Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century

Edited by
Andrew D. Wolvin
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Introduction: Perspectives on Listening in the 21st Century

Andrew D. Wolvin

Listening and Human Communication in the 21st Century

The twenty-first century brings with it any number of challenges to the world order. Nation states are in disarray as rulers make life-ending decisions for thousands of followers. Natural resources are in limited supply, and the fury of nature has threatened to bring devastation to entire countries and regions throughout the world. The fragility of economic systems is revealed in major ways, impacting millions of people who find it increasingly difficult to afford their present lifestyle. Human medical advances cannot keep up with the mutations that continue to bring down, or threaten to bring down, vast numbers.

Against the doom and disaster of today’s dysfunctional world, people are embracing new ways to connect with each other through modern-day technology, through religious organizations, and through renewed attention to personal and professional relationships alike.

Never has it been so apparent that the world needs listeners. Leaders need to listen to their followers to formulate policy and create programs that will be responsive to the needs of their constituents. And people need to listen to each other throughout the world to increase international understanding and bring a sense of order to world affairs.

Getting people to listen to each other, however, is not an easy objective. Unfortunately, listening has come to be viewed, at least in American society, as a passive, simple act that we just do. The word “just” is all too frequently used to describe listening in the admonition “Just listen.” This reduces listening, then, to the non-active, receptor, part of human communication.
To establish the listener as a serious, active participant in the communication process, it is necessary to understand what is involved in this highly complex aspect. Indeed, listening may be one of the most, if not the most, complex of all human behaviors.

Listening scholars have made remarkable strides in attempting to understand the complexities of listening and, at the same time, encourage more engaged, purposeful behaviors on the part of listeners in both personal and professional settings. This collection of essays by some of the leading listening scholars in the field is designed to document some of those remarkable strides in what we know about listening in human communication. The essays review the theory and research paradigms used to study listening. And applications of our understanding of listening focus on pedagogy and practice. The chapters are structured so that the reader will first have a theoretical overview of what we know about listening and an introduction to research methods that guide listening scholars in the study of listening. Essays about listening as a cognitive and relational activity follow these introductory chapters. The final part of the book, then, situates listening in particular contexts.

In the first part of this book, *Theoretical Overview of Listening*, Wolvin begins with a framework for listening theory: applying theoretical perspectives of some disciplinary paradigms to understanding listening. We then turn to the research methods, *Listening Research Methods*, both qualitative and quantitative, used by researchers to study systematically this complex process. Purdy analyzes the state of qualitative research in listening, while Bodie and Fitch-Hauser examine the role of quantitative research in listening scholarship. Both chapters offer solid advice to readers interested in conducting listening research.

Part III, *Listening as a Cognitive and Relational Activity*, offers cognitive and relational perspectives on listening. The authors provide an expanded view of the complexities of listening from their various theoretical and research agenda. Imhof, a cognitive psychologist, takes us into the intricacies of listening cognition. Floyd develops a model of listening as dialogue, while Brownell looks at listening as a communication behavior. Flowerdew and Miller review the research on second language listening and draw implications for learning and teaching language skills.

Other listening scholars offer contemporary perspectives on listening in specific contexts in our final part, *Listening in Contexts*. Bentley looks at listening practices in the corporate setting, while Janusik reviews
what we know about listening instruction. Beall provides a global view of listening in the intercultural context, while Corley Schnapp summarizes the role of listening in spirituality and religion. Thompson and colleagues provide an integrative model of listening that establishes an interesting foundation for educating today’s listeners.

From this overview of perspectives on listening, the reader should gain an understanding of the state-of-the-art of our present knowledge on listening cognition and behavior as it is central to human communication. Hopefully, such an understanding can enhance decisions on how to make the world a better listening world where all of us, as global citizens, willingly engage in listening to each other.
Part I

Theoretical Overview of Listening
1

Listening Engagement: Intersecting Theoretical Perspectives

*Andrew D. Wolvin*

In this chapter Wolvin reviews some of the principal research and theory in listening in order to provide a foundation for building listening theory. Recognizing that a great deal of work has been done in the study of listening, he proposes that this work can be characterized from physiological, psychological, sociological, and communicative perspectives which frame an engagement theory of listening. These perspectives can enable listening scholars, teachers, and practitioners to identify more fully the principles underlying their work in this important communication function.

Powers (1995) has offered a conceptual model for understanding the intellectual structure of the communication field, suggesting that we can organize our knowledge into tiers: content and form of messages; communicators; levels of communication; and communication contexts. Interestingly, most of the theory that groups in the “communicators” category centers on the communicator as producer/sender of the communication messages. The communicator as receiver/processor has been given short shrift in the communication discipline (Hewes and Graham, 1989). A look at the texts designed for the “Introduction to Communication” course so popular in the 21st century communication curriculum demonstrates how little attention we pay to the receiver. Littlejohn’s (1999) seminal text with its chapter on “Theories of Message Reception and Processing” is one important exception.

Yet a theoretical foundation for understanding the message receiver, the listener, is critical to an integrated theory of communication.

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1 Powers does offer some recognition of the decoding and processing of messages and the effects of messages on recipients in his consideration of the nature of the individual communicator.
Andrew D. Wolvin

Littlejohn (1999) guides us to nine functions for integrating theory, functions that support the need for building a solid theoretical foundation to inform our understanding of the complexities of listening behavior. According to Littlejohn, theory serves to (1) organize and summarize knowledge; (2) focus on variables and relationships; (3) clarify what we observe; (4) offer a tool for observation; (5) enable us to predict outcomes and effects; (6) generate research – the heuristic function; (7) provide a forum for communicating our research and ideas; (8) establish norms of performance; and (9) generate change (pp. 30–31). Indeed, theory provides the foundation to generalize from examples of some phenomenon with some degree of probability.

Kuhn (1977) offers criteria for evaluating theory. He suggests that good theory is accurate, consistent, broad in scope, simple, and capable of generating research “fruitful of new research findings … that … disclose new phenomena or previously unnoted relationships among those already known” (p. 322). Craig (1993) argues that good communication theory should meet these goals of good empirical social science for building knowledge. Additionally, he notes, theory must contribute not only to knowledge but also serve pragmatically as “an integral component of an engaged social practice” (p. 31).

Ever mindful of the need to build a strong theoretical foundation for the study of listening behavior, the International Listening Association sponsored a “state of the art” of listening theory and research in 1989. Witkin (1990), reviewing the state of listening theory at that time, concluded that listening research and instruction lacked a solid theoretical foundation, with an emphasis on “A basic issue that has rarely been addressed by researchers is how well the concept of ‘listening,’ plays the role of a hypothetical construct in theory building and research,” (p. 19).

Witkin’s analysis offered a useful stimulus for a decade of research in listening behavior that has moved forward the study of listening. However, the advances in listening research may still fall short in theory building. In an analysis of listening research reported in the International Journal of Listening, Wolvin, Halone, and Coakley (1999), determined that work that could be characterized as listening theory (in contrast to research, instruction, assessment, and practice) was the least prevalent in the 11-year history of the journal. Hence, authors of communication theory texts may not be so out of line in their focus on theories of communicators as message producers/senders only.
On the other hand, the study of listening has not proceeded from a totally atheoretical perspective. Admittedly, much of the listening instruction model has focused on a “quick fix” list of skills. But even that skill set has a solid empirical origin. In a pioneering study, Nichols (1948) subjected the incoming University of Minnesota freshmen to a battery of tests to determine what makes for good and poor listening in the classroom student context. His profile enabled him to describe some familiar characteristics of poor listening: (1) condemning a speaker’s subject as uninteresting; (2) criticizing the speaker’s delivery rather than focusing on the message; (3) preparing an answer to a point or question before comprehending it; (4) listening only for facts; (5) wasting the advantage of thought speed over speech speed; (6) tolerating or creating distractions; (7) faking attention; (8) permitting personal prejudices to interfere; (9) avoiding difficult material; and (10) attempting to take outline notes even when the message isn’t structured to be outlined. To this day, these characteristics (essentially the Ten Commandments of listening) continue to be listed (see Gilbert, 1988) for students as the issues to overcome in order to be good listeners.

Missing from this instructional recipe is the foundation for understanding why these are listening issues. Overloaded with messages, a listener may find faking attention to be a workable strategy in today’s work environment, for example, if the communication relationship and the outcome of the communication really are not all that important. Listening competency, like any communication competency, builds on a tripartite cognitive, affective, and behavioral foundation (Wolvin and Coakley, 1994). The listener needs to know what he or she is doing (and why), be willing to be engaged in the communication, and – finally – perform the necessary behaviors that counter some of what Nichols’ popular magic list of poor listening habits suggests.

As a result, listening scholars have explored the listening competency model in an effort to develop listening theory that can inform/support our claims. A group of listening specialists participated in a summer conference sponsored by the International Listening Association to establish a definition of listening so that we may begin to work from a more unified perspective. That definition – “Listening is the process of receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages” (An ILA Definition of Listening, 1995) – can frame theoretical perspectives underpinning listening instruction and listening research. The definition effectively organizes the elements of
the listening process into the physiology, psychology, sociology, and communication perspectives of this complex communication phenomenon. These theoretical perspectives intersect to provide for building a foundation of listening engagement.

The Physiology of Listening

Entering into the communication, the listener must receive the verbal/nonverbal message. The auditory reception of this (usually) vocal message is a detailed audio-logical process involving the intricate, delicate hearing mechanism. The sound enters the middle ear, setting into vibration the tympanic membrane, and conducts through the inner ear to the brain (Newby and Popelka, 1992). Problems with the hearing mechanism compound this receptive process. Researchers at the National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (1996) estimate that as many as 28 million Americans have some type of hearing impairment. For some listeners, this loss, which can block or distort sound reception, can be profound. Excessive exposure to noise pollution and to loud music on headsets is of particular concern to researchers in the field of audiology.

Frequently, the listener also receives visual stimuli – the speaker’s nonverbal cues such as facial expressions, body language, eye contact, and appearance. The visual process occurs when light rays, reflected from an object, fall on the cornea in the front of the eye. The rays then pass through the liquid aqueous humor contained in the anterior chamber behind the cornea. The rays pass through the lens and the vitreous humor behind the lens to the retina, the innermost part of the eyeball. The back of the retina contains the optic nerve fibers which pass to the visual cortex where the nerve fibers are formed into images. Cataracts usually result from the aging process and macular degeneration, a deterioration of the retina that leads to progressive loss of central vision, is a leading cause of blindness in people between the ages of 45 and 74. The National Eye Institute (2002) estimates that as many as 2 million Americans suffer from glaucoma, a disorder which usually begins in middle age or later.

The physiology of listening extends to the neurology of the process (Goss, 1995). Once the auditory and/or visual receptors have received the message stimulus, that stimulus is recorded in the brain. The brain contains billions of neurons, the transmitters of the electrical-chemical information throughout the brain. The occipital lobe (the visual area)
and the temporal lobe (the auditory area) in the cerebral cortex coordinate the association and storage functions. Specifically, the Wernicke’s and Broca’s regions of the brain are activated in response to auditory stimuli (Just, Carpenter, and Keller, 1996), and the prefrontal cortex is where comprehension is believed to occur (Kane and Engle, 2000). Brain damage can, of course, interrupt the processing of messages. Neurological research on the effects of aging on the brain (Salk Institute, 2002) most currently supports the view that the nerve cells – neurons – in the brain regenerate through mental use throughout one’s lifetime.

Clearly, listening is a highly complex physiological process involving the human receptors and influenced by the human sensory capacity. The genetic structure of these receptors has a profound effect on the listener’s sensory capacity. MRI brain research at the Indiana University School of Medicine (Phillips, Low, Lurito, Dzemidzic, and Mathews, 2001), for example, illustrates that male listeners process language through the left side of the temporal lobe. Female listeners were seen to process language in the temporal lobe through both sides of the brain. However, a larger scale MRI study (50 men and 50 women) concluded that men and women actually do not have substantive differences in lateralization of brain activity or brain activation patterns during a listening task (Frost, Binder, Springer, et al., 1999).

The physiology of listening has received some attention from listening researchers. Villaume, Brown, Darling, et al. (1997), for example, looked at the effects of presbycusis (age-related hearing loss) on conversation characteristics of elders. Beatty and McCroskey (Beatty, McCroskey, and Valensic, 2001; Heisel, McCroskey, and Richmond, 1999) argue that communication theory must account for the human biological system, that communication is a biological process. And nowhere does this have greater bearing than in our efforts to understand the complex process of listening behavior. The neurobiology and the psychobiology of the listener are at the core of his/her functioning as a listening communicator.

The Psychology of Listening

The operationalization of listening extends beyond the physiology of the process to the psychological functions as well. After the message has been received through the auditory and visual channels, it must be
attended to through the short-term memory system. While researchers disagree as to how the short-term memory system receives and holds the information, they do agree that the attention span is quite limited, possibly as short as a few hundred milliseconds to a longer phase of up to about 30 seconds (Cowan, 1995). Cognitive psychologists (Lang and Basil, 1998) have come to understand attention as a limited resource of a fixed capacity of sensory systems and memory mechanisms. Janusik (2005) stresses that listening researchers need to apply the principle of working memory (in which information is both processed and stored synergistically) originally conceptualized by Baddeley and Hitch (1974) to explain the listener's attention limits. This theory of attention, which guides attention and memory research today, explains how the listener shifts stimuli from and into long-term storage while, at the same time, creating meaning.

Attention to the message is affected not only by the listener’s working 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 background, experience, roles, and mental and physical states make up this filter and shape the listener’s expectations for the messages being presented. Studies suggest that “the louder, the more relevant, and the more novel the stimuli, and the more likely they are to be perceived by the listener” (Barker, 1971, p. 31; Driver, 1992).

Once the message has been received by the listener through the auditory, visual, and attention processors, the message must be interpreted. This stage of the 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. Van Dijk and Kintsch (1983) suggest that this interpretation results from three different mental representations: a verbatim representation; a semantic representation that describes the meaning; and a situational representation of the situation to which the message refers. Lundsteen (1979) describes this as the internal speech process during which the listener “may give to a word or message a meaning that probably includes an internal picture of the thing or event named by the word (p. 34).” Burleson (2007) depicts the interpretation process as multi-dimensional; listeners interpret others’ meanings, intentions, and motives. This interpretation usually occurs at the surface level, though at times the listener may be required to engage in-depth processing through a systematic analysis of the
speaker and/or the message. Decoding the verbal and nonverbal language varies according to each listener’s perceptual filter and linguistic category system. Consequently, the original intent of the speaker’s message may be interpreted, misinterpreted, or even changed as the listener assigns semantic meaning in this cognitive process.

Early theory and research in attitude change supports our understanding of this process. For example, Osgood’s (Snider and Osgood, 1969) semantic space is descriptive of this function. The listener may interpret messages according to a sense of evaluation (good or bad), activity (active or inactive) and potency (strong or weak). Likewise, the interaction of the listener’s values, attitudes, and beliefs (Rokeach, 1969) shapes the meaning that is constructed in the listener’s cognition.

“Selective attention is not so much the conscious ‘tuning out’ of inconsistent information as it is the unconscious ‘tuning in’ of consistent information” (McCroskey, 1971, p. 172).

The cognitive process of assigning meaning is understood by cognitivists as mental schema. Schema theorists (Edwards and McDonald, 1993) describe the decoding/interpreting process as a mental organizational task. Humans carry schemata, mental representations of knowledge, in the brain. These organized information structures consist of nodes (concepts, events, objects) and links (relationships of the nodes). New information is first run through these existing schemata – scripts – and then interpreted. Smith (1982) suggests that these generic scripts serve important listening purposes in telling us to what we should attend; serving as the framework for interpreting incoming information; and guiding the reconstruction of messages in memory. Those who are perceived to be more competent conversationalists have a better schema for processing conversation (Miller, deWinstanely, and Carey, 1996).

A listener’s processing requirements vary as the length and the speed of the message varies. Beatty (1981) identifies “cognitive backlog” as a significant part of this process: the listener continually adds (backlogs) material to be remembered for later recall. Listeners who confront increased message length and/or speed may experience higher levels of listening anxiety and diminished listening ability (King and Behnke, 2004).

The reconstruction of messages in memory returns us to the listener’s working memory capacity and how the listener is, then, able to recall and to use the information which has been communicated. Thomas and
Levine (1994) have argued that verbal recall and listening are related but separate constructs. They call for more research on how recall fits into the theoretical model of the listening process: “As each element of listening—hearing, attending, understanding, and remembering—is more fully explored, a more contemporary theory of listening becomes attainable” (p. 122).

The psychological functions that bear on listening behavior are profound. Halley (2001) characterizes how listeners make meaning of the messages they have received and attended: “Meaning is assigned based on what is organized, the listener’s intent, the listener’s value system, and the expectations of the listener or the probability that a particular pattern should occur based on the experience of the listener” (n.p.). As the listener creates meaning, the “degree of congruence between the cognitions of a listener and the cognitions of a source” (Mulanax and Powers, 2001, p. 70) yields listening fidelity (accuracy). Listening research demonstrates that many psychological variables—including listening styles (Johnson, Weaver, Watson, and Barker, 2000; Mullen and Narain, 2005; Worthington, 2004), apprehension (Schrodt and Wheeless, 2001), and perceptions (Ryan, Kwong See, Meneer, and Trovato, 1994)—influence the way listeners create their meaning from the listening experience. “Successful message reception ... requires an understanding of the goals and intentions of the communicator as well as the literal implications of the message being transmitted,” note Wyer and Adaval (2003, p. 292), confounded by the listener’s purpose and expectations of the complexities of the communication.

The Sociology of Listening

Once the listener receives and interprets the message through his/her cognitive psychological process, he/she then responds to the message. This response, the listener’s feedback, takes listening beyond the internal, self-controlled cognitive processing and back into the communication relationship. Some listening scholars (Wolvin, 1989) argue that overt listener responses go beyond the act of listening, that listening is limited to the receiving/decoding process. Perry (1996), in his review of feedback, concludes that it is a separate function: “Knowledge effects, the reconstruction of memory, and the evocation of schemas before
response all point toward a complex series of steps that make feedback distinct from the three stages of listening” (pp. 23–4). And indeed, the complexity of the listening stages does support this perspective. Others argue that listening within the context of communication must include an overt response in order to distinguish the act of listening from cognitive processing (Janusik, 2002).

However, the listener’s feedback is an essential part of the communication function of the interaction. As Daly (1975) observes, “No matter how effective, skilled, or competent an individual is in listening, unless he or she is perceived as listening by the other interactants, little may be accomplished” (pp. 1–2). The perception of being listened to is important and difficult, for, as Beach and Lindstrom (1992) observe, “speakers also rely upon recipients to display whatever effect(s) speaker’s utterance(s) might have in the course of their delivery” (p. 27). And Cooper and Husband (1993) demonstrate that these perceptions created by feedback behaviors that “show an accurate understanding of the message as well as demonstrate support for the relationship between the communication participants…” (p. 13) really define listening competency.

The listener’s feedback puts listening into the relational context, providing a more complete picture of the listener/communicator. Rhodes (1993) has noted that the transactional perspective requires that we “look at a ‘listener’ in relation to a ‘speaker’ – to look at both parties simultaneously – to look at both parties together as a whole” (p. 224). Pecchioni and Halone (2000) have built a construct of relational listening in social and personal relationships. Others have looked at listening in family interactions (Coakley and Wolvin, 1997; Ross and Glenn, 1996) and in professional settings such as health care (Arnold and Shirreffs, 1998; Trahan and Rockwell, 1999). Imhof (2004) developed a profile of listeners across contexts made up of professional, instructional, family, and friends. Further, the concept of empathic listening requires that the listener must attempt to understand why the fellow communicator is responding as he/she responds (Walker, 1997). And I would argue that a meaningful interpretation of any message requires listening empathy, situating the competent listener front and center in any communication relationship.

Purdy (2003) emphasizes that “listening creates community” (p. 1). Historical roots of communication in Western society, he observes, center on the speaker. “With the advent of the late modern world, communication can no longer be speaker dominated. It is now critical that listening also be central to the shaping of community …” (Purdy, 2003, p. 1).
The sociology of listening, then, extends beyond the relationship to the culture of the listening community itself. As Purdy (2000) stresses, “Different cultures express their listening differently . . .” (p. 65). Edward Hall’s (Hall and Hall, 1989) model of low and high context cultures suggests that listeners in high context cultures rely on a common understanding of cultural values and rules whereas listeners in low context cultures must attend more explicitly to the verbal message. “In high context cultures, it is the responsibility of the listener to understand” Reisner (1993) explains, while “in low context, it is the speaker who is responsible for making sure the listener comprehends all” (p. 31). Thomlison (1997) identifies any of a number of cultural variables – values and beliefs, language, nonverbal codes, cognitive processing – that bear on listeners’ attempts to reduce uncertainty and gain understanding across cultures. In their interesting contrast of American and Swedish conversation patterns, Beach and Lindstrom (1992) illustrate intercultural listening as “passive recipiency” in their research on Swedish conversational interactions that move toward fuller participative “speakership” (p. 34).

The notion of speakership suggests that listening theory does not necessarily have to center on the listener only. Admittedly, most of what we know about listening behavior has been applied to our understanding of listening competence (Wolvin and Coakley, 1994). Rubin (1993), however, argues that what we know about listening supports a model of “listenability,” text that is oral-based and rhetorically considerate of the listener’s perspective. Listenable prose, he (Rubin, Hafer, and Arata, 2000) has discovered, contains “less dense syntax, greater frequency of personal pronouns, more verb-based rather than nominal constructions, and less lexical diversity than literate-based style” (p. 130). Earlier, Weaver (1972) offered a listenable model couched in terms of “what the talker can do to help (p. 107).” Stressing the need for speakers to create and present listenable messages, Wolvin, Berko, and Wolvin (1999) center listenability on the clarity, conciseness, and color of the communicator’s language.

The Communication of Listening

Effective listening and listenable speaking ultimately converge into the communication perspective of listening behavior. Adapting Johannesen’s (1971) theory of dialogue as communication, Floyd (1985)