



UNSPOKEN TRAUMA: INTERPRETING SILENCE AND OMISSION THROUGH A SOCIO-COGNITIVE DISCOURSE FRAMEWORK IN A LITTLE LIFE

Karisma Erikson Tarigan¹

¹English Literature Study Program, Faculty of Cultural Sciences, Universitas Katolik Santo Thomas, Indonesia
Email: erick_tarigan2006@yahoo.com¹

Abstract

Silence and omission play a significant role in discourse, particularly in representing complex experiences such as trauma; however, they are often overlooked as meaningful linguistic elements. While previous studies have examined trauma in literary texts, limited research has analyzed how silence and omission are systematically realized at the clause level and interpreted through a socio-cognitive perspective. This study addresses that gap by investigating the linguistic realization and functions of silence and omission in Hanya Yanagihara's *A Little Life*. This research employs a qualitative descriptive design with clause-level analysis as the unit of investigation. The data consist of 387 clauses selected through a systematic data reduction process from an initial dataset, focusing on expressions that reflect silence, omission, avoidance, and indirect discourse. The analysis applies a socio-cognitive discourse framework to interpret how these linguistic patterns relate to mental processes and social interaction. The findings show that silence and omission are realized through various forms, including explicit silence, vague or incomplete expressions, avoidance strategies, non-verbal communication, and minimal responses. The distribution of data indicates that cognitive and emotional processing is the most dominant pattern (39.8%), followed by silence and non-verbal expression (18.3%), avoidance and deflection (15.0%), omission and concealment (13.7%), and socio-discursive regulation (13.2%). These results demonstrate that silence and omission function as mechanisms for expressing unspoken trauma through cognitive limitation, emotional suppression, and socially regulated interaction. This study contributes to discourse analysis by demonstrating that meaning is constructed not only through explicit language but also through absence and indirect expression. It also highlights the relevance of a socio-cognitive approach in understanding how language, cognition, and social context interact in representing trauma.

Keywords: avoidance; discourse analysis; omission; silence; socio-cognitive

INTRODUCTION

Language is a system that allows meaning to be diminished, hidden, or left unsaid in addition to being a means of communicating meaning. Communication in language is influenced not just by explicit statements but also by silences, omissions, and inferred statements. In recent discourse studies, this viewpoint has drawn more attention, especially when it comes to complicated human situations like trauma (AL-Jahdhami, 2018; Ephratt, 2016). According to recent study, silence is a significant communicative act that reflects social, psychological, and emotional processes rather than just being the lack of speech (Bao, 2025). When events are too overwhelming to describe, people frequently turn to silence or indirect expression, according to research in trauma discourse (T. van Dijk, 2007; Verboon et al., 2025). This suggests that meaning can be produced through absence just as much as through presence. Silence has also been recognized as a discursive tactic used by speakers to manage identity, control engagement, and negotiate delicate meanings in social settings (Ephratt, 2016).

Silence and omission are particularly important in literary discourse since stories often use fragmentation, indirectness, and implicit meaning to convey interior experience. Trauma is frequently portrayed through narrative gaps, fragmentary statements, and avoidance of explicit reference rather than through direct depiction, according to recent literary analysis research (Balaev, 2017; Ganteau & Onega, 2007). Silence is a key mechanism in meaning-making because of these characteristics, which enable readers to decipher what is left unsaid. In this way, omission and silence are active storytelling techniques that show the limitations of language in expressing emotional and psychological complexity rather than passive components. This is particularly noticeable in contemporary trauma-centered fiction, where characters' traumas are not explicitly narrated but rather mediated through reluctance, denial, and indirect discourse (Chakraborty, 2023; Luckhurst, 2024).

A Little Life by Hanya Yanagihara is one piece of literature that effectively captures this phenomenon. The book is distinguished by its deep emotional depth and intricate narrative structure as it delves into themes of trauma, identity, and interpersonal connections. Characters often rely on non-verbal clues, evasive expressions, scant responses, and avoiding direct queries throughout the story. These patterns imply that important parts of their experiences are left unsaid, suggesting that silence and omission are crucial to the construction of meaning. As a result, the book offers a pertinent framework for analyzing how discourse represents unsaid suffering.

From a theoretical standpoint, examining such events necessitates a method that links language to social interaction and cognition. The socio-cognitive approach to discourse offers an appropriate framework since it clarifies how people's common knowledge and mental images influence discourse. This viewpoint holds that social norms and cognitive processes have an impact on both what is expressed and what is not (T. van Dijk, 2007). This suggests that silence and omission are systematically manufactured based on how people perceive, interpret, and control their experiences within a social context rather than being random absences. Consequently, a deeper comprehension of how unacknowledged trauma is formed through both language and non-linguistic ways is made possible by a socio-cognitive framework.

There is still a sizable gap in the body of literature, despite discourse studies' increasing focus on silence, omission, and trauma. Exploring trauma as a general subject without closely exploring its language realization, many earlier studies have tended to concentrate on thematic or narrative analysis (Balaev, 2017). Other studies talk about silence in general terms, but they don't look at how it functions at the level of particular linguistic pieces like clauses. Furthermore, only a small amount of research has combined a thorough clause-level examination of literary language with a socio-cognitive approach. Because of this, there is currently a lack of knowledge on how silence and omission are systematically

realized in language and how they serve to reflect unacknowledged pain within an organized analytical framework.

By analyzing the linguistic realization and purposes of silence and omission at the phrase level in *A Little Life*, this study fills that gap. This study is innovative since it incorporates three important elements. First, it examines silence and omission as recognizable linguistic patterns at the phrase level as well as abstract concepts. Second, it interprets how these patterns represent social interaction and mental processes using a socio-cognitive discourse framework. Third, it focuses on how implicit and indirect discourse is used to depict unsaid trauma. This study provides a more thorough and methodical explanation of how meaning is created through absence in literary discourse by fusing clause-level analysis with a socio-cognitive viewpoint.

Given this context, the study's two primary research concerns are how silence and omission are linguistically realized at the phrase level and how they serve to symbolize silent trauma and the sociocognitive processes of the characters in *A Little Life*. By answering these questions, this study hopes to show that meaning in speech is created by silence, omission, and indirect expression in addition to explicit language, all of which are crucial elements of communication.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Discourse Analysis

The study of language that goes beyond sentences and focuses on how meaning is created in context is known as discourse analysis. Van Dijk, (2008) asserts that discourse is a type of social activity that reflects knowledge, beliefs, and power dynamics in addition to being a linguistic framework. This viewpoint highlights the close relationship between what is said and what is not said in discourse, including silence, omission, and implicit meaning. Schröter & Taylor, (2020) have methodically developed this idea through empirical methods for identifying meaningful absences across discourse types. Discourse analysis in literary texts enables scholars to investigate how characters use language and interaction to communicate, hide information, or steer clear of particular subjects. In their examination of James Joyce, Gast et al., (2023) argue that elliptical phrasing and gaps serve as intentional artistic devices to evoke the “unspeakable” rather than as simple omissions. In a similar vein, Warhol, Robyn; Shuman, (2018) contend that literary analysis should consider “who cannot or will not speak” in addition to “who speaks,” demonstrating how silence actively shapes narrative meaning.

Socio-Cognitive Approach

The relationship between discourse, cognition, and society is explained by the socio-cognitive approach, which was developed in van Dijk's journal papers. Mental models, which are people's internal

representations of experiences, knowledge, and beliefs, have an impact on discourse, according to van T. A. van Dijk, (2006a). These models direct how people evaluate circumstances and choose what to say or not say. According to T. A. van Dijk, (2006b), speakers' positioning and the information they choose to include or omit are influenced by socially held views. The distinction between situation models, which depict the people, events, or actions under discussion, and context models, which depict the communicative situation itself, is crucial to this method; according to Storchak, (2020), context models serve as “the link between the situation model and textbase”. Because meaning in conversation is frequently based on shared knowledge and implicit understanding rather than being stated clearly, speakers may leave out details or employ ambiguous language in the hopes that others will understand. T. A. van Dijk, (2006a) refers to this as the “K-device” (knowledge device), which determines what can be left unsaid by calculating what recipients already know at each stage of discourse formation. A character may claim “I’m fine” in literary discourse analysis while actually hiding anguish; this is a cognitive tactic to control social interaction and shield oneself from exposure.

Silence and Omission in Discourse

Discourse relies on silence and omission to convey meaning. Silence is the absence of speech, while omission is the intentional or unconscious deletion of information. According to Jaworski, (2013), silence is not merely the absence of speech but a meaningful communicative act that can indicate hesitation, resistance, emotional suppression, or social constraint; he argues that “silence can be accounted for by the same principles as those of speech” and describes it as “a rich and powerful tool of communication”. Similarly, omission lets speakers avoid delicate issues, minimize emotion, or maintain social peace.

Silence and omission often indicate emotional turmoil, pain, and interpersonal strain in literature. Omwocha (2022) contends that silence is a “enunciation of trauma,” analyzing how postcolonial female characters employ silence to narrate grief when verbal articulation fails. She places silence at the intersections of “oppression, resistance, and trauma”. Dash & Sarangi (2025) also view silence as “a very powerful form of communication” that conveys psychological distress, showing how journal entries and artwork are essential when “speech fails”. Munir & Khan (2022) demonstrate the “unrepresentability of traumatic experiences” through narrative fragmentation, showing how trauma disturbs mental processes and creates “fragmented memories” that resist direct expression. Xia (2023) presents the concept of “absence of narrative capacity” as a symptom of trauma, analyzing how nonlinear temporal-spatial narrative structures indicate the “belatedness and repetition of trauma”. Khanam et al. (2026) use their “synaptic self-framework” to link literary silence to trauma-oriented neurological processes, treating quiet as “encoded synaptically” a neurocognitive survival strategy. Beyond individual psychology, Nazockdast

et al. (2025) show how trauma narratives can “downplay, manipulate, or omit political references,” showing that silence conceals power dynamics and depoliticizes painful occurrences ideologically. Sattar et al. (2026) similarly introduce the concept of “narrated silence” to describe how trauma is “discursively erased” through passive constructions and narrative compression, showing that silence is actively produced by institutional and linguistic mechanisms rather than merely the absence of speech. In recent studies, characters may avoid direct declarations, utilize vague phrasing like “something happened,” or leave sentences unfinished. These linguistic traits signal that meaning is there but not fully articulated.

Clause as Unit of Analysis

This research uses the clause as the major unit of analysis since it represents a complete unit of meaning in conversation. Within Systemic Functional Linguistics (SFL), the clause is recognized as the fundamental grammatical unit that simultaneously expresses three distinct types of meaning: experiential (processes, participants, and circumstances), interpersonal (speaker attitudes and social roles), and textual (information structure and cohesion). Fatima et al. (2024) apply Halliday's transitivity framework to demonstrate how clause-level analysis reveals ideological construction in discourse; by examining which process types (material, mental, relational, behavioral, verbal, existential) are selected or omitted, researchers can identify how speakers and writers position themselves and their audiences. Jasmine et al. (2026) further elaborate that clause analysis extends beyond individual clauses to clause complexes, where interdependency relations (parataxis versus hypotaxis) between clauses signal how logical meanings are sequenced and subordinated a critical feature when examining how speakers may leave information implicit or structurally downplay certain content. Zhang et al. (2026) study how that-clauses operate as projection devices that arrange propositional content, demonstrating that the choice to project or not project specific information directly effects what is stressed, backgrounded, or altogether excluded from discourse.

Through systematic sentence analysis, scholars can find precise language patterns that instantiate silence, omission, and avoidance at the micro-structural level. Clauses such as “I don't know” or “something happened” may appear semantically incomplete or referentially imprecise, yet these very incompletions form relevant discursive techniques for avoiding direct declaration, concealing agency, or regulating interpersonal tension. Omission or infrequency of specific process types (for example, the absence of mental process clauses assigned to a character) implies systematic silencing, while hypotactic phrases may subordinate embarrassing information to a primary clause, and unprojected propositions leave information unsaid. Together, this research indicate that clause-level analysis provides a reproducible, linguistically grounded tool for analyzing how silence and omission operate within discourse.

METHOD

This research uses a qualitative descriptive design. The study focuses on understanding phrases that involve silence, omission, avoidance, concealment, and indirect meaning in Hanya Yanagihara’s *A Little Life*. The analysis is qualitative since the data are evaluated based on meaning, context, and discourse function rather than numerical measurement. The study employs a socio-cognitive discourse paradigm, supplemented by clause-level analysis, to analyze how silence and omission signify trauma, identity struggle, and interpersonal avoidance in the story.

The data for this study are drawn from *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara (2015), specifically limited to Section I: Lispenard Street. This portion was purposively picked because it introduces significant individuals and demonstrates early patterns of silence, omission, avoidance, and hidden trauma, especially in connection to Jude’s relationships. Rather than examining the entire novel, the study focuses on sentences from selected chapters that indicate linguistically important instances of unacknowledged trauma, making the dataset both relevant and methodologically justifiable.

Data were collected and analyzed utilizing a qualitative, socio-cognitive discourse technique. The part was reviewed frequently, relevant passages were recognized, and then split into clauses as the unit of analysis. These clauses were categorized based on traits such as silence, omission, deflection, and indirect expression, followed by a data reduction technique to keep only trauma-related cases. The study then categorized and evaluated these patterns to illustrate how silence and omission operate as discursive techniques in depicting trauma, relating linguistic choices to the characters’ cognitive and social environments.

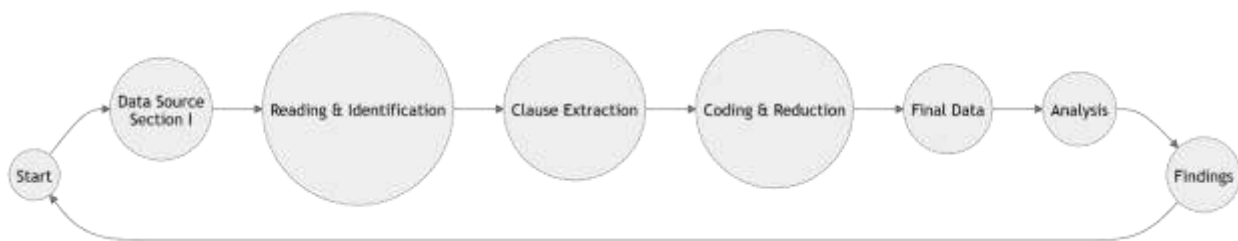


Figure 1 Research Procedure Flowchart

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Linguistic Realization and Functions of Silence and Omission in Section I (Lispenard Street)

The findings are based on 387 reduced clauses taken from the data reduction process. These clauses were grouped into five major patterns: cognitive and emotional processing, silence and non-verbal expression, avoidance and deflection, omission and concealment, and socio-discursive regulation.

Table 1 Distribution of Silence and Omission Patterns

No	Major Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
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No	Major Pattern	Frequency	Percentage
1	Cognitive & Emotional Processing	154	39.8%
2	Silence & Non-verbal Expression	71	18.3%
3	Avoidance & Deflection	58	15.0%
4	Omission & Concealment	53	13.7%
5	Socio-discursive Regulation	51	13.2%
	Total	387	100%

Table 1 displays the distribution of five significant patterns of silence and omission determined from 387 sentences in Section I (Lispenard Street) of *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara. The most dominating pattern is cognitive and emotional processing (39.8%), showing that silence and omission are predominantly linked to the characters' internal mental and emotional states. This shows that hidden trauma is most typically generated through inner battles, such as hesitancy, suppressed thoughts, and difficulties in articulating sentiments.

The other designs appear with somewhat balanced proportions. Silence and non-verbal expressiveness (18.3%) and avoidance and deflection (15.0%) indicate how characters communicate indirectly by gestures, pauses, or by moving topics. Meanwhile, omission and concealment (13.7%) and socio-discursive regulation (13.2%) imply conscious control over what is shown or hidden in social interactions. Overall, the table indicates that silence and omission function not only as internal psychological processes but also as purposeful communicative acts affected by interpersonal and social settings.

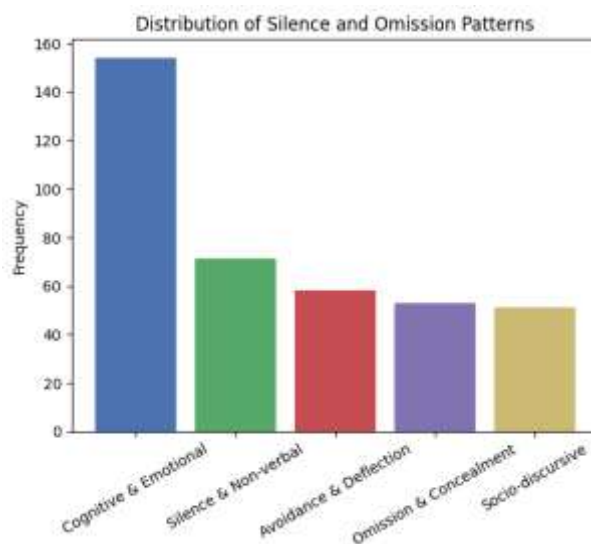


Figure 2. Distribution of Major Patterns

The most dominant pattern is cognitive and emotional processing with 154 sentences or 39.8% of the data. This reveals that silence and omission in Section I are significantly associated to psychological feelings, such as dread, guilt, doubt, humiliation, and difficulty to communicate. Examples include

“unable to articulate,” “didn’t know what,” “afraid of answers,” and “sick with guilt.” These phrases show that silent pain is constructed through the characters’ mental and emotional struggle.

The second pattern is silence and non-verbal expression, with 71 sentences or 18.3%. This includes explicit silence and non-verbal actions such as “he was quiet,” “sat in silence,” “looked... wordlessly,” “shrugged,” and “not looking at each other.” This research reveals that silence is not simply the lack of speech but also manifests through bodily movements and non-verbal engagement.

The third pattern is avoidance and deflection, with 58 clauses or 15.0%. Clauses such as “refused to discuss,” “didn’t want to talk,” “avoided Jude,” “not what you think,” and “as if nothing happened” demonstrate how characters avoid direct confrontation with uncomfortable reality. This pattern shows that avoidance becomes a strategy for handling trauma-related speech.

The fourth pattern is omission and concealment, with 53 clauses or 13.7%. This pattern includes sentences such as “there was something amiss,” “something had happened,” “he had been lying,” “burned his arm,” and “smelled... bleach.” These clauses illustrate how trauma is disguised, reduced, or replaced with partial answers.

The fifth type is socio-discursive control, with 51 clauses or 13.2%. This contains clauses such as “they knew never to ask,” “don’t tell people your name,” “silently decided,” and “they all knew.” These clauses illustrate that silence is not just individual but also socially regulated by shared standards, expectations, and interpersonal agreements.

Therefore, the findings reveal that silence and omission in Section I are accomplished through both language and non-linguistic modes. They work not only as absence, but also as important discourse methods that express trauma, emotional control, social pressure, and shared understanding.

Discussion

The findings presented in figure 2, demonstrate that silence and omission are not merely linguistic absences but function as meaningful discourse strategies shaped by cognitive and social processes. The dominance of cognitive and emotional processing in the dataset indicates that silence is strongly rooted in the characters’ internal mental states. Expressions such as “unable to articulate,” “didn’t know what,” and “couldn’t think beyond” suggest that the characters experience difficulty in transforming their thoughts and emotions into language. From a socio-cognitive perspective, as proposed by Teun A. van Dijk, discourse is influenced by mental models that organize knowledge and experience. In this context, trauma disrupts the formation of coherent mental representations, resulting in linguistic limitation. Therefore, silence emerges not only as a communicative choice but also as a consequence of cognitive overload, where language fails to capture the complexity of traumatic experience.

In addition to cognitive limitation, the findings reveal that silence is frequently expressed through non-verbal actions. Clauses such as “looked... wordlessly,” “not looking at each other,” and “shrugged” indicate that meaning is conveyed through gestures rather than speech. This supports the view that silence functions as an alternative communicative mode. From a socio-cognitive perspective, such non-verbal expressions are guided by internal evaluations of social situations, where individuals regulate their behavior to avoid discomfort or emotional exposure. As a result, silence operates as a subtle yet effective means of communication, allowing characters to express meaning indirectly while maintaining control over what is revealed.

The use of avoidance and deflection further demonstrates that silence is strategically employed to manage interaction. Clauses such as “refused to discuss,” “didn’t want to talk,” and “not what you think” show that characters actively limit or redirect discourse when confronted with sensitive topics. This behavior reflects a socio-cognitive process in which individuals assess the potential consequences of disclosure and choose to protect themselves from vulnerability. Silence, in this sense, becomes a form of self-regulation, enabling characters to maintain emotional stability and social acceptability. It is therefore not passive, but a deliberate strategy shaped by both personal and social considerations.

Moreover, omission and concealment play a significant role in representing trauma indirectly. The use of vague expressions such as “something had happened” or generalized statements like “a lot of problems” indicates that information is selectively withheld. In some cases, trauma is replaced with alternative explanations, such as “burned his arm,” which mask the underlying reality. From a socio-cognitive perspective, this reflects the selective nature of mental models, where individuals choose which aspects of experience to include in discourse. Omission allows characters to construct a surface-level narrative while concealing deeper meanings, resulting in a fragmented representation of trauma. This demonstrates that what is left unsaid can carry as much significance as what is explicitly stated.

The findings also show that silence is not only an individual phenomenon but is socially regulated. Clauses such as “they knew never to ask,” “no one ever asked,” and “silently decided” indicate the presence of shared norms that govern communication. These expressions suggest that silence is collectively maintained through mutual understanding, where all participants contribute to avoiding certain topics. According to the socio-cognitive approach, shared knowledge and social conventions play a crucial role in shaping discourse. In this case, silence becomes a form of social agreement that preserves relationships and prevents conflict. Unspoken trauma is therefore sustained not only by individual choice but also by the dynamics of social interaction.

In the end, the discussion shows that silence and omission function as complex mechanisms in representing unspoken trauma. They are shaped by the interaction between cognitive limitations, emotional regulation, and social expectations. Silence operates as both a constraint and a strategy,

reflecting the characters' inability to articulate their experiences as well as their deliberate efforts to control discourse. Through this interplay, unspoken trauma is constructed as something that exists within discourse but remains partially hidden, expressed through gaps, absences, and indirect forms of communication.

CONCLUSION

This study set out to analyze how silence and omission act in Section I (Lispenard Street) of *A Little Life* by Hanya Yanagihara through a socio-cognitive discourse framework. The research illustrates that meaning in the narrative is not produced exclusively through explicit language, but also through what is left unsaid, hinted, or avoided. At the linguistic level, silence and omission exist in different forms that transcend beyond the absence of speech. These include indirect expressions, minimum responses, insufficient information, and non-verbal acts that operate as meaningful pieces of discourse. Such forms indicate that communication in the novel is often restricted, fragmented, or shifted, yet nevertheless capable of transmitting considerable meaning.

At the interpretative level, silence and omission work as processes that mediate the relationship between internal experience and social contact. They reflect the characters' struggles to navigate emotional complexity, manage interpersonal interactions, and govern the exposure of sensitive experiences. In this perspective, silence is not merely a lack of communication, but a structured and meaningful practice defined by both cognitive limits and social expectations.

From a socio-cognitive perspective, the data show that unacknowledged trauma is formed through the interaction between mental processes and social circumstances. Characters' internal states impact what can be stated, while common standards and relationships dictate what should stay unspoken. As a result, silence and omission become fundamental to the way trauma is represented, sustained, and negotiated within the discourse. This study demonstrates that silence and omission are crucial components of meaning-making in literary discourse. They work not as empty gaps, but as active aspects that demonstrate how language, thought, and social interaction intertwine in the portrayal of human experience.

This study implies that silence and omission deserve increased consideration in discourse analysis, as they play a key role in creating meaning. Researchers are encouraged to explore not just what is stated in language, but also what is withheld, inferred, or left unsaid, as these features provide crucial insights into human cognition and social interaction.

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