

## Listening, Understanding, and Misunderstanding

Listening has been identified as one of the most used **and** one of the most important communication skills in personal, academic, **and** professional settings alike (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996, pp. 13–25). The vital role of listening in communication begins with the recognition that listening is the first language skill to be acquired. The fetus listens as it develops in the mother's womb; henceforth, this listening development plays a central role in one's language acquisition. Auditory **and** visual discrimination also are central to the child's early development of other (including survival, social, **and** intellectual) skills.

Studies of time spent communicating (Emanuel Adams, Baker, Daufin, Ellington, Fitts, et al., 2008) suggest that people listen for as much as 55% of their day. The primacy of listening is not just a matter of time on the task. Listening is a critical factor in academic success. Federal initiatives to strengthen educational outcomes for secondary school **and** post-secondary-school students underscore the need for listening proficiency. The U.S. Department of Labor established a commission to identify what critical skills are essential for high school graduates to function effectively in the workplace. The basic skills of mathematics, reading, writing, speaking, **and** *listening* were determined to be at the core of preparation for graduates to enter the workplace. In the workplace, listening ability consistently ranks in the top three skills that employers seek in hiring for entry-level positions. Effective listening is recognized as a key to organizational success, because poor listening can be costly.

The study of listening behavior in the field of communication is not a new focus. As early as 1948, Ralph G. Nichols, considered by many to be the “founder” of listening as a field of study, established some dimensions of what constitutes listening behavior, including inference making, listening for the main ideas, identifying the organizational plan, **and** concentration. Basic to any attempt to define listening, however, is a consideration of how listening is a unique behavior separate from other intellectual behaviors. Early listening research isolated a disparate listening comprehension factor, distinct from the students' performance in areas such as reasoning, verbal comprehension, attention, auditory resistance, **and** memory.

### **The Listening Process**

As a communicator, the listener engages in a sequence of behaviors that are generally accepted to characterize the decoding process: receiving; attending; perceiving; interpreting; **and** responding.

#### ***Receiving***

The listener receives messages. During reception, the listener employs auditory **and** visual sensory receptors. While the listening process can include hearing sounds, listening **and** hearing are not the synonymous functions that many individuals assume. The auditory reception of the message is itself a detailed process involving the intricate hearing mechanism. The sound must enter the middle ear, set into vibration the tympanic membrane, **and** be conducted through the inner ear to the brain. Problems with the hearing mechanism can compound the receptive process. Research at the National Institutes of Health suggests that as many as one out of every nine Americans has some type of hearing loss. Exposure to loud music, especially through headsets, has been

identified as a major contributor to this situation. While many researchers **and** practitioners have focused their definitions **and** models of listening on listening to auditory-only stimuli, listening also involves the visual channel when the source of the stimuli is in the presence of the listener. The visual channel is an influential communication media, **and** the other senses (smell, taste, touch) impact the listener as well.

### ***Attending***

After the message has been received through auditory **and** visual channels, it must be attended to in the working memory (Baddeley & Hitch, 1974). At this point, the listener is required to focus on the auditory **and/or** the visual stimuli **and** concentrate on the message received. While researchers differ as to how the short-term memory system receives **and** holds the information, they do agree that the attention span is quite limited. Cognitive psychologists recognize that attention is a limited resource of a fixed capacity of sensory systems **and** memory mechanisms combined.

The human attention span today undoubtedly has been limited further by the impact of the media. Many people raised in the television generation, for example, have come to expect a 7- to 10-minute program format with time out for a commercial break. This shortened attention span affects one's capacity to listen to lectures, to participate in conversation, **and** generally to function as a listener in all sorts of settings.

A listener's ability to attend to a message is influenced significantly by attention energy. Kahneman (1973) has determined that attention energy may be distributed according to (1) the difficulty of the mental task; (2) automatic, unconscious communication rules (such as focusing on the speaker who uses the listener's name); **and** (3) conscious decisions (such as focusing on one's supervisor's message rather than on that from a coworker).

### ***Perceiving***

Attention to the message is affected not only by the listener's energy in the short-term memory system but also by the listener's perceptual filter. The perceptual filter serves to screen the stimulus so that one's predispositions alter the message received. The listener's frame of reference—all of one's background, experience, roles, **and** mental **and** physical states—makes up the perceptual filter. The frame of reference establishes the perceptual expectations that listeners bring to the communication so that, essentially, we see **and** hear what we want to see **and** hear. The listener who understands how the frame of reference shapes his or her listening behavior can function at a more sophisticated level. This understanding should extend to understanding the other communicator(s)— why they are responding as they do. Getting to this level of empathic perception affords the listener a solid frame of reference for interpreting the message.

### ***Interpreting***

Once the message has been received **and** perceived by the listener through the auditory, visual, **and** attention processors, the message must be interpreted by the listener. This stage of the listening process involves fitting the verbal **and/or** nonverbal messages into the proper linguistic categories stored in the brain **and** then interpreting the messages for their meanings. Lundsteen (1979) describes this representational process as one of internal speech. Decoding the verbal **and** nonverbal language varies according to each individual's perceptual filter **and** linguistic category system, so the original intent of a speaker's message may be misinterpreted, distorted, or even completely changed as the listener's meaning is assigned.

The assignment of meaning to the message is influenced not only by the linguistic category system but also by one's cognitive processing. This mental activity is framed by the hemispheric dominance of an individual; by his or her inductive, deductive, or intuitive orientation; **and** by the long-term memory. As the message is processed, it is analyzed, visualized, **and** associated according to the linguistic categories in the long-term memory store. As individuals are called on to handle a vast amount of information during the course of any given day, techniques to process **and** recall information become critical.

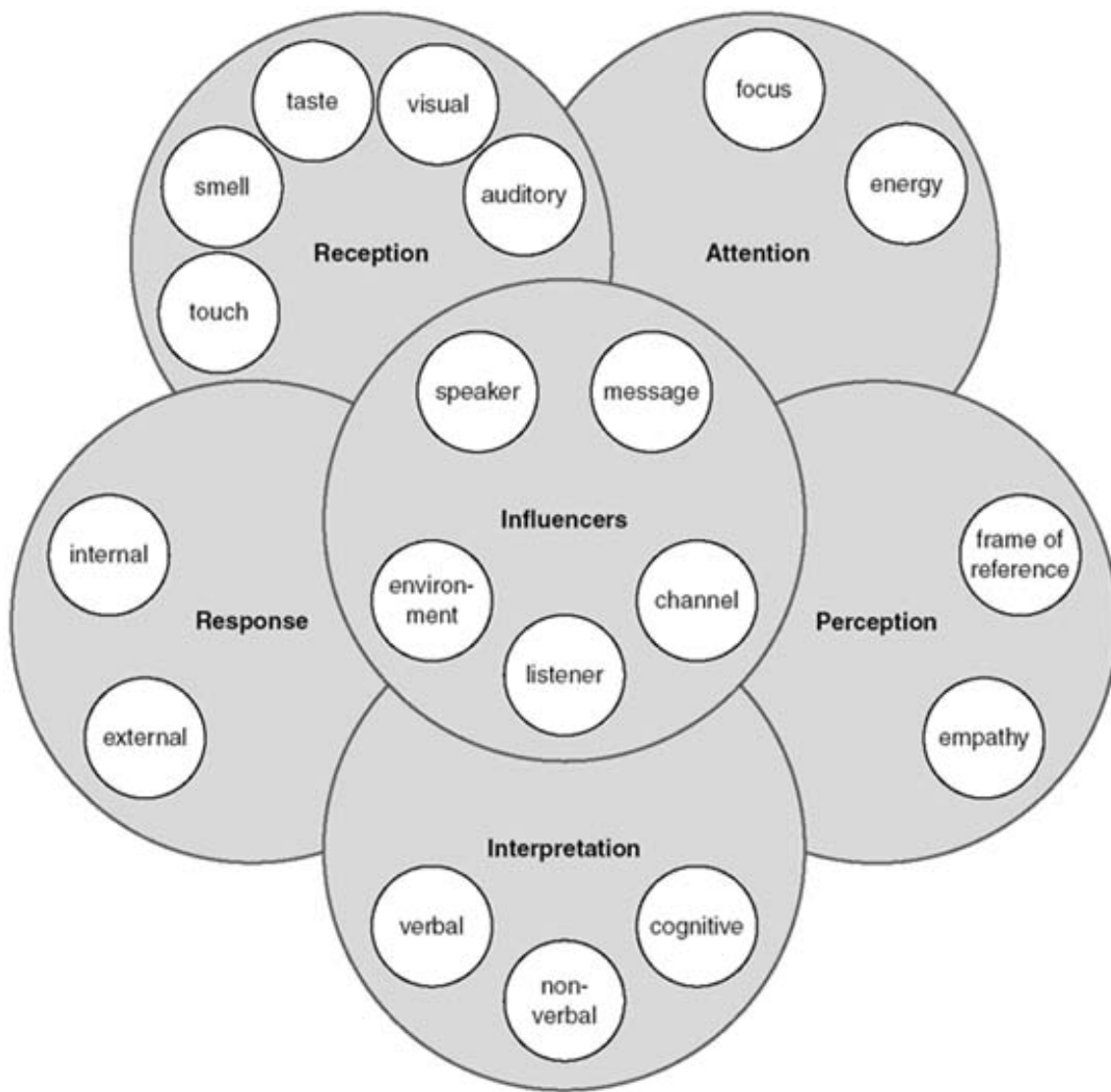
Some cognitive psychologists use schema theory to describe this complex task of decoding **and** interpreting messages. Schema theory posits that humans carry schemata—mental representations of knowledge—in their brains. These organized information structures consist of nodes (concepts, events, objects) **and** links (relationships of the nodes). New information that listeners receive is first run through existing schemata, or scripts, **and** then interpreted. Schemata represent the generic concepts that are stored in memory **and** relate persons or objects to attributes or relate actions to anticipated consequences. Smith (1982) suggests that schemata serve important listening functions in (1) telling us to what we should attend, (2) serving as the framework for interpreting incoming information, **and** (3) guiding the reconstruction of messages in memory. Cognitive responses to the message, thus, serve to frame the listener's interpretation of the information received.

### ***Responding***

After assigning one's own meaning to the message, the listener responds to it. This phase of the listening process involves moving the received, attended to, **and** interpreted message from the short-term memory into the long-term memory store for potential retrieval. As memory development specialists stress, retention requires strategy. Familiar techniques such as the use of mnemonic devices, linking, clustering, **and** chunking are considered by researchers studying the dynamics of short-term memory **and** recall.

The listener's response also is external, manifested in the feedback that the listener provides to the source of the message. Though listening constitutes an intricate internal process, attention to feedback is essential to good listening. Research by Leavitt **and** Mueller (1968) demonstrates that with increased feedback, both listener **and** speaker gain confidence that the message is communicated with accuracy **and** experience satisfaction with the communication. Other communicators in an interaction base their assessment of a listener's effectiveness on the feedback, responses that might take the form of performance on a comprehension test, questions asked, attentive behaviors, or even compliance. Thus, while some listening scholars argue that feedback goes beyond listening **and** takes the listener back into a sender's role in the communication transaction, we rely on feedback, albeit unfairly at times, as an indicator of listening “accomplished.”

The complex listening process, including reception, attention, perception, interpretation, **and** response, may be illustrated as a process model of overlapping circles (Figure 16.1). While the stages of listening occur in some sequence, in the listener's “real time,” the dimensions probably occur in close simultaneity. At the core of the process are communication influencers—variables of the speaker, message, channel, environment, **and** individual listener—that affect the outcome at every stage of this process. It should be apparent, then, that listening behavior is one of the most complex of all human behaviors—**and** certainly extends far beyond the auditory processing that has been the focus of so many of the earlier listening scholars.



**Figure 16.1** Listening Model

## Listening Variables

As listeners receive, attend, perceive, interpret, **and** respond to messages, they are influenced by many variables that can enhance or impede effective listening. Listening researchers have focused on key physiological, social/psychological, **and** contextual influencers.

### **Physiological Influencers**

Listening physiology certainly plays a major role in how listeners function. Sensory acuity, especially auditory **and** visual, is basic to listening. Age-related deterioration of sensory mechanisms can lead to loss of both the verbal content **and** the nonverbal dimensions of the communication. Additionally, the neurological makeup of the listener is a factor. Research on hemispheric specialization, for example, suggests that the left brain may be the more rational, objective, organizing processor, while the right brain is the more emotional, intuitive side.

Age also is an important listening variable. In a body of research on listening across the life span, my colleagues **and** I have determined that what may characterize competent or effective listening can change as one physiologically, sociologically, **and/or** communicatively ages (Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, & Wolvin, 1998). A listener acquires differential listening experiences **and** gains a wider array of general knowledge throughout his or her life span. Significantly, children, adolescents, young adults, older adults, **and** elders report different

listening needs, different listening goals, **and** different listening strategies as they account for listening expectations **and** for listening experiences alike.

Just as age is a listening variable, so too is gender. One of the highly perpetuated American stereotypes is that listening is, essentially, "women's work." Brain imaging research (Phillips, Lowe, Lurito, Dziedzic, & Mathews, 2001) does demonstrate that men **and** women bring some very real differences in attention styles **and** cognitive processing styles to the communicative interaction. As these researchers explore more deeply the biological influence of the male/female genetic makeup, however, the social influence model continues to dominate our understanding of gender variables. Research reveals that men **and** women have been found to "learn to listen for different purposes **and** have different listening goals. The primary contrast appears in task versus interpersonal understanding: Males tend to hear facts, while females are more aware of the mood of the communication" (Booth-Butterfield, 1984, p. 39).

### ***Psychological Influencers***

In addition to the physiological influences on listening, listeners bring psychological variables to the communication. The listener's attitudinal state may well be one of the most significant influences on that person's listening behavior. A positive listening attitude, along with listening knowledge, is a critical ingredient of effective listening. Positive attitudes give the listener a willingness to listen.

Positive attitudes that facilitate effective listening may be identified. Being interested is probably one of the most significant. Too frequently, listeners tune out with the excuse "Oh, this isn't interesting." A high level of interest combines with an active, responsible approach to listening. Unfortunately, Americans are conditioned to listening as a passive act. Good listeners recognize that they are partners in the communication **and** that they share in the responsibility for meeting the goals of the interaction. Effective listeners also remain open-minded, willing to listen to differing points of view **and** to speakers whose styles are not necessarily attractive or engaging.

Positive listening attitudes are not directed only at the other communicator. Positive listening attitudes also influence one's self-concept as a listener. Sadly, listening is not a highly valued American communication skill; we seldom reward good listening. Rather, we reinforce negative listening behaviors in schools **and** families alike. "You're not listening." "You never listen to me." "Be quiet **and** listen." These admonishments are more prevalent in American speech than "Thanks for listening" or "You're a good listener."

Listeners, like speakers, also suffer communication apprehension. Wheelless (1975) has pioneered some study of receiver apprehension, "the fear of misinterpreting, inadequately processing, **and/or** not being able to adjust psychologically to messages sent by others" (p. 263).

Research on receiver apprehension suggests that listening anxiety stemming from stressful situations can lead to distorted messages **and** misunderstandings.

Additionally, there is evidence that receiver apprehension can result from inadequate information processing. McReynolds (1976) hypothesizes that the processing of material that is difficult to assimilate tends to accumulate (resulting in "cognitive backlog") **and** to produce anxiety. Beatty (1981) has determined that receiver apprehension is a function of unassimilated information that results from processing difficulties because of the cognitive backlog.

The listener who suffers receiver apprehension **and/or** negative attitudes toward listening is not going to be an efficient listener. Indeed, an unreceptive listener may not be a listener at all. Wheelless, Frymier, **and** Thompson (1992) have looked at receptivity—being open to influence—as it relates to the listening behaviors of responsiveness **and** attentive-ness. Extending this line of research, Roberts **and** Vinson (1998) determined that the importance of the topic is the crucial factor in establishing a listener's willingness to listen.

A listener's willingness to listen also depends on his or her listening preferences. Listeners choose different ways to listen, choices grounded in habitual responses that evolve over the course of one's listening lifetime. Watson, Barker, **and** Weaver (1995) identified four listening styles: (1) a people-oriented style, which focuses on the emotional **and** relational aspects of a communication; (2) a content-oriented style, centered on processing complex information; (3) an action-oriented style, where the listener prefers clear, efficient information; **and** (4) a time-oriented style, where the listener has a preference for short, limited messages. Undoubtedly, other listening factors, such as listening type (data driven, structure oriented, vision seeker, human dimension oriented), cognitive style (inductive, deductive, intuitive), introverted/extroverted personality style, conversational sensitivity, **and** channels, influence listening behavior in significant ways.

### ***Contextual Influencers***

While listeners bring significant physiological **and** psychological variables to their listening behavior, contextual influencers also play a central role in shaping the listening experience. Roles, culture, **and** time have received the attention of listening researchers.

The context of the communication frequently shapes the roles that communicators must assume in the interaction. We listen in many different communication relationships— personal, academic, professional—which require that we assume different roles as family members, friends, students, workers, or managers. It is noteworthy that listening effectiveness has been correlated with perceptions of good leadership. **And** listening enhances the sales relationship by creating a trusting climate.

Culture is understood as the set of customs, behaviors, beliefs, **and** language that distinguish a particular group of people **and** make up the background, experience, **and** perceptual filters of individuals within that group. The anthropologist Edward Hall (Hall & Hall, 1989) described how different cultures manage information in different ways. Low-context cultures, such as the United States **and** Canada, require communicators to give **and** receive a considerable amount of verbal information, while high-context cultures, such as Japan **and** Saudi Arabia, requires less extensive verbal messages. In high-context cultures, more information is contained in the communication setting **and** in the communicators themselves than in the words used.

As a result, people listen differently in different cultures. Kiewitz, Weaver, Brosius, **and** Weimann (1997), for example, compared the listening style preferences of young adults in three different cultures. They discovered that Germans preferred the action style, Israelis were more prone to the content style, while Americans were more oriented to the people **and** time styles of listening.

Like culture, time is a major variable in listening. Listening communicators are influenced continuously by various dimensions of time. Time is manifested in the aging process itself **and** how that process affects sensory acuity **and** the experience level of the listener. The time in which the communication occurs has an effect on listening, because people deal with information differently at different times of the day. Interestingly, verbal information presented in the afternoon may be retained longer than that offered in the morning.

Additionally, the time it takes to listen is a factor. It has been suggested that listeners can listen (**and** think) about four times faster than the normal conversation rate, so we have a considerable "time gap" in the system for attention to wander **and** to lose focus. This gap between speech speed **and** thought speed may be one of the most significant factors.

With the advances in communication technology **and** information, many listeners today feel overwhelmed with messages. The average American worker confronts as many as 201 messages a day. As a result, we justifiably perceive that we are running out of time.

### **Listening Typologies**

Listeners function in this complex, multidimensional process of listening with a variety of purposes. These purposes have been identified through several typologies by listening scholars. Lundsteen (1971, 1979), one of the first to analyze listening skills as a hierarchy, offered an instructional taxonomy of listening skills in general **and** of critical listening skills in particular. Lundsteen was concerned with building a listening curriculum, so she stressed the value of looking at levels of listening skills: Level A, the lowest level, is acuity or sound perception; Level B represents basic discrimination among sounds; **and** Level C is the comprehension of sounds. Skills at these levels may form a hierarchy, stresses Lundsteen (1979), "because persons who fail to discriminate sound differences with finesse probably also fail to symbolize much verbal meaning from those sounds" (p. 54).

Two other categories have been proposed by Barker **and** by Mills. Barker (1971) defined listening contexts as social **and** serious. These categories were explicated further as social listening, which includes appreciative, conversational, courteous listening **and** listening to indicate love or respect, while serious listening was classified as either selective or concentrated. Mills (1974) described listening targets as responsive listening (agreeing with the speaker), implicative listening (identifying what is not being said), critical listening (evaluating the message), **and** nondirective listening (providing a sounding board for the speaker).

Extending the previous work on the hierarchical nature of listening skills, Wolvin **and** Coakley (1979) developed a taxonomy of listening functions that correlate with five general purposes of listeners (aligned, of course, with the general purposes of speakers): discriminative, comprehensive, therapeutic, critical, **and** appreciative. Just as there are specific listening skills unique to each of these listening purposes, these skills operate in a hierarchical sequence—depending on what each listener's intended objective or objectives for listening might be at any particular time. To listen to comprehend information, for example, the listener must use discriminative as well as comprehensive listening skills. Discriminative **and** comprehensive listening are the basic types in which listeners engage. At a higher order, then, listeners build on their discriminative **and** comprehensive listening skills to function as therapeutic, critical, or appreciative listeners.

It should be recognized that these listening purposes are not always discrete categories. There are times when an individual may listen for multiple purposes while receiving, attending, perceiving, interpreting, **and** responding to messages.

### ***Discriminative Listening***

Discriminative listening involves distinguishing the auditory **and**/or visual stimuli. Discriminative listening requires careful concentration on, **and** sensitivity to, the various stimuli to differentiate between/among them accurately. Effective discriminative listening demands sensitivity to the verbal **and** nonverbal cues offered by the communicator **and** a concerted effort to identify the auditory **and** the visual messages.

The importance of listening to discriminate is significant. Parents quickly learn discriminative listening skills when listening to the cries of their newborn infant. Auditory discrimination serves as the base for reading readiness programs for young children. Panhandlers are experts at visually discriminating an "easy mark" on the street. Auto mechanics rely on sound discrimination to understand the malfunctioning of a car. Musicians must discriminate sounds to perform at a professional level. **And** speech **and** hearing specialists work to distinguish speech sounds in order to assist clients in dealing with speech disorders.

Discriminative listening serves as the basis for all other purposes of listening behavior. The receptive stage in the process requires the listener to identify **and** interpret carefully the auditory **and** visual cues in order to deal effectively with the information being received.

### ***Comprehensive Listening***

Listening for comprehension extends from the discrimination of the stimulus to an understanding of the message. Comprehensive listeners listen to lectures, briefings, reports, conferences, television **and** film

documentaries, telephone messages, traffic alerts in order to comprehend the information presented. Much of the educational process at all levels is based on comprehensive listening. Students are asked to listen carefully to lectures **and** class discussions in order to understand **and** retain vast amounts of information.

The effective comprehensive listener actively strives to understand **and** to retain the information in the message. Essentially, the listener is after listening fidelity, a concept identified by listening scholars as the “degree of congruence between the cognitions of a listener **and** the cognitions of a source following a communication event” (Mulanax & Powers, 2001, p. 70). To assign the meaning intended by the speaker instead of assigning his or her own meaning, the listener avoids critical judgment of the message, the speaker, the channel, or the language used. In addition to not being evaluative, the listener requires proficiency at listening for comprehension by having a well-developed vocabulary, skill at making accuracy checks through questioning, **and** even note-taking strategies. Understanding **and** retaining the information presented requires the listener to develop memory skills—skills that enable the listener to initially hold the incoming information in the short-term memory, to rehearse the information in order to ensure that it is placed in the long-term memory store, **and** to draw on the long-term memory store to assign meaning. All these memory strategies depend on intense concentration, an essential key to effective listening comprehension. Given the fluctuating nature of attention, an effective comprehensive listener must work to refocus **and** maintain focus on the speaker's message. Using internal summaries **and** identifying the speaker's “signposts” may assist in this concentration process.

### ***Therapeutic Listening***

Therapeutic listening (also referred to more narrowly as “empathic” listening) requires that the listener serve as a “sounding board” to provide the speaker with the opportunity to talk through a problem, ideally to the speaker's own solution to it. Effective therapeutic listening builds from discrimination **and** comprehension of the message for the listener to provide the necessary supportive behaviors **and** responses that enable the speaker to talk through the problem. While serious psychological problems must be handled by qualified therapists, an empathetic ear can be all the assistance required for many people to deal with daily concerns. An effective therapeutic listener must be careful not to evaluate or judge what is said. The therapeutic listener must operate from a high level of empathy—understanding why the speaker is responding as he or she does—to understand the speaker's thoughts **and** feelings. By applying principles of nondirective listening, the listener offers just the necessary responses (verbalizations such as “uh huh” **and** nonverbalizations such as head nods) to keep the speaker communicating without directing him or her to any one particular solution.

Successful therapeutic listening demands a supportive communication climate in which the speaker feels free to express his or her feelings **and** thoughts without judgment. Likewise, the therapeutic listener must work to remain an empathetic listener without offering a great deal of advice. This is a difficult task, because many individuals will say, “What do you think I should do?” **and** we have a natural tendency to want to respond with “If I were you, I would ...” Unfortunately, such advice then imposes *your* solution on another's problem, **and** that may not be the most productive. People need help in solving their own problems.

### ***Critical Listening***

Unlike therapeutic listening, critical listening requires that a listener evaluate/judge what is being said. Once the critical listener has discriminated **and** comprehended the message, it is necessary then to form judgments about the message in order to accept or reject the persuasive appeals. It is important to determine when critical listening is required. Unfortunately, too many listeners go to a critical evaluation prematurely or inappropriately, passing judgments on speakers **and** messages before comprehending them.

Listeners respond to persuasive messages at various levels. The credibility (trustworthiness, dynamics, **and** believability) of the speaker is influential. Furthermore, listeners respond to the structure **and** support of the speaker's arguments. Since effective persuasive communicators will use a variety of psychological appeals to



get listeners to respond at the appropriate need levels, the conscientious critical listener must know what speakers are doing to develop persuasive messages **and**, consequently, how he or she is responding to them.

Critical listeners do well to train themselves in recognizing argument fallacies, particularly hasty generalizations drawn from too little or no evidence. **And** emotional language can distract listeners if they are not careful to recognize the “red flags” that lead to strong emotional responses. Furthermore, critical listeners should be able to assess the impact that the speaker may be having on their responses to the persuasive messages. Effective critical listening, thus, involves sound judgment **and** awareness of the persuasive strategies being used.

### ***Appreciative Listening***

Appreciative listening is listening to enjoy or to gain a sensory impression from the material. Listening to music, to environmental sounds, to a book on tape, or to a television presentation all represent forms of appreciative listening.

Although listening for appreciation also builds from discrimination **and** comprehension of appreciative experiences, it results from a very individual response. Listeners' tastes **and** standards for appreciation vary widely. Some specialists argue that awareness of the background **and** the style of the material may provide a more meaningful basis for appreciating that material. Thus, music appreciation courses, for example, frequently stress music history, form, **and** composition. Other specialists, however, encourage listeners to “go with the experience” **and** not be terribly concerned about analyzing the elements.

The effective listener, then, will make some determination as to what purpose for listening is appropriate in any given communication situation **and** adapt his or her listening responses accordingly. Although these categories are not discrete (a person may both appreciate **and** evaluate some material, for example), the taxonomy of listening purposes has been helpful to listeners in understanding their own listening behavior **and** in developing strategies for functioning more effectively with the different purposes.

While the taxonomy serves as a useful instructional frame, Arnold (1990) argues against this (or any) classification system by suggesting that “these distinctions do not hold up in practice **and** they provide little insight into the processes of listening” (p. 3). As a result, he proposes to look at listening as a continuum from listening for information on the left side (of the continuum) to listening with empathy on the right side. However, as we have described the listening process, listening with empathy is integral to all forms of listening. For the listener to best interpret any message, he or she must bring a certain level of empathetic understanding to his or her perception of what the speaker is communicating.

Whether viewed as a continuum or as a taxonomy, listening is a complex communication behavior. The listener functions at different purposes depending on his or her objective as well as the speaker's goal in the communication. Because listening is such a complex human behavior, because as a covert behavior it is difficult to investigate, **and** because research on listening is still at a relatively exploratory stage, conceptualizing the process of listening continues to occupy the attention of many listening scholars.

Given the multidimensionality of listening, Fitch-Hauser **and** Hughes (1992) call for the establishment of some agreed-on operationalizations of listening. Yet most listening tests have focused only on the recall abilities of listeners who are aware that they are being tested.

### **Listening Competency**

Traditionally, listening researchers **and** educators have focused on a skills-based approach to listening. Nichols's (1948) work on listening established 10 principles for good listening, which for decades became the benchmarks for skills in listening. These “ten commandments” for skilled listening formed a familiar base for much of the writing **and** teaching about listening:

1. Find an area of interest.
2. Judge content, not delivery.
3. Hold your fire (withhold evaluation until you comprehend the message).
4. Listen for ideas.
5. Be flexible in note taking.
6. Work at listening.
7. Resist distractions.
8. Exercise your mind (don't avoid difficult material).
9. Keep your mind open.
10. Capitalize on thought speed (productively use the gap between speech rate **and** listening/thinking rate).

Listening competence, however, has come to be understood as more than behavioral technique. Ridge (1984) concludes that "competence in listening is acquired by knowing **and** doing, **and** is evidenced by appropriate feedback or response" (p. 4). Rhodes, Watson, **and** Barker (1990) articulate a similar view of listening competence: Competent listening cannot be defined as only possession of knowledge; effective, or competent, listening is a behavioral act, **and** like other behavioral acts, listening can be improved with practice **and** feedback" (p. 64).

Competence in listening, then, demands both knowing about listening **and** doing or engaging in appropriate listening behavior. Clearly, there are cognitive, behavioral, **and** affective dimensions to listening competency.

My colleagues **and** I have argued that listening competence must extend beyond knowledge **and** skills to the development of listening attitudes. The listeners' motivation **and** willingness to participate in communication transactions are essential to all listening experiences. Bostrom (1990) supports the incorporation of attitude as a listening dimension, because willingness to listen is such an inherent part of the process. Given that listening is not a simple, passive communicative act, it becomes important that the listener engage as a fully functioning communicator in the communication process. Indeed, we argue that successful listeners must assume at least 50% (if not 51%) of the responsibility for the outcome of the communication.

The engaged listener is generally referred to as the "active" listener, the listener who does take his or her communication responsibilities seriously. Of necessity, accepting responsibility works into the attitudinal frame—being willing to listen. **And** the listener has to know what he or she is doing as a listener to understand how he or she is functioning in this complex process. The knowledgeable listener must understand not only the process itself but also the enhancers **and** the deterrents to functioning in this process at any given point—reception, attention, perception, interpretation, **and** response—while engaged in the act of listening.

Our research (Halone et al., 1998) provides an inventory of what listeners do. Individuals in different age groups across the life span, responding to open-ended questions about their listening, enabled us to develop a multidimensional profile of listening competency. We have established five listening dimensions: cognitive (what listeners know); affective (listeners' attitudes); behavioral/verbal (listeners' verbal responses); behavioral/nonverbal (listeners' nonverbal responses); **and** behavioral/interactive (listeners' relationship behaviors with speakers).

To expand our understanding of listening behaviors, Imhof (1998, p. 95) asked students in the Introduction to Psychology course at German universities to describe their listening strategies. The student self-reports enabled Imhof to design a profile of listening strategies before, during, **and** after listening. In further research, Imhof (2000) discovered that listeners who engage in strategic mental activities raise their motivation levels **and** their comprehension. The listeners' mental strategies include intentionally monitoring interest in a topic, listing a set of questions before approaching a listening task, elaborating on the material during listening, constructing a mental model of the orally presented text, **and** integrating the material into existing knowledge structures.

Another useful profile of the competent listener emerges from Stein's (1999) research using the think-aloud

protocol, in which students were asked to describe their thoughts **and** feelings as they were listening. After coding the listeners' observations **and** the researchers' observations of the listeners, Stein developed an inventory of what listeners do. Her inventory breaks out the cognitive, affective dimensions into a (similar to Imhof's) prelistening (constructs goals **and** prepares to listen), listening (evaluates, expresses affective reactions, infers, interprets, monitors **and** activates comprehension repair strategies, selectively attends, integrates, **and** takes notes), **and** postlistening (evaluates retrospectively, notes goals' relevance, asks questions, **and** retrospectively interprets, infers, monitors, integrates **and** expresses affective reactions) profile.

It is possible that Stein's use of the think-aloud protocol **and** the resulting inventory will enable listening researchers to get closer to determining the cognitive, behavioral, **and** affective dimensions of listening so that listening assessment **and** listening training can be targeted more specifically to what listeners actually do when they listen. Just as reading researchers have used the protocol to determine what *expert* readers do, so too, it will be helpful to create a profile of how expert listeners function when they listen.

## Listening Practice

Practice is crucial to listening proficiency. But that practice must be good practice. Listeners must be prepared to practice *correct* listening skills. **And** they must be prepared to practice listening skills throughout their communication life spans. Just as good speakers, writers, **and** readers practice **and** polish their communication skills across their lifetimes, so too do good listeners monitor, adapt, change, **and** polish their listening skills.

**And** good listening requires commitment. Americans assume far too passive a role as listeners. We expect speakers to do all the work. We don't value listening as a leadership quality. Recent political campaigns are illustrative. Running for a U.S. Senate seat in New York, Hillary Clinton launched her successful campaign with a "listening tour" in the summer of 1999. While the vote may still be out on listening politicians, the information demands of the 21st century require that we take another look at listening skills. We live in a global economy, connected around the world by computers **and** cell phones. Information travels so fast **and** changes so fast that written documentation takes too much time. Organizations today rely on oral briefings with presentation graphic support as a primary means for managing information. Skilled oral briefers need skilled listeners.

Some institutions have recognized the importance of preparing skilled listeners for the 21st century. Alverno College in Milwaukee, for example, prepares all its students to listen **and** reinforces good listening competencies throughout its 4-year curriculum. As such listening training becomes more central to communication studies, it also becomes more sophisticated. Given the multidimensionality of listening competency, higher-order theory, **and** research about listening offer a substantial cognitive, affective, **and** behavioral frame for training listeners.

## Listening Research

As should be apparent, the multidimensional, complex nature of listening makes this challenge even more complex from a research perspective. Research in listening has focused on the measurement of listening comprehension **and** on perceived listening effectiveness. The first major research study to do this, as has been noted, was the seminal study in 1948 by Nichols, in which he subjected University of Minnesota students to a battery of tests to develop a profile of how effective listeners do (**and** don't) behave while listening to lecture material. How listeners function has continued to receive the attention of quantitative scholars.

Expanding from Nichols's focus on listener behaviors, some empirical scholars have developed tests to assess listening skills. Bostrom **and** Waldhart (1983) developed the Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Skills Test, a measure of a listener's ability to comprehend audio messages. Watson **and** Barker (1984) designed a broader listening assessment (delivered via video) that taps into five dimensions: listening for message content; listening to dialogues/conversations; listening to lectures; listening for emotional meaning; **and** listening for directions **and** instructions. Steinbrecher **and** Wilmington (1993) published a video test that is designed to assess comprehensive, empathic, **and** critical listening skills.

Other empirical scholars have explored, from a qualitative research perspective, how listeners listen in different personal **and** professional contexts. Ross **and** Glenn (1996), for example, looked at how grown children **and** their parents listen to each other. Wolvin **and** Coakley (1993) used survey methods to profile the status of listening training in Fortune 500 corporations.

Empirical research in listening is drawing on more sophisticated models **and** methodologies today. Janusik (2005), for instance, explores how working memory influences listeners, expanding listening research beyond behaviors to cognitions. Consistent with communibiology theory, researchers (Phillips, Lowe, Lurito, Dzemidzic, & Mathews, 2001) are making use of brain imaging to determine how listeners respond to various stimuli.

Humanistic scholars also bring perspectives to critical interpretations of listening behaviors. Cornwell **and** Orbe (1999), for example, have used the concept of dialogic listening to explicate the impact of hate speech on culturally diverse listeners. Wolvin (2005) has used a leadership model to analyze the effectiveness of Hillary Clinton's 1999 listening tour at the beginning of her U.S. Senate campaign.

The considerable body of research on listening enables scholars to better frame the pedagogy **and** practice of listening in the communication process. Bodie (2007) suggests that this research can be conceptualized as listening as a process (i.e., an information processing, cognition model) **and** listening as a product (i.e., a communicative function). Exploring the intersections of these two research perspectives **and** applying appropriate methodologies can expand the research agenda of listening scholars, who are found not only in the communication field but also in related disciplines such as psychology, religion, business management, education, **and** leadership.

Clearly, the study of listening offers interesting, challenging opportunities to better understand what listeners do cognitively **and** behaviorally **and** how those cognitions **and** behaviors are affected by a host of factors that influence the communicative outcome of the listening act. As scholars apply more sophisticated research **and** instructional strategies to understand this complex process, the significant role of listening in today's fast-paced communication world undoubtedly will be recognized **and** respected. Advances in technology **and** economic globalization have significantly altered the act of listening in the 21st century. "These changes are far reaching," observes Bentley (2000), "**and** have significant implications for how we will study **and** teach listening skills in the future" (p. 130).

—Andrew D. Wolvin

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**Entry Citation:**

Wolvin, Andrew D. "Listening, Understanding, and Misunderstanding." *21st Century Communication: A Reference Handbook*. Ed. . Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE, 2009. 137-47. *SAGE Reference Online*. Web. 29 Jun. 2012.



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