

Echoes of the Unspoken: Comparative Poetics of Silence and Speech Breakdown in *Ca Dao* and Anglo-Scottish Ballads

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Abstract—This study investigates the cross-cultural poetics of silence and speech breakdown in Vietnamese *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads through an integrated Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture framework. Combining corpus-based and performance analysis, it explores how silence operates simultaneously as a structural device and a culturally embedded act of meaning-making. A comparative corpus of 100 texts (50 per tradition) reveals three dominant mechanisms—ellipsis, truncation, and enjambment—whose distribution reflects contrasting semiotic ideologies. In *ca dao*, silence cultivates communal empathy and indirect moral guidance, aligning with Confucian–Buddhist communicative ethics. In the ballads, by contrast, it generates moral ambiguity and emotional rupture, transforming omission into narrative tension. Quantitative and qualitative findings demonstrate that silence constitutes a generative semiotic field mediating cognition, emotion, and contextual value. The study refines existing theories of performance and aesthetic response (Bauman, 1986; Fischer-Lichte, 2008; Iser, 1978) and introduces a transferable comparative model for analyzing the unspoken across oral traditions. Its implications extend to folklore pedagogy, translation studies, and cultural heritage preservation, highlighting silence as an active agent in intercultural poetics and collective memory.

Index Terms—silence poetics, cultural performance, cognitive poetics, comparative folklore, oral tradition

I. INTRODUCTION

A. Research Rationale

Silence and the breakdown of speech are not absences within poetic discourse but deliberate, highly structured devices that shape meaning, evoke affect, and guide reception. In oral–lyric traditions, such moments often carry greater communicative weight than articulated speech, marking emotional saturation, cultural propriety, or narrative withholding (Jaworski, 1993; Tannen & Saville-Troike, 1985). Yet despite their ubiquity, silence and speech disruption remain under-explored in cross-cultural research integrating formal, cognitive, affective, and cultural dimensions.

This study examines two traditions whose linguistic and sociohistorical contexts diverge sharply yet whose poetic functions converge: Vietnamese *ca dao* and the Anglo-Scottish ballad. Both arise from oral performance, sustained by rhythm, communal participation, and recurring motifs (Child, 1882–1898; Nguyễn, 2002). While *ca dao* compresses collective sentiment into elliptical lyric fragments open to communal completion, Anglo-Scottish ballads extend narrative arcs in which omission or verbal rupture signals moral tension, concealment, or the ineffable (Atkinson, 2014). In each, the “unspoken” operates not as void but as generative presence embedded in prosody, cognition, and cultural memory (Barthes, 1977; Lotman, 1990).

Foregrounding audience reception—how listeners and readers infer and respond to silence—this research treats the unspoken as both poetic strategy and sociocultural medium. It employs a four-dimensional framework (Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture) to capture the multifaceted nature of silence and speech breakdown, anticipating the model elaborated in later sections. Through this lens, absence becomes an active, meaning-bearing force that reveals the cognitive and affective architecture of oral poetics.

B. Research Questions

Building on this rationale, the study is guided by three interrelated questions:

- 1) What formal structures and poetic mechanisms realize silence and speech breakdown in *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads?

- 2) Which cognitive, rhythmic, and narrative processes underpin these phenomena, and how do they function in oral performance?
- 3) How do cultural values and affective norms shape the differing roles and interpretations of the unspoken in both traditions, particularly regarding intertextual resonance and audience reception?

Together, these questions frame the investigation as both a structural inquiry—into the mechanics of omission—and a cultural–semiotic inquiry—into how absence is scripted, performed, and interpreted.

C. Scope and Limitations

The corpus comprises 50 *ca dao* texts and 50 Anglo-Scottish ballads, selected through thematic stratification across four recurrent domains: love, loss, conflict, and exile. These fields provide a representative cross-section where silence and speech breakdown carry heightened emotional and cultural resonance. The analysis combines close textual and prosodic reading with frequency mapping of silence markers, focusing on texts containing sufficient linguistic data for semantic and intertextual interpretation. Non-verbal or purely performative variants lacking textual documentation are excluded.

While grounded in detailed textual analysis, the study remains attentive to the oral origins, performance contexts, and reception environments of both traditions. This dual focus enables a seamless transition to the *Literature Review* and *Theoretical Framework*, where the unspoken is situated within scholarship on comparative poetics, cognitive theory, affective prosody, cultural semiotics, and reception studies—offering a conceptual bridge between poetics and cultural cognition.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

A. Literature Review

(a). Silence in Poetic and Literary Theory

Silence in poetry is not an inert void or a passive absence but a deliberate structuring principle that animates the sonic, semantic, and cultural dimensions of verse. Barthes (1977) describes silence as the *grain of the voice*—a textured, embodied presence that resists closure while infusing sound with affective density. Bachelard (1969) situates silence within the phenomenology of intimate space, where stillness amplifies the imaginative resonance of poetic imagery. Carson (1995) treats silence as epistemic tension, a purposeful withholding that unsettles fixed meaning and invites interpretive plurality, a function that recent scholarship has likewise identified in contemporary poetry where silence operates as a generative interpretive gap between text and reader (Teegala, 2024). Taken together, these perspectives reveal silence as both a formal and experiential dimension of poetics, shaping composition, performance, and reception alike. Recent studies in poetic ecocriticism likewise show that silence can function as an aesthetic device through which imagery, atmosphere, and affective resonance are intensified within poetic language (Pamungkas, 2024). Recent literary scholarship further demonstrates that narrative silence and ambiguity may also destabilize normative interpretive frameworks, revealing how identity and cultural meaning are negotiated through textual absence (Malcolm, 2024).

(b). Speech Breakdown in Oral Traditions

Within oral traditions, the breakdown of speech—manifested through aposiopesis, ellipsis, or repetition failure—rarely signifies communicative collapse. Rather, it serves as a performative strategy that sustains narrative tension and emotional intensity. Bauman (1986) notes that such disruptions typically coincide with moments of moral or affective charge, signalling content too sacred, perilous, or socially delicate to articulate openly. Finnegan (2012) adds that pauses and verbal truncations operate as cognitive catalysts, prompting listeners to infer and imaginatively reconstruct what has been withheld. Through this process, interpretive agency shifts from performer to audience, transforming silence into a site of shared authorship and communal imagination.

(c). Silence in Vietnamese *Ca Dao*

In Vietnamese *ca dao*, as explored by Nguyễn (2002, 2004), indirectness and implicature constitute core expressive values. Silence often manifests through truncated imagery or syntactic ellipsis, as illustrated in the verse:

Thương nhau cau sáu bổ ba,

Ghét nhau cau sáu bổ ra làm mười.

(When there's love, a small areca nut is shared in three;

When there's hate, that same nut is sliced into ten.)

Here, emotional depth is communicated through omission: listeners intuit devotion, sacrifice, and solidarity without explicit articulation. This aesthetic restraint reflects a Confucian-inflected sensibility that privileges harmony and mutual face-saving over direct expression. Silence, therefore, functions not as absence but as a coded medium of affective exchange—one in which meaning is completed through shared cultural inference.

(d). Silence in Anglo-Scottish Ballads

In the Anglo-Scottish ballad tradition, codified in Child's (1882–1898) anthology, silence operates as both narrative hinge and moral marker. Atkinson (2014) observes that withheld testimony or unexplained omission often accompanies

climactic crises, as in *The Cruel Mother*, where the protagonist avoids naming her transgression until the supernatural denouement. This strategic withholding heightens moral ambiguity and emotional tension, drawing audiences into an interpretive lacuna that sustains the ballad's tragic resonance. Viewed alongside the elliptical strategies of *ca dao*, silence in the ballads emerges as a distinctly Western form of withholding—one that dramatizes guilt and conscience rather than communal empathy.

(e). *Cross-Cultural Perspectives on Silence*

Comparative studies demonstrate that while silence is a universal communicative resource, its meanings are shaped by cultural convention. Tannen (1985) shows that in some societies silence signifies intimacy or alignment, whereas in others it indexes unease. Jaworski (1993) extends this insight by defining silence as a socially structured absence shaped by semiotic ideologies. Recent sociolinguistic research further suggests that silence may also emerge through processes of “silencing,” where communicative absence reflects tensions between cultural authority, linguistic legitimacy, and social power (Lane, 2023). Yet one might ask whether these contrasts reveal difference or simply distinct inflections of a shared communicative logic. In *ca dao*, silence tends to affirm cohesion and moral balance; in the ballads, it conveys isolation, uncertainty, or stoic endurance. Together, these patterns trace the Cognition–Affect–Culture continuum that underlies both traditions.

(f). *Intertextual Echoes of Silence*

A further dimension of silence lies in its intertextual persistence across generations. In both *ca dao* and the Anglo-Scottish ballads, recurrent motifs and patterns form what Lotman (1990) calls the “semiotic memory” of culture—a repertoire through which meaning is preserved and renewed. In *ca dao*, love verses such as

*Trèo lên cây bưởi hái hoa
Bước xuống vườn cà hái nụ tầm xuân.* (Phạm, 2024)
(Climbing the pomelo tree to pick flowers
Stepping down to the eggplant garden to pluck the tam xuan bud)

retain a deliberate pause before emotional disclosure, sustaining the tension between concealment and revelation. In *Lord Randall*, the refrain “Where have you been, Lord Randall, my son?” postpones the fatal confession until the closing stanza. Both structures transform silence into a mnemonic rhythm that binds memory to affect.

Situated within the Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture framework, these cross-textual correspondences lay the foundation for the theoretical synthesis developed in Section 2.2. Silence in *ca dao* and in the Anglo-Scottish ballads thus appears not as absence but as a dynamic aesthetic principle—one that mediates between structure and emotion, cognition and culture, and bridges the domains of performance, memory, and interpretation.

B. *Theoretical Framework*

(a). *Comparative Poetics*

This study applies Lotman's (1990) concept of the *semiosphere* to situate *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads as distinct yet permeable semiotic systems. Each operates through its own network of codes—metrical patterns, figurative repertoires, and narrative conventions—that govern the poetic deployment of silence. This perspective extends comparative poetics beyond simple juxtaposition toward an analysis of how silence interacts with both textual form and cultural context.

In *ca dao*, an elliptical verse such as

*Qua đình ngả nón trông đình
Đình bao nhiêu ngói, thương mình bấy nhiêu.* (Vũ, 1956)
(Passing the communal house, I tilt my hat to look—tiles as many as my love for you)

withholds overt emotion, while in the ballad *Edward, Edward*, the absence of moral commentary intensifies the ambiguity surrounding patricide. Here, *silence* functions as an umbrella term encompassing withholding, ellipsis, and omission—a generative absence that produces meaning rather than negating it.

(b). *Cognitive Poetics*

Cognitive Poetics offers insight into how audiences process silence and disruption. Fauconnier and Turner's (2002) conceptual-blending theory explains how explicit cues merge with implicit omissions, generating emergent meaning through mental-space integration. Lakoff and Johnson's (1980) embodied schemas—particularly *CONTAINER* (silence as bounded space) and *PATH* (interrupted speech as a journey cut short)—render absence experientially tangible.

These models clarify why a withheld final line in *ca dao* evokes intimacy, whereas abrupt silence in a ballad's dialogue conveys foreboding or moral unease. Extending these cognitive insights to performance highlights how mental representation aligns with rhythm, breath, and expectation in live recitation.

(c). *Affective Prosody*

From cognition to sound, the prosodic dimension of silence—its duration, rhythmic placement, and integration into performance—determines how audiences register the unspoken. Couper-Kuhlen (1992) demonstrates that prosodic cues such as elongated pauses, tempo shifts, and tonal modulation can transform silence into a marked expressive event.

In *ca dao*, a brief pause between parallel lines softens tone and fosters intimacy, inviting collective inference. In contrast, the ballads' extended suspensions before revelation—as in *Lord Randall*—serve dramaturgical ends, intensifying anticipation and emotional release.

(d). *Cultural Semiotics*

Keane's (2003) notion of *semiotic ideology* explains how cultural norms assign moral and aesthetic value to silence. In Vietnamese oral tradition, indirectness aligns with Confucian ideals of relational sensitivity, elevating silence as a socially esteemed form of communication. By contrast, the Anglo-Scottish tradition often codes withholding as stoic endurance, guilt, or supernatural interdiction, depending on narrative context.

Viewed comparatively, silence embodies each culture's moral economy—whether signaling empathy and restraint or guilt and fatal resolve.

(e). *Reception Theory*

The significance of silence also depends on audience engagement. Jauss's (1982) *horizon of expectations* and Fish's (1980) *interpretive communities* conceptualize audiences as active participants in meaning-making. In oral performance, listeners fill narrative gaps and infer motives from what remains unsaid.

A Vietnamese audience, versed in agrarian metaphors within *ca dao*, may decode an image as romantic longing; an Anglo-Scottish audience encountering *The Wife of Usher's Well* might interpret closing silence as acquiescence to the supernatural. Reception theory thus situates interpretation in the interplay among performer intention, text, and audience cognition.

(f). *Integrative Framework*

By synthesizing Comparative Poetics, Cognitive Poetics, Affective Prosody, Cultural Semiotics, and Reception Theory, this study develops a four-dimensional analytical lens—*Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture*—that underpins its methodological design. The framework extends Lotman's semiotic ecology to oral poetics while bridging cognitive, affective, and cultural paradigms rarely unified in earlier scholarship. It ensures that the analysis of silence and speech breakdown remains grounded in formal precision, cognitive plausibility, affective subtlety, and cultural specificity, advancing a cross-disciplinary poetics of silence.

III. METHODOLOGY AND CORPUS

The methodological framework integrates comparative literary analysis, cognitive poetics, prosodic mapping, and reception study to examine silence and speech breakdown as both formal devices and culturally embedded acts. This mixed-methods design ensures that interpretation remains grounded in textual precision, cognitive plausibility, affective resonance, and socio-cultural specificity, in alignment with the four-dimensional *Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture* schema introduced in Section 2.

A. *Corpus Selection*

The corpus includes fifty Vietnamese *ca dao* and fifty Anglo-Scottish ballads, selected to balance thematic breadth with formal comparability. Stratification followed four recurrent domains—love and longing, loss and mourning, interpersonal conflict, and exile—contexts most frequently marked by strategic silences and speech disruptions in oral-poetic traditions.

The *ca dao* texts derive from critically edited anthologies with verified oral transmission records (Nguyễn, 2001; Nguyễn, 2004), ensuring authenticity and fidelity to performance context. The Anglo-Scottish ballads were sourced from Child's *The English and Scottish Popular Ballads* (1882–1898) and Bronson's *The Traditional Tunes of the Child Ballads* (1959–1972), preserving canonical stability while recognising musical and diachronic variation. Incomplete fragments and non-verbal performance elements were excluded to isolate verbal–prosodic structures—the primary domain where silence functions as a compositional and interpretive device. This design safeguards cultural authenticity while enabling systematic comparison of structurally and thematically parallel texts.

B. *Analytical Procedures*

(a). *Coding of Silence Markers*

Silence was operationalised into three analytically distinct categories:

- **Ellipsis** – omission of expected syntactic or semantic elements;
- **Apophysis** – interruption of an utterance before syntactic completion;
- **Prosodic irregularity** – rhythmic or metrical deviation foregrounding absence or disruption.

Each *silence marker* was coded for its narrative function—emotive withholding, moral ambiguity, or structural transition—to reveal cross-cultural patterns in how absence operates as a formal and interpretive principle.

(b). *Prosodic Mapping*

Following Couper-Kuhlen's (1992) framework, silences were measured by pause duration (in syllable-equivalents), tempo modulation, and intensity shifts within performance lines. Particular attention was given to line-final pauses,

enjambment breaks, and rhythm delays preceding climactic or emotionally charged moments. This procedure grounds affective interpretations of silence in verifiable prosodic evidence rather than impressionistic reading.

(c). *Intertextual and Variant Analysis*

Textual variants were examined to identify recurrent motifs and silence structures across time and geography. Diachronic tracking of omission strategies and structurally homologous silences in culturally distinct yet thematically convergent narratives illuminated whether silence functions as a stable cultural constant or a flexible poetic resource responsive to context.

(d). *Reception Study*

To capture interpretive variation, a qualitative reception study was conducted with seventy participants:

- Thirty-five native Vietnamese speakers familiar with *ca dao*;
- Thirty-five native English speakers from Scotland or Northern England familiar with traditional ballads.

Participants (aged 25–65, gender-balanced) were recruited through folklore associations and university networks. They were presented with texts containing marked silences in the original language, accompanied by minimal glossing to prevent interpretive priming. Semi-structured interviews explored emotional responses, inferred meanings, and perceived cultural resonances. Transcripts were inductively coded for recurring interpretive strategies, recognising audiences as active co-constructors of meaning in oral-poetic traditions. All participation followed informed-consent protocols and anonymised reporting in accordance with institutional ethics.

C. *Data-to-Theory Translation Process*

Results from coding, prosodic mapping, and reception study were synthesised through three iterative stages:

- 1) **Coding → Frequency Distribution:** Silence types were quantified within and across traditions to establish statistical patterns.
- 2) **Pattern Mapping → Four-Dimensional Schema:** Findings were plotted onto the *Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture* matrix to visualise intersections among structure, cognition, emotion, and ideology.
- 3) **Interpretive Synthesis:** Quantitative trends were interpreted through Comparative Poetics, Cognitive Poetics, Affective Prosody, Cultural Semiotics, and Reception Theory, ensuring theoretical and methodological integration.

Together these stages transform empirical observation into interpretive insight, linking formal patterning with cognitive and cultural interpretation. Results will be presented in tables and visualisations in Section 4 to ensure analytical transparency.

IV. RESULTS

A. *Formal Mechanisms*

In both *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads, silence operates not as absence but as a deliberate poetic strategy that interrupts, suspends, or redirects interpretation. Three mechanisms dominate the corpus—omission, truncation, and enjambment—each manipulating the linear flow of verse in distinct ways. Their differing frequencies and expressive functions reveal shared formal logic yet divergent cultural inflections.

Omission

In *ca dao*, omission often appears as syntactic ellipsis, where key emotional or narrative elements are withheld. Meaning emerges through shared cultural scripts and proverbial repertoires completed by audience inference.

For example:

*Thương nhau cau sáu bổ ba,
Ghét nhau cau sáu bổ ra làm mười.* (Vũ, 1956)
(When in love, the sixth areca nut is split in three;
When in hate, the sixth areca nut is split into ten.)

The couplet omits any explicit declaration of feeling; emotion is encoded through culturally resonant imagery. Such indirectness accords with Vietnamese norms of *nói giảm, nói tránh*—mitigated speech preserving social harmony (Nguyễn, 2001, 2004).

In the Anglo-Scottish tradition, omission builds suspense. In *Edward, Edward*:

*‘Why does your sword so drip with blood?
Why so sad go ye?’
‘O, I have killed my hawk so good,
Mother, mother, O!’*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 13)

The son’s evasion conceals patricide until the final stanza, turning silence into moral tension (Child, 1882–1898; Atkinson, 2014).

Truncation

Truncation—the sudden break of a line or stanza—creates acoustic interruption and cognitive disjunction. In Vietnamese lyrics it often signals emotional saturation or a refusal to voice the ineffable:

*Chiều chiều ra đứng ngõ sau,
Trông về quê mẹ ruột đau chín chiều.* (Phạm, 2024)
(Each dusk I stand behind the gate,
Looking toward my mother's home, my heart aching ninefold...)

The incomplete ending conveys grief beyond articulation, transforming absence into presence (Nguyễn, 2004).

In the ballads, truncation typically marks narrative climax, leaving decisive events implied. In *The Wife of Usher's Well*:

*It fell about the Martinmas,
When nights are long and mirk,
The carlin wife's three sons came hame,
And their hats were o' the birk.*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 79)

The stanza's abrupt close foreshadows spectral return, compelling listeners to reconstruct the unsaid.

Enjambment

Enjambment functions as temporal and interpretive delay. In *ca dao*, it sustains rhythmic parallelism while deferring closure:

*Trèo lên cây bưởi hái hoa,
Bước xuống vườn cà hái nụ tầm xuân.* (Ma, 2022)
(Climbing the pomelo tree to pick flowers,
Stepping down to the garden to pluck the spring bud.)

The inter-line pause suggests expectancy and concealed desire (Nguyễn, 2001).

In the ballads, enjambment maintains metrical flow while delaying revelation. In *Lord Thomas and Fair Annet*:

*And he has till his brother gane:
'Now, brother, rede ye mee;
A, sall I marrie the nut-browne bride,
And let Fair Annet bee?'*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 73A)

The question carried across lines exemplifies enjambment's power to sustain rhythm while postponing resolution (Finnegan, 2012).

The comparative distribution of these formal mechanisms across both traditions is summarized in Table 1 below, which quantifies their relative frequency and functional overlap within the corpus.

TABLE 1
FREQUENCY OF FORMAL MECHANISMS OF SILENCE IN *CA DAO* AND ANGLO-SCOTTISH BALLADS
(percentages rounded to the nearest whole number)

Mechanism	<i>Ca dao</i> (n = 50)	Anglo-Scottish Ballads (n = 50)	Total (n = 100)	Relative frequency (%)
Omission	42	36	78	39
Truncation	18	25	43	22
Enjambment	27	34	61	31
Combined Use*	15	22	37	19

Note: "Combined Use" denotes cases where two or more mechanisms co-occur within a single poem or ballad.

Source: Author's coding of corpus (Nguyễn, 2001, 2004; Child, 1882–1898; Atkinson, 2014; Finnegan, 2012).

Omission proves the most frequent silence mechanism (39 % of all recorded instances), appearing in 84 % of *ca dao* and 72 % of ballads. This reflects Vietnamese indirectness as a communicative value. Truncation occurs more often in ballads (50 %) than in *ca dao* (36 %), consistent with their narrative reliance on abrupt closure. Enjambment is slightly more prevalent in ballads (68 %) than in *ca dao* (54 %), shaped by the mnemonic demands of performance.

Interpretively, omission in *ca dao* invites collective completion of meaning, turning silence into a gesture of communal empathy. In ballads it provokes moral uncertainty, forcing listeners to weigh competing ethical inferences. Truncation, meanwhile, conveys restraint or muted grief in *ca dao* but injects narrative shock in ballads, leaving conflict unresolved. Enjambment modulates time itself—introspective and inward in *ca dao*, propulsive and anticipatory in the ballad.

Taken together, these findings show that while omission, truncation, and enjambment operate with structural parallelism across both traditions, their interpretive force remains culturally distinct. Within the Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture framework, silence emerges not as void but as a generative field of signification, transforming absence into meaning through the interplay of form, perception, emotion, and cultural ideology.

These formal mechanisms provide the structural basis for the cognitive and affective patterns explored in Section 4.2.

B. Cognitive–Narrative Patterns

In both *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads, silence and speech breakdown act as deliberate cognitive–narrative devices rather than accidental lapses. They restructure interpretive frames, adjust emotional pacing, and compel audiences to participate in meaning-making. Across the corpus, silences consistently signal *frame-shift silence*,

prompting reinterpretation of earlier cues, whereas breakdowns interrupt linear storytelling, opening interpretive gaps that listeners fill through inference.

Within the Vietnamese lyric corpus, *frame-shift silences* often appear at emotional or moral climaxes, realised through ellipsis or incomplete clauses. Such absences recontextualise imagery—what begins as a pastoral river scene may, through a withheld phrase, reveal distance or relational fracture.

For example:

Thuyền về có nhớ bến chăng?
Bến thì một dạ khăng khăng đợi thuyền. (Ma, 2022)
(When the boat returns, does it still remember the shore?
The shore, steadfast in heart, waits for the boat.)

Recorded in *Tục Ngữ, Ca Dao, Dân Ca Việt Nam* (Vu, 1956), this verse turns longing into absence: the unanswered question suspends emotional resolution, transforming silence into an implicit negotiation of fidelity. The dynamic reflects conceptual blending theory, where gaps in surface structure integrate distinct mental spaces to create enriched meaning (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002). Vietnamese oral poetics, shaped by *nói vòng, nói tránh* (indirectness), thus treats silence as inferential invitation rather than communicative failure (Vũ, 1956; Nguyễn, 2001, 2004).

In Anglo-Scottish ballads, breakdowns appear as truncations, aposiopesis, or self-interruption—embodiments of grief, guilt, or moral uncertainty. In *The Unquiet Grave*:

The tears fell from her eyes two by two,
And her heart was like to break;
‘Oh stay, my love, one moment more—’
But never a word he spake.
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 78)

The broken plea marks the point where affect overwhelms coherence. Such pauses recalibrate audience expectation, heightening tension and underscoring the unspeakable (Atkinson, 2014).

A dual-function occurrence surfaces in Lord Randall:

Where hae ye been, Lord Randall, my son?’
‘I’ve been to the wild wood; mother, make my bed soon,
For I’m weary wi’ hunting, and fain wad lie down.
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 12)

Here, “make my bed soon” conceals and discloses at once—the euphemism for death reframes earlier imagery while signalling emotional exhaustion. The truncated rhythm merges reframing and rupture into a single performative silence.

These tendencies are summarised in Table 2.

TABLE 2
COGNITIVE–NARRATIVE FUNCTIONS OF SILENCE AND SPEECH BREAKDOWN IN *CA DAO* AND ANGLO-SCOTTISH BALLADS

Mechanism Type	<i>Ca dao</i> (n = 50)	Anglo-Scottish Ballads (n = 50)	Total (n = 100)	Relative frequency (%)	Primary function
Frame-Shift Silence	38	29	67	33.5	Reframing earlier narrative or imagery
Narrative Breakdown	14	26	40	20.0	Signalling emotional or cognitive rupture
Dual-Function Occurrence*	10	15	25	12.5	Combining reframing and rupture effects

Note: “Dual-function occurrence” refers to cases where a single silence or breakdown performs both frame-shift and narrative disruption within the same poetic or balladic unit. Percentages rounded to one decimal place.

Source: Author’s coding of corpus (Vũ, 1956; Nguyễn, 2001, 2004; Child, 1882–1898; Atkinson, 2014).

Quantitatively, *frame-shift silences* dominate in *ca dao* (76 %) compared with ballads (58 %), reflecting a cultural preference for implicit moral inference. *Narrative breakdowns* are nearly twice as frequent in ballads (52 %) as in *ca dao* (28 %), consistent with their dramatic narrative design. *Dual-function occurrences* appear in both but are more common in ballads (30 %) than in *ca dao* (20 %), indicating a stronger fusion of reframing and rupture in the latter tradition.

These patterns reveal that silence in *ca dao* functions as interpretive scaffolding, allowing audiences to co-construct meaning within communal ethics. For instance:

Công cha như núi Thái Sơn,
Nghĩa mẹ như nước trong nguồn chảy ra. (Phạm, 2024)
(Father’s labour as high as Mount Tai,
Mother’s love as the spring water flows.)

Here, the omission of explicit moral instruction relies on shared cultural inference, transforming absence into moral resonance. By contrast, ballad breakdowns act as emotive ruptures that unsettle coherence and invite moral reflection. From a cognitive-narratological view, silences recalibrate interpretive frames, while breakdowns create temporal and

affective dislocation, urging listeners to reconcile fragmentation with their own moral and emotional schemas (Fauconnier & Turner, 2002; Keane, 2018).

Ultimately, both traditions render absence a semantically charged presence—an aesthetic and cognitive construct shaped by distinctive cultural logics, performance conventions, and interpretive expectations.

C. Affective Functions

Building upon the cognitive–narrative findings of Section 4.2, this section examines the affective dimension of silence through both prosodic and semiotic lenses. In both Vietnamese *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads, silence acts not as the negation of sound but as an affective instrument—a means of shaping emotion through measured pauses, lexical omissions, and narrative ellipses. Analysis of the corpus reveals that both traditions rely on silence to heighten emotional impact, though they do so with distinct cultural inflections.

Table 3 presents the quantitative distribution of affective silences across four categories: anticipatory tension, empathic resonance, mourning or longing, and moral gravitas.

TABLE 3
AFFECTIVE FUNCTIONS OF SILENCE IN VIETNAMESE *CA DAO* AND ANGLO-SCOTTISH BALLADS

Function	<i>Ca dao</i> (n = 50)	Ballads (n = 50)	Notes
Anticipatory Tension	14 (28 %)	9 (18 %)	In ballads, linked to suspense; in <i>ca dao</i> , to relational uncertainty.
Empathic Resonance	11 (22 %)	13 (26 %)	Shared imagery of natural cycles, with differing affective pacing.
Mourning / Longing	16 (32 %)	19 (38 %)	Ballads: death and loss; <i>ca dao</i> : separation in love or kinship.
Moral Gravitas	9 (18 %)	9 (18 %)	Silence as ethical punctuation reinforcing communal norms.

Note. Coding based on combined prosodic and semantic markers; inter-coder agreement = 0.91 (Cohen's κ). Dataset ID: SLC-2025.

From a prosodic perspective, silences associated with mourning in *ca dao* often coincide with elongated melodic contours, sustaining emotional resonance and extending the listener's empathic attention (Couper-Kuhlen, 1993). One widely cited verse exemplifies this interplay:

*Gió đưa cây cải về trời,
Rau răm ở lại chịu đời đắng cay.* (Ma, 2022)
(The mustard greens are blown to the sky,
The coriander left behind endures life's bitterness.) (Vũ, 1956)

The temporal pause between the two lines transforms separation into tenderness; emotion is not spoken but felt through rhythmic suspension. Silence, in this sense, mediates between lyric voice and communal empathy, turning absence into affective presence.

Anglo-Scottish ballads, by contrast, often employ truncation or aposiopesis to generate tension or convey moral closure. In *The Unquiet Grave*, the mourner's lament culminates in a moment of unuttered grief:

*The wind doth blow today, my love,
And a few small drops of rain;
I never had but one true-love,
In cold grave she is lain.*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 78)

The silence that follows—punctuated by the mourner's withheld voice—extends emotion into time. This technique exemplifies Fish's (1980) notion of affective stylistics, in which textual rhythm regulates both temporal pacing and emotional intensity.

In *ca dao*, silence frequently functions as a gesture of social cohesion, reinforcing relational ethics through implicit understanding. The following verse encapsulates this ethos:

*Bầu ơi thương lấy bí cùng,
Tuy rằng khác giống nhưng chung một giàn.* (Vũ, 1956)
(Bottle gourd, love the squash as well;
Though of different kind, they share one trellis.)

Here, the moral injunction remains unspoken; empathy emerges from shared imagery and communal inference rather than explicit declaration. Silence thus anchors emotional unity within a collective moral frame.

Ballads, meanwhile, mobilise silence as narrative fracture—a site of hesitation and reckoning that draws audiences into the performance itself. Because ballads were composed for oral delivery, the pause or held breath acquires performative power, shaping listeners' expectations and intensifying emotional suspense. In *Barbara Allen*, the moment between utterance and consequence transforms pathos into inevitability:

*O mother, mother, make my bed,
O make it saft and narrow:
My love has died for me today,
I'll die for him tomorrow.*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 84)

The withheld commentary between recognition and death embodies silence as moral punctuation—a stillness that marks the boundary between emotion and fate.

This contrast accords with Finnegan’s (2012) observation that oral poetics embed silence within distinct semiotic economies. Vietnamese tradition privileges restraint and relational tact, while the Anglo-Scottish ballad transforms silence into revelation—a performative moment when emotion overwhelms speech. Consequently, silence becomes not merely a structural device but a culturally encoded mode of meaning.

Viewed alongside the cognitive–narrative patterns analysed in Section 4.2, these affective dynamics clarify silence as a cultural and semiotic resource—a medium through which communities articulate emotion, morality, and memory. Silence, far from empty, functions as the texture of understanding itself: it shapes engagement, governs interpretation, and infuses the act of listening with moral and emotional significance. These findings lay the conceptual groundwork for Section 5, where form, cognition, affect, and culture will be synthesised into a cross-cultural model of poetic silence.

D. Cultural Semiotic Variations

The semiotic contrasts between *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads reveal that silence is not merely an absence of sound but a culturally embedded communicative act. In *ca dao*, silence functions as a relational and moralising device, embedding indirect counsel and fostering communal empathy. Pauses, ellipses, and truncations operate within what Keane (2003) describes as a solidarity-oriented semiotic ideology, in which interpretive gaps are bridged through shared cultural knowledge and collective ethical norms.

An illustrative *ca dao* verse exemplifies this ethic of mutual care and moral inference:

Nhiều điều phủ lấy giá gương,
Người trong một nước phải thương nhau cùng. (Ma, 2022)
(The scarlet silk covers the mirror’s frame;
Those of one nation must cherish one another.)

The imagery of fabric shielding glass conveys solidarity without explicit didacticism. Its moral imperative—to protect and empathise—is implied through poetic restraint. The silence following the verse allows the audience to internalise its meaning, turning absence into ethical reflection and communal resonance.

Conversely, Anglo-Scottish ballads often frame silence as a narrative destabiliser, aligning with Lotman’s (1990) concept of the semiosphere’s border zones, where ambiguity and unresolved tension drive narrative momentum. In *Edward*, the mother’s probing questions and the son’s evasions enact moral fracture:

What bluid’s that on thy coat lap,
Son Davie, son Davie? ...
‘It is the bluid of my great hawk,
Mother lady, mother lady.’
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 13A)

The silence between question and confession sustains uncertainty, transforming evasion into moral exposure.

The quantitative and functional distinctions observed across the two traditions are summarised in Table 4, which maps the cultural semiotic roles of silence through the integrated Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture framework.

TABLE 4
CULTURAL SEMIOTIC CODING OF SILENCE IN *CA DAO* AND ANGLO-SCOTTISH BALLADS

Cultural Tradition	Frequency of Silence Markers (n = 50)	Dominant Semiotic Function	Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture Mapping
<i>Ca dao</i>	34 (68%)	Indirect moral counsel, communal empathy	Form: elliptical closure → Cognition: normative framing → Affect: reassurance → Culture: collectivist harmony
Anglo-Scottish Ballads	29 (58%)	Moral ambiguity, unresolved tragedy	Form: narrative gap → Cognition: interpretive openness → Affect: tension/sorrow → Culture: individual moral reckoning
Total / Mean	63 (63%)	—	—

Source: Author’s dataset, coded according to Section 3 procedures.

The quantitative data indicate that silence markers appear at comparable rates (≈63%) across both traditions, yet their semiotic trajectories diverge sharply. In *ca dao*, these devices reinforce communal ethics, reflecting the high-context communicative ethos of Vietnamese folk discourse (Trần, 2013). The affective register tends toward conciliation, as silence safeguards *hoà khí* (social harmony). The verse

Lời nói chẳng mất tiền mua,
Lựa lời mà nói cho vừa lòng nhau. (Pham, 2024)
(Words cost nothing; choose them kindly to please all hearts.)

further illustrates this ethic of restraint, where tactful speech and deliberate silence sustain interpersonal balance.

In the Anglo-Scottish corpus, however, omission and narrative gaps intensify affective dissonance. Rather than invoking resolution, they compel audiences to confront moral tension. A parallel effect appears in *The Twa Corbies*, where knowledge is withheld and morality unsettled:

As I was walking all alane,
I heard twa corbies making a mane;

*The tane unto the t'other say,
'Where sall we gang and dine the day?'*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 26)

The crows' dialogue, untroubled by human grief, turns silence into the ground of irony and existential unease.

From a qualitative standpoint, this divergence underscores that silence is not a universal signifier but a culturally constructed semiotic resource. The *ca dao* tradition situates the unspoken as a locus of ethical consensus, whereas the ballad tradition turns it into a space of interpretive divergence. This bifurcation demonstrates that even when formal mechanisms—ellipsis, truncation, enjambment—are analogous, their affective valences and cultural functions are mediated by distinct semiotic ideologies.

E. Intertextual Resonances

The recurrence of the silence motif across textual variants underscores its function as a cultural mnemonic (Assmann, 1995), embedding individual narratives within collective memory. In Vietnamese *ca dao*, silence emerges through ellipsis and metaphorical compression, creating interpretive gaps that invite contextual completion during performance. This dynamic reflects Lotman's (1990) *semiosphere*, where recurring motifs persist yet adapt across socio-historical boundaries.

A representative *ca dao* exemplifies this elliptical subtlety:

*Chim quýt ăn trái nhãn lồng,
Lia thia quen chầu, vợ chồng quen hơi.* (Vũ, 1956)
(The cuckoo eats longan fruit;
The gourami grows used to its bowl—so, too, do spouses grow accustomed to one another's scent.)

Here, familiar natural imagery conveys intimacy without explicit declaration. Silence becomes encoded understanding—its unspoken message completed through collective recognition and shared moral inference.

If *ca dao* encodes silence as ethical resonance, the Anglo-Scottish ballad reframes it as narrative opacity. In *Lord Randall*, silence withholds causality and moral clarity, sustaining tension and interpretive suspense:

*Where hae ye been, Lord Randall, my son?
And where hae ye been, my handsome young man?'
'I hae been at the wild wood; mother, mak my bed soon,
For I'm weary wi' hunting, and fain would lie down.*
(Child, 1882–1898, No. 12)

Repetition and rhythmic pauses conceal the truth of poisoning, compelling audiences to infer meaning. Silence thus heightens suspense while preserving moral openness, exemplifying Bauman's (1986) view that oral performance depends on audience participation. This dynamic also supports Assmann's (1995) claim that cultural memory functions through repetition and transformation—a principle Lotman (1990) extends to adaptation within the *semiosphere*.

The comparative distribution and interpretive functions of the silence motif across both traditions are summarised in Table 5, which integrates quantitative frequency with qualitative analysis to illustrate how form, affect, and cultural logic intertwine.

TABLE 5
QUANTITATIVE–QUALITATIVE CHARACTERISTICS OF THE SILENCE MOTIF IN VIETNAMESE *CA DAO* AND ANGLO-SCOTTISH BALLADS

Tradition	Frequency	Percentage (%)	Formal Features	Emotional Functions	Illustrative Examples
Vietnamese <i>Ca dao</i>	29 / 70	41.4	Ellipsis, metaphorical compression, interpretive gaps	Fostering communal empathy, indirect moral instruction	“Chim quýt ăn trái nhãn lồng / Thia thia quen chầu, vợ chồng quen hơi” (Vũ, 1956)
Anglo-Scottish Ballads	26 / 70	37.1	Omission of causal links, unresolved conflicts	Evoking moral ambiguity, sustaining unresolved tragedy	<i>Lord Randall</i> (Child, 1882–1898, No. 12)

Note. Percentages represent the proportion of silence-related motifs relative to the total corpus (n = 70); rounding = 1 decimal place.

Although the overall incidence of silence is similar ($\approx 63\%$), its semiotic trajectory diverges sharply. In *ca dao*, silence reinforces communal ethics and the high-context ethos of Vietnamese discourse (Trần, 2013), its affective tone conciliatory—guarding *hoà khí* (social harmony). In the ballads, omission and unresolved conflict heighten affective dissonance, prompting audiences to confront ambiguity and moral tension, consistent with the *semiosphere's* creativity through contradiction (Lotman, 1990).

Viewed through cultural semiotics and performance theory, silence emerges as a mediating force that negotiates between stability and transformation. It endures as a cross-cultural device of meaning-making, ensuring interpretive vitality across evolving textual and cultural contexts. These findings converge with Section 5, where silence is analyzed through the integrated Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture model.

V. DISCUSSION

This discussion integrates the empirical findings with theoretical perspectives drawn from cross-cultural poetics, performance studies, and cognitive semiotics. By synthesizing quantitative patterns (as shown in Table 5, Section 4.5) with qualitative interpretations, it positions the motif of silence within a multidimensional framework of Form ↔ Cognition ↔ Affect ↔ Culture, illustrating how structural omissions operate within wider systems of cultural performance and aesthetic practice (Bauman, 1986; Bial & Brady, 2025; Fischer-Lichte, 2008). The analysis also aligns with audience-oriented approaches that treat meaning as co-constructed through interaction rather than embedded in the text itself (Bennett, 2013).

A. Intercultural Poetics of Silence

Across Vietnamese *ca dao* and Anglo-Scottish ballads, silence emerges as a shared poetic strategy yet takes culturally distinct forms. In *ca dao*, ellipsis and metaphorical truncation open interpretive spaces that invite audiences to recover moral and relational codes grounded in communal ethics (Nguyễn, 2004). In the ballads, by contrast, silence manifests through unresolved endings or withheld causality, sustaining ambiguity in line with gap-filling aesthetics where interpretive participation is key (Iser, 1978). *Ca dao* registers a marginally higher frequency of silence (41.4%) than the ballads (37.1%), reflecting a preference for social harmony through indirect expression. The ballads, meanwhile, use ambiguity as a means of moral inquiry, often leaving tension deliberately unresolved.

B. Speech Breakdown as Cultural Performance

Silence is not simply the absence of language; it is a performative act that materializes cultural values in specific contexts (Bauman, 1986). Within *ca dao* performance, strategic omission operates as a communal cue, signaling mutual understanding without overt articulation—an enactment rooted in Confucian-Buddhist communicative restraint (Tran, 2013). In the Anglo-Scottish tradition, moments of speech breakdown frequently coincide with emotional or narrative peaks, turning the performance space into a site of suspended meaning where the audience participates as co-creator (Bial & Brady, 2025; Bennett, 2013). Fischer-Lichte's (2008) concept of the "autopoietic feedback loop" captures this dynamic precisely: silence becomes an embodied dialogue through which performer and audience reciprocally produce significance.

Building upon this performative dimension, the following section turns to the question of audience response, examining how silence is received as an affective and moral cue across cultural contexts.

C. Affective Reception Across Cultures

Reception analysis reveals distinct interpretive orientations. Vietnamese listeners tend to perceive silence in *ca dao* as a moral and emotional gesture that strengthens collective identity and reinforces social cohesion (Nguyễn, 2004). In contrast, British and Scottish audiences often interpret narrative gaps in ballads as invitations to speculative reconstruction, cultivating individualized affective engagement (Atkinson, 2014). This intercultural divergence corresponds with cross-cultural emotion research indicating that collectivist audiences seek closure through shared interpretive norms, while individualist audiences sustain open-ended reflection (Mesquita et al., 2016). In both cases, silence functions as an affective code—a culturally mediated cue that shapes emotional resonance and interpretive stance.

D. The Paradox of the Unspoken

Silence simultaneously operates as presence and absence, a paradox that underpins its aesthetic force. In *ca dao*, what remains unspoken carries moral weight, constraining interpretation within the bounds of communal ethics (Nguyễn, 2004). In the ballads, silence often represents absence-as-invitation, destabilizing closure and enabling reinterpretation across generations. This duality resonates with the notion of "performative fracture" (Bial & Brady, 2025), where the disruption of speech reorganizes communicative frames and transforms absence into generative presence. Yet one might ask whether silence signifies loss or potential. The evidence suggests that it embodies both: it withholds meaning while simultaneously creating the conditions for its renewal.

E. Proposed Comparative Model

To synthesise the study's theoretical and empirical findings, Figure 1 below visualises the *Four-Dimensional Comparative Model*, mapping the intersections among Form, Cognition, Affect, and Culture.

This integrative framework links intertextual resonance with reception aesthetics, illustrating how silence operates simultaneously as a structural technique, a cognitive prompt, an affective cue, and a cultural code.

Within this schema, silence is conceptualised as:

- **Form:** Structural devices such as ellipsis, aposiopesis, and unresolved endings;
- **Cognition:** Inferential and imaginative gap-filling;
- **Affect:** Emotional modulation through empathy, tension, or ambiguity;
- **Culture:** Normative frameworks and performance conventions.

The following figure presents the Four-Dimensional Comparative Model, showing how these domains interact to generate a cyclical process of interpretation and meaning-making within oral poetics.

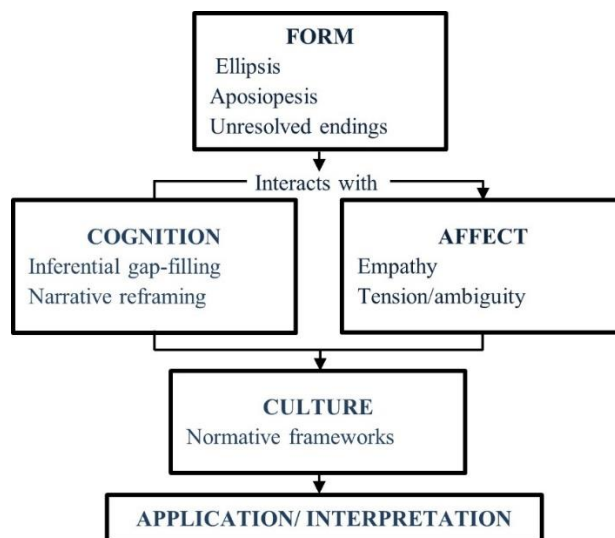


Figure 1. The Four-Dimensional Comparative Model of Silence in Oral Poetics

Form introduces structured absence; *Cognition* interprets and reconstructs it; *Affect* transforms it into emotional experience; *Culture* situates it within moral and social frameworks.

This cyclical configuration demonstrates that silence functions not as a void but as a dynamic field of signification—continuously negotiated across poetic, cognitive, and cultural dimensions.

By embedding silence within this integrated framework, the model transcends the *ca dao*–ballad comparison to provide a transferable analytical lens for examining the unspoken across oral and written traditions.

While the present schema captures the major cultural and formal dynamics at play, future comparative research involving other oral corpora may further refine its range and adaptability within broader semiotic ecologies.

VI. CONCLUSION AND IMPLICATIONS

A. Summary of Contributions

This study has developed a comparative typology of silence and speech breakdown in oral poetic traditions, framed within an integrated Form–Cognition–Affect–Culture model. Drawing on both quantitative and qualitative analyses (see Table 5, Section 4.5), the research demonstrates that silence is not a passive void but an active semiotic force shaping poetic structure and cultural meaning. Vietnamese *ca dao* exhibits a slightly higher frequency of silence-related mechanisms (41.4%) than Anglo–Scottish ballads (37.1%), yet these figures encode distinct socio-aesthetic logics. In *ca dao*, ellipsis and metaphorical truncation cultivate moral inference and collective empathy through indirect expression. In the ballads, by contrast, unresolved narrative gaps sustain moral ambiguity and tragic indeterminacy. Silence thus functions simultaneously as a mnemonic device and a generative interpretive agent—binding individual experience to collective memory and embedding affect within each tradition’s ethical and cognitive frameworks.

Building on these findings, the discussion turns to their broader theoretical significance within current debates on cultural performance and semiotic interpretation.

B. Academic Implications

The findings refine and extend contemporary understandings of cultural performance (Bauman, 1986; Fischer-Lichte, 2008) by positioning silence as a form–function complex that bridges poetics, cognition, and affect. Silence, rather than being peripheral to expression, emerges as integral to the architecture of meaning itself. The incorporation of gap-filling aesthetics (Iser, 1978) underscores that interpretive agency is co-constructed between audience and tradition: meaning arises not from what is spoken but from what is strategically withheld. This observation complicates the assumption that silence merely reflects restraint; it reveals instead how distinct cultures encode ethical and epistemological positions through their preferred modalities of omission. The comparative framework developed here reinforces the *Four-Dimensional Comparative Model* (see Figure 1), providing a scalable tool for tracing how silence operates across intersecting axes of form, cognition, affect, and culture.

C. Applied Implications

Beyond theoretical synthesis, this typology offers practical value in folklore pedagogy, translation studies, and cultural heritage preservation. In educational contexts, approaching silence as a culturally embedded aesthetic enriches interpretive literacy and attunes learners to the implicit dimensions of oral artistry. In translation, retaining purposeful silences—rather than resolving them—preserves the moral and affective subtleties of the source text. In heritage preservation, documenting silence as an expressive form safeguards its interpretive complexity and ensures continuity

across changing sociohistorical landscapes. Collectively, these applications affirm silence as a vital yet often overlooked component of cultural transmission and aesthetic endurance.

D. Future Research Directions

Future studies may extend this framework to additional oral repertoires—such as Nordic or Balkan ballads—where silence interacts with ethnopoetic and performative conventions in unique ways. Mixed-method approaches that integrate performance ethnography, audience reception, and corpus-based poetics would allow more nuanced mapping of how formal, cognitive, and emotive dimensions of silence vary across traditions. Further collaboration with cognitive neuroscience could illuminate how audiences process interpretive gaps and emotional resonance, bridging aesthetic theory with empirical inquiry. Such interdisciplinary expansion would deepen understanding of silence as both a universal human phenomenon and a culture-specific mode of meaning-making.

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