivity and salience in producing structural, discursive absence. Choices as to what is considered to merit perception and communication are usually not made with the deliberate intention to exclude others, but absences result from a process of choosing, they are the other side of the coin that results in the presence of the chosen. Most speakers' choices are not made with a view to producing a certain order of discourse, while at the same time contributing to it, which might most adequately be imagined as an invisible hand process (Keller, 1994).

In contrast to absence, *silence* can be ascribed to individual speakers when they make a more conscious and intentional choice about what (not) to say—when they choose to say nothing, but instead could have said something. (Please note that 'saying or speech' in the following is meant to include other modes of communication without having to spell out each possible mode in every instance.) Schröter (2013) discusses at length how silence becomes meaningful when there is (1) an intention to be silent, which determines the logical existence of a silence from the point of production; (2) a disappointed expectation of speech, which determines the phenomenological existence of a silence from the point of perception; and (3) that what is not said is relevant to the context or situation at hand.

Concealment and *omission* can also be assigned to individual agency. We regard silence then as a term to also include concealment and omission because both of these link with intentionality. As explained in Schröter (2013), *concealment* can be considered as "silence about X", which might go along with talking about Y instead, but the identification of concealment still relies on intentionality, disappointed expectation to talk about X and relevance of X, just as with silence above. *Omission* is a term that can sometimes be found in the literature on silence, and while it, like concealment, seems to entail a specific X, it appears to focus on removal (possibly of something that was present before or elsewhere) (cf. Jaworski & Galasiński, 2000) and, unlike concealment, less on being silent by hiding X from the start or putting forward something else instead. There is a link to secrecy here (cf. Nippert-Eng, 2010; Roberts 2006; Black 2006) as well as other constellations that have been noted in the existing literature on silence; professional obligations of silence (Bellebaum, 1992, pp. 81–128; Ulsamer, 2002, pp. 225–236) and rights to silence (Cotterill, 2005; Kurzon, 1995, 1998; Garbutt, Chap. 12 in this volume), all of which relate to individual agency, even if in part afforded by rules and regulations. Such rules and regulations need to be consciously adhered to, maintained and reinforced by individuals subscribing to them when they become part of the relevant professions. This angle also helps characterise *conventional silence*, i.e. silence that is related to certain situations and assigned a certain meaning; minutes of silence or silence at a funeral which is meant to signify commemoration or mourning. Similar to professional secrecy, speakers make conscious decisions to adhere to silences predetermined by specific cultural conventions of which they are conscious, and it would be possible, if they bear the social cost, for them to act out of line.

Of course, we can also investigate discourses (and silences) of individuals or how they link in to (absences in) discourse as above, but then we are moving between the level of intentional choice and contextual predetermination. The interplay between the two levels is perhaps most interesting when looking at *taboo* and *self-censorship*. Taboos are collective, arising from discursive predetermination beyond the decisions of individuals (cf. Zerubavel, 2006). To adhere to taboos, we do not normally have to actively suppress that which would challenge a taboo

because we normally adhere to norms of sayability either through self-censorship or because it does not occur to us to say something that would cross the boundaries of what is socially acceptable to say. However, individuals might face a situation in which a conscious decision is required as to whether or not to break a taboo. Similarly, adherence to professional obligations of silence involves less of a conscious decision than breaching such rules and, for instance, becoming a whistle-blower.

The notion of contextual predetermination does not deny that powerful individuals can (and intentionally so) shape discourse and thereby also determine what remains unsaid, but in order to find evidence for this, we would have to refer back to discourse as above, and moreover, these would be exceptionally powerful speakers who can steer, but not provide, a whole body of communication that sustains a discourse which shapes what can (or cannot) be said for the speakers involved in it.

Censorship (cf. Anthonissen, 2003, 2008; Galasiński, 2003) needs to be regarded as a form of *silencing*, but these two terms again point towards the level of discourse and predetermined ways of speaking versus individual choice and agency. Censorship involves powerful actors' attempts to control, restrict and suppress speech by others in specific ways. Silencing can be achieved through censorship, but certain speakers or groups or points of view can also be silenced as a consequence of their marginalisation determined by the order of discourse that neither affords salience to certain points of view, nor resonance for voices from groups who are not perceived to be proper, or entitled, or participating speakers.

> A major function of silencing is to contain […] opposition by identifying categories of persons and ideas about which speech and texts will be unacceptable, that is, categories of forbidden speech and 'forbidden reading'. This process is complemented by the circulation of acceptable speech and texts that express some things at the expense of others; it is thus a discursive displacement. (Thiesmeyer, 2003, p. 9)

What is *unsaid*, or, in nominalised form, the unsaid (cf. Jalbert, 1994), is not used specifically as a term here, nor has it been defined in existing literature on silence. We use it as a synonym to loosely describe any of the

absence phenomena above in order to vary expression, but it does not designate a specific form or occurrence of absence.

As we aimed to show above, we think that *intentionality* and *individual agency* provide a useful angle for distinguishing and characterising different phenomena of absence and silence. We could envisage a scale between low and high intentionality. We argue that absence in discourse arises from orders of discourse that are usually brought about without the intention of producing it in the shape that it takes. Conspiracies of silence, taboos and silencing (e.g. of marginalised groups and points of view) are related phenomena; we might speak in ways that contribute to establishing these phenomena without wanting to establish them, hence our intention to produce such absences is low, and they can only be produced by collective, rather than individual agency. Given the discourse analytical orientation of this volume, most of the contributions deal with absence. This is particularly true for the contributions that are based on media discourse.

Self-censorship can result in absences as an unconscious by-product of conspiracies of silence, but it can also be the result of a more deliberate decision to remain silent in order not to rock the boat. Similarly, adherence to silence required by professional roles involves intentional choices, but these are pre-shaped, in a recognised way, by rules and regulations. Adhering to conventional silences equally requires a degree of intentionality, but less so than deliberate silences. Perhaps due to the lesser dependency of these types of silences on discourse contexts, none of the contributions in this volume deal with them.

More deliberate silences can include concealment, censorship, omission, evasion, lying and deception or metalinguistic comments such as announcements to not say anything. They require individual and intentional agency. These may occur in various discourse contexts, but from a discourse analytical point of view, they are less of interest as occasional, individual occurrences, but more so when they are related to discourse contexts or social norms (e.g. avoiding taboo words, see Thurlow and Moshin's Chap. 11 in this volume) or genres (e.g. police interviews, see Garbutt's Chap. 12 in this volume).

1.2 Manifestations of Silence and Absence

Absences can be as multi-layered as discourses themselves, in terms of the levels of language use at which they can manifest and include phenomena dealt with by different approaches to linguistic description. They can manifest, for example, as vague terms, ellipsis, implication and presupposition. They can arise from the interplay of highlighting and hiding or foregrounding and backgrounding in the framing of topics, use of the passive voice or in metaphorical conceptualisation. They can arise from the structure of conversations, e.g. a missing second move in an adjacency pair, or from deictic expressions with a contextually unclear reference. They can involve strategies of evasion (e.g. Bull, 2003) and deception (Galasiński, 2000) and such strategies can involve a range of means to achieve the intended silence or concealment. Silences can also be symbolically represented, e.g. as *** or through verbalising an intention to remain silent.

It is neither our aim here to establish a full list of possible phenomena of absence, nor to be prescriptive about what phenomena can constitute absences. On the one hand, it is open to dispute whether presupposition and implicature are by default forms of absence, when it would be an illusion to think that direct and all-explicating speech was possible. On the other hand, they can be means used to omit and conceal. What is therefore important in any discourse analyses of absence, is to deliver, by means of contextualisation, description and interpretation, a convincing argument as to how and why phenomena such as the above constitute, produce or indicate absences in the discourses under investigation.

The three previous verbs (constitute, produce, indicate) have been piled up deliberately, because they indicate different angles under which phenomena can be seen to relate to absences in discourse. Rather than trying to provide a list of possible absence phenomena, especially given that, like most signs, they might have varying functions and meanings according to context, it seems more useful to find a wider angle.

Looking at a phenomenon that constitutes an absence means establishing what can be regarded as an absence (of something else) in itself, i.e. this is about identifying or locating absences by means of analysis. Part I of this volume, 'Comparison as Means to Identify Silence and Absence', contains

contributions that propose comparison as a way to identify absence in discourse. Manuel Alcántara-Plá and Ana Ruiz-Sánchez look in Chap. 2 at missing statements relating to the immigration of refugees in the main parties' election manifestoes and in candidates' tweets by comparing these against the omnipresence of the topic in national newspapers. In Chap. 4, Alan Partington looks at the absence of the topic of the early Arab Spring uprisings in British newspaper discourse by comparing their references to Middle Eastern and North African countries to White House press briefings and CNN coverage. In Chap. 6, Kieran O'Halloran analyses a newspaper opinion piece and shows how it builds up a straw man argument against an aspect of a parliamentary debate that was largely absent, by comparing it to the latter. Cecilia Strand, in Chap. 5, identifies the voices of sexual minorities as absent from Ugandan mainstream media by contrasting discriminatory media reporting with tweets by the Sexual Minorities Uganda network. In Chap. 3, Sameera Durrani compares visual representations of Iran and Pakistan in *Time* magazine and uses comparison of the representations of these two countries to identify absences in each of them. Jiayi Wang and Dániel Kádár deal with smog in Chinese news media in Chap. 7 and show how there is little smog reporting during the times of greatest pollution, but an increase when triggered by official political announcements. Bridging over to Part II of this volume, 'Exploring Means that Produce Silence and Absence', they also show that vagueness and backgrounding of causes and agency contribute to silences about smog in Chinese media discourse.

Looking at phenomena that produce absences means that certain aspects of language use can result in absences (e.g. framing, metaphorical conceptualisation). Part II of this volume contains contributions that investigate how the interplay of a variety of means can produce discursive absences. Patricia von Münchow analyses in Chap. 8 how dominant and obvious representations in parenting discourse constitute an absence of fathers as active caretakers of their children. Nina Venkatamaran looks at textual silences in discourses about environmental refugees in Chap. 9 and shows how presupposition, implicature, metaphor, nominalisation and transitivity patterns produce the effect of silencing aspects of climate change and, as a consequence, environmental refugees. In Chap. 10. Taiwo Oluwaseun Ehineni analyses headlines of Nigerian newspaper articles about the abduction of more than 200 girls by the radical Islam sect Boko Haram. He

illustrates how topicalisation, omission, ellipsis and the use of deixis, rhetorical questions, acronyms and numbers contribute to foregrounding a small number of girls who were released while backgrounding the large number of girls who were still held captive by Boko Haram.

Looking at phenomena that indicate absences means looking at how given phenomena relate to either a largely absent signified (e.g. vagueness) or signifier, often metalinguistically. Part III of this volume, 'Analysing Surface Indicators of Silence and Absence' contains contributions that look at such surface indicators of silence and absence. In Chap. 13, Dorte Madsen uses a discourse theoretical approach to look at 'interdisciplinarity' as an empty signifier, arguing that the signified remains largely absent through lack of specification. In Chap. 11, Crispin Thurlow and Jamie Moshin illustrate various ways of omitting and replacing swear words in newspaper discourse—and thereby also note how these work to highlight the ostentatiously absent. Joanna Garbutt looks in Chap. 12 at the use of 'no comment' as a reply that indicates absence of the expected answer in police interviews.

1.3 Methodological Approaches to Meaningful Silence and Absence in Discourse

Referring back to Blommaert's remark quoted above, we agree that "[t]he emphasis on linguistic analysis implies an emphasis on available discourse, discourse which is there" (2005, p. 35). What is given offers itself to analysis, whereas what is absent often remains unnoticed and opaque. Zerubavel further asserts the difficulty of studying silence empirically:

> As one might expect, what we ignore or avoid socially is often also ignored or avoided academically, and conspiracies of silence are therefore still a somewhat undertheorized as well as understudied phenomenon. Furthermore, they typically consist of nonoccurrences, which, by definition, are rather difficult to observe. After all, it is much easier to study what people do discuss than what they do not (not to mention the difficulty of telling the difference between simply not talking about something and specifically avoiding it). (Zerubavel, 2006, p. 13)