Communication as Performance and the Performativity of Communication

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Edited by

Kevin M. Carragee
Suffolk University

Annette Moennich
University of Bochum

Communication as Performance and the Performativity of Communication:
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Kevin M. Carragee, Editor
Department of Communication and Journalism
Suffolk University
73 Tremont Street
Boston, MA 02108
USA

AnnetteMönnich, Editor
Germanistisches Institut
Ruhr-Universität Bochum
GB 3/129
44780 Bochum
GERMANY

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Listening Is Easy!?
Looking at Critical Factors for Listening Performance

Margarete Imhof
Department of Psychology
University of Mainz, Germany
imhof@uni-mainz.de

1. Listening as Information Processing

Consistent with the model of cognitive information processing (Mayer 2014), listening is defined as the intentional selection, organization, and integration of verbal and nonverbal aspects of an acoustic message. Listening is basically a constructive process (Burleson 2011). The listener (re-) constructs the message and (re-)creates the meaning which a speaker had shared. To draw a precise distinction between hearing and listening, the element of intentionality needs to complement the definition of listening. Listening does not take place incidentally and requires both allotment of attentional capacity to a signal and the active investment of decoding skills. In the same way in which reading is different from seeing, listening can be conceptualized as different from hearing. Taken together, listening is modelled as a four-step process (see Figure 1) in extension of the S-O-I model of information processing (Imhof 2010).
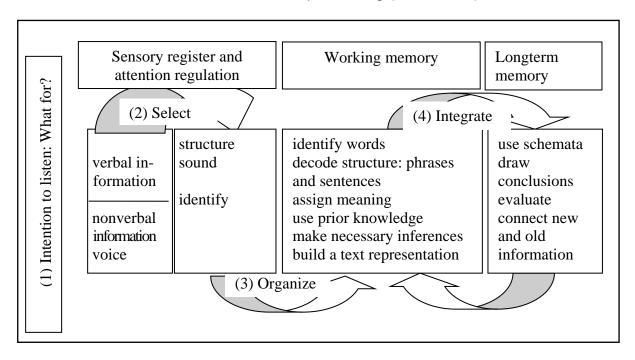

Figure 1: Listening as a four-step process of information processing

This model of listening provides a heuristic for identifying critical factors for listening performance. First of all, there is no listening performance if there is no listening

intention. Listening is an active and necessarily self-regulated process. The listener initiates, monitors and manipulates the listening process by coordinating both mental processes and external behavior. As such, listening takes an investment of effort and self-regulation on all levels (Boekaerts 1999) from cognitive competence to identify and process content, metacognitive competence to monitor information processing from diverse sources for an extended period of time, and resource management to secure a balanced return on investment for listening.

It is crucial for listening to take place that a listener forms an intention concerning what to listen for. Depending on how this intention is formed, the listener will apply specific selection criteria and, therefore, define which "bricks" he or she will use to (re-)construct the message. The choice can be made from a variety of sources, e.g., from verbal information and/or from nonverbal information, from peripheral information, e.g., the context and the situation. To give an example: A trained speaker announces the weather advisory for the day. As a listener who plans to take a trip in the car, you carefully listen for the content, if there will be snow or ice on the roads or other unpleasant conditions which might influence your decision. However, if you listen as the trainer of this speaker, you do not care about what he says but how he speaks and you attend to enunciation, speech rate, emotionality or lack thereof. The sensory register typically takes in a myriad of information at any given moment. However, information decay is fast and placing attention on relevant pieces of information just in time is crucial. Depending on where a listener directs his or her attention, the extracted information will differ; at the same time, any information, which has not been attended to, will be deleted and remain irretrievable.

Those pieces of information which the listener selected are forwarded to working memory for further use. The next step is to organize the information and to create a representation of the message (Imhof 2010; Kintsch 1998). This is done by activating linguistic competence (what is the difference in meaning between *snow flurry* and *blizzard*), by referring to content from prior knowledge and world knowledge (how fast has the reaction of the local snow plows been in the past?), and by using complex thinking and problem-solving skills (how long does it take me to get to my destination and will I get there before the snow front?). Thus, the original information is enriched by previously stored information. This includes both explicit knowledge (facts, figures, evidence) and implicit knowledge, including relevant emotional content (fear, defiance, disappointment). At this step of organizing information, a listener will mix and blend new information and old information to create his or her own representation of what is – supposedly – being meant.

The final step of listening is the integration of information. The listener uses his or her judgment to finally figure out what the situation means for his or her behavior. What needs to be done? The listener creates a situational model (Kintsch 1998), which includes the evaluation of the message and an assignment of meaning (What do I take as the intention of the speaker to tell me?), including some kind of response and behavioral reaction (e.g., to decide against driving the car).

In sum, listening is conceptualized as an active and self-regulated process which involves investment of intentional effort, attention, and coordination and integration of various functions of the cognitive system. Listening has a clear product which is represented by the meaning which the listeners eventually assign to the message and the conclusions which they draw, including the behavioral responses. The structure and

content of the assigned meaning vary depending on individual differences. The following sections will discuss empirical and theoretical findings about some of the critical factors which have an impact on listening performance. The selection of the aspects is guided by the contributions of cognitive psychology. Different aspects might appear when research in linguistics and grammar (Harley 2012; Hilpert 2014; Jay 2002), neurolinguistics (Friederici 2011), developmental psychology (Imhof 2014) or other areas of expertise (Berwick, Friederici, Chomsky & Bolhuis 2013) would have been chosen. So, this text will certainly leave the reader with some open questions.

2. The Critical Role of Working Memory

One bottleneck for incoming information is the structure which researchers call working memory (WM). It represents an information processing unit in which a person holds transitory information active in the mind to evaluate and manipulate it according to situational needs and interests (Baddeley 1986, 1998; Cowan 1995, 2010). According to Gathercole and Alloway (2008, 2), it refers "to the ability … to hold and manipulate information in the mind over short periods of time. It provides the mental workspace … that is used to store important information …" Through WM, the listener's mind selects, coordinates and monitors the information and creates and assigns meaning to a message. WM is critical when the listener allocates attention to specific sources and guides the selection of information by defining relevant stimuli. WM is also instrumental in retrieving content from prior knowledge which is used to assess the consistency, the logic and the value of incoming information. The listener relies on WM to incorporate incoming information from simultaneous sources, e.g., verbal and nonverbal information which may or may not be in line with each other. However, the complexity of the task on the one hand and the structure of WM on the other hand seem to be somewhat contradictory. A large body of experimental research has shown that working memory capacity is both limited and flexible within constraints (Kahneman 1973). Baddeley and colleagues (1998) modelled WM as a system with (at least) three subsystems which comprise special processing units for visual and acoustic information and the central executive as a coordinative function. In particular, cognitive load theory (Sweller, Ayres, & Kalyuga 2011) has posited that there are limits to how much information WM can take in and process at a time and that an overload of information may cause information processing breakdown and failure. In particular, the transitory nature of orally transmitted information challenges the information processing components of the cognitive system (Kalyuga 2012). Relevant experimental research has revealed which factors specifically create cognitive load and which strategies serve to relieve cognitive load. In accordance with Kahneman's (1973) theory of limited attentional capacity, Glonek and King (2014) found that there are limits as to how fast a person can take in information by listening.

The processing of acoustic information as in listening requires particular investment of effort, because both the linguistic (semantics, syntax) and the paralinguistic characteristics of a message (pronunciation, speech rate, tone of voice) contain information which a listener needs to take into account as he or she (re)constructs the meaning of a message. Experimental research has shown that cognitive load on a listener is created by both content-related aspects of a message (e.g., text difficulty) and voice characteristics (Imhof, Välikoski, Laukkanen & Orlob 2014). Listeners retain less information when they listen to a distorted voice, they find the content harder to digest,

feel that they need to invest more mental effort, and perceive the speaker as less attractive and agreeable. Acoustic information, relevant or irrelevant, affects WM and, as a consequence, notably interferes with information processing. In particular, younger participants (8-9 years old), who were instructed to ignore background noise, still make more errors in a visual categorization task and use longer reaction times to find the correct solution (Meinhardt-Injac, Schlittmeier, Klatte, Otto, Persike & Imhof 2015).

In sum, it is safe to say that listening performance as interpreted from a constructivist perspective depends on the functioning of WM as the critical unit for information processing. Considerable individual differences may be expected as to what listeners choose to attend to, to select and to retain.

3. The Critical Role of Listener Characteristics and Competencies

Listening performance is clearly a function of listener specifics, including both state and trait characteristics. Watson, Barker, and Weaver (1995) proposed the concept of listening styles and suggested that individual listeners differ in terms of how they habitually behave in listening situations. They argue that listeners have typical orientations which may be toward people, action, content, and time (Barker & Watson 2000). According to the authors, each preference implies strengths and weaknesses which affect the communication in a given situation. Table 1 provides an overview of the relevant patterns of behavior (cf. also Worthington & Fitch-Hauser 2012).

Table 1
Strengths and weaknesses in the patterns of behavior pertaining to four listening styles (adapted from Barker & Watson 2000, 25-29)

Listening style preference	Strengths	Weaknesses
People-oriented listening	• cares and is concerned about others	• becomes overinvolved with the feelings of others
	• is nonjudgmental	• avoids seeing faults in others
	• provides clear verbal and nonverbal feedback signals	• internalizes / adopts emotional states of others
	• identifies emotional states of others	• is intrusive to others
		• is overly expressive when giving feedback
	• interested in building relationships	• is nondiscriminating in building relationships
	• notices moods in others quickly	
Action-oriented listening	• gets to the heart of the matter	• tends to be impatient with

	quickly	rambling speakers
	• gives clear feedback concerning expectations	• jumps ahead and moves to conclusions quickly
	• concentrates energy on understanding task at hand	• gets distracted easily by unorganized speakers
	• helps others focus on what is important	• asks blunt questions of others
	• encourages others to be organized and concise	• appears overly critical
	• identifies inconsistencies in messages	• minimizes emotional issues and concerns
Content-oriented listening	• values technical information	• is overly detail-oriented
	• tests for clarity and understanding	• may intimidate others by asking pointed questions
	• encourages others to provide support for their ideas	• minimizes the value of nontechnical information
	• welcomes complex and challenging information	• devalues information from unknown individuals
	• looks at all sides of an issue	• takes a long time to make decisions
Time-oriented listening	• manages and saves time effectively	• tends to be impatient with time wasters
	• lets others know listening time requirements	• interrupts others, putting strain on relationships
	• sets time guidelines for meetings and conversations	• lets time affect the ability to concentrate
	• discourages wordy speakers from wasting time	• rushes speakers by frequently looking at watches/clocks
	• gives cues to others when time is being wasted	• limits creativity in others by imposing time pressure

While typically individual listeners have a consistent and habitual preference for one listening orientation, the authors concede that there are also listeners with multiple preferences. In addition, there is evidence which suggest that listening style preferences

are highly adaptable according to situational demands as, for example, different areas of life and varying hierarchical implications between speaker and listener. Imhof (2004) found that listening style preferences of the same person are different when interpersonal communication takes place in a business context or in an educational or personal context; similarly, listeners adjust their preferred listening styles to the perceived quality of the interpersonal relationship. Listening is viewed differently when the speaker is perceived as a person of authority, as an equal, or as a subordinate. Bodie and Worthington (2010) and Bodie, Worthington, and Gearhart (2013) published research on an instrument which can be used to measure listening style preferences with some validity. They revised the original instrument proposed by Watson and Barker and updated the scales based on a factor analytical analysis.

In a similar vein, personality traits were investigated for their impact on listening behavior. There is some plausibility in the assumption that the general temperament and psychological needs of a person finds expression in how this person is able and willing to listen (Bommelje, Houston, & Smither 2003; Villaume & Bodie 2007; Worthington 2003, 2008). Castro, Cohen, Gilad and Kluger (2013) showed that developmental experience, such as attachment style, play a moderating role in listening ability and listening needs.

In addition to listener characteristics, listener skills and competences need to be taken into account in the analysis of listening performance. Listening products are a function of how a listener perceives the demands of a communication situation both in terms of overt behavior (what type of behavior is expected in a given situation?) and in terms of cognitive activity (how relevant are different parts of the information?). Depending on the evaluation of the situation, a listener will gauge the amount of effort that he or she is ready to invest in a communication episode (for example: I can listen to my grandmother's story of her first day at school almost effortlessly because I have heard the story umpteen times and because it is not relevant for me to retain the details).

Decoding skills, both verbal and nonverbal, are obviously critical for listening performance (Joyce 2013; Young, Guthrie & Faux 2013). Verbal decoding skills are closely related to the quality of the mental lexicon and to linguistic competencies. Listeners need to structure and organize the acoustic input to identify words, their semantics in general and specifically in the given situation. The scope of the receptive vocabulary and the versatility with which a person can access the different layers of linguistic knowledge affects both the listening process and product. Anyone who has tried listening in a second language (which may, by the way, according to Rost (2014) be either a so-called foreign language or a specific vernacular within one's own first language) will remember how challenging listening becomes when the linguistic knowledge base (in terms of lexicon, semantics, syntax, and pragmatics) is suddenly limited.

Beyond verbal decoding skills, listeners need nonverbal decoding skills for a full listening performance. Individual differences are to be expected concerning how sensitive individuals are to perceiving nonverbal information and to assigning meaning into the relationship between nonverbal and verbal meaning (Aron 1996; Gearhart 2014).

In any case, research tells us that listening performance can be expected to be a function of higher order thinking skills, in particular of memory capacity, the awareness

of different perspectives, of the familiarity between the communicators, and motivational resources, e.g., willingness to invest effort, vigilance, activation and attention, and the content and structure of the knowledge base (Imhof 2003, 2010). Evidence from past research also suggests that the ability to decode both verbal and nonverbal information has a developmental trajectory, which means that listening performance might vary considerably across the life span (Abrams & Farell 2010; Halone, Wolvin, & Coakley 1997; Imhof 2002).

4. The Critical Role of Context and Presentation Mode

In addition to listener characteristics, listening performance is also a function of the situation, context and presentation mode. The message which a listener distills from oral communication is systematically influenced by how, where, and when a message is being delivered or, as Harley (2010, 143) puts it: "Language is grounded to the world." In general, oral communication takes place in a specific setting which is determined by a common ground (Clark 1996, 93): "Two people's common ground is, in effect, the sum of their mutual, common or joint knowledge, beliefs, and suppositions." The degree of overlap and shared context shapes oral communication, in particular, in interpersonal settings. If two individuals communicate in a standardized situation and everyone knows what to say when and, vice versa, what the other says and when, understanding may be reached more easily than in an open situation with a large number of degrees of freedom. An example of highly standardized communication would be a religious service with preset calls and responses; a somewhat less standardized but still normative and certainly not open situation might be teacher-student classroom interaction. As long as students in class interpret a situation as "instruction," their oral interaction is more formal, e.g., in terms of word choice and sentence structure than in the next moment when a teacher adjourns formal class time and permits them to talk about their extracurricular activities (Turgay 2015).

Presentation mode and text type have an impact on how listeners process what they hear and what they make of a message. Glonek and King (2014) experimentally showed that the type of presentation affects how well listeners retain information from orally presented messages. When a message was presented in the form of a narrative, subjects retained more information than when the message was presented as an expository instructional text. The critical difference between the two texts in this experiment was the way in which the text was organized. The narrative text had a storyline: introduction, conflict, and resolution, while the expository text presented an introduction of the topic followed by three main points (Glonek & King 2014). Jeglitzka (2014) investigated listening performance as a function of text coherence and redundancy. Results suggest that text coherence facilitates comprehension and retention in particular in "older" listeners (which in the case of this study means participants older than 25). Redundancy in oral messages increased comprehension in younger participants (younger than 25), while older participants (older than 25) did not benefit from redundancy; quite the contrary, older participants found that they had to invest more effort into processing messages which contained redundant information.

In sum, it is safe to say that both the situated and contextual embedding of oral communication and text characteristics from a general genre to organization of the relevant information have systematic implications for the listening product. This could be

relevant for both speech production (What can a speaker take into account in order to deliver a message which is "listenable"?) and for speech reception (What can a listener do to (re-)construct a rich and comprehensive mental model of the message?), e.g., when training schemes for speaking and listening skills are developed.

5. Conclusion: How to Juggle the Critical Factors for Listening Performance

To fully understand the process and product of listening, it is important to take into account the reciprocity of communication. Listening is not only a form of taking in information, but also a form of backchanneling information to the speaker. As Floyd recognizes (2014, 6), listening behavior is critical for relationship building and can "qualify as an affectionate gesture" when "listening behavior demonstrates immediacy" and the speaker acknowledges the "investment of time and energy" expended by the listener. So, the listener's behavior is an expression of affection and reveals to the speaker the manner in which and how much a listener cares for him or her. Rost (2014, 138) points out that communication, and, in particular, face-to-face interaction is a "mutual task" in which the bottom line is the "need to coordinate on several levels of cognition, affect, and behavior." Itzchakov, Kluger, Emanuel-Tor and Gizbar (2014) found a substantial relationship between personality characteristics and listening style preferences. Their data suggest that the degree of adjustment of a person is positively correlated with a person-oriented listening style. It seems that listening behavior is not per se appropriate or dysfunctional, but that its effects develop in the interaction with the speaker's needs and psychological traits on the one hand and the listener's goals and skills on the other hand (Keaton, Keteyian, & Bodie 2014).

In conclusion, I am presenting a set of skills which are critical for listening performance. As can be drawn from the listening model, listening is a heterogeneous set of skills which can be mapped to the different phases of the listening process on the one hand and to levels of self-regulation (Boekaerts 1999) on the other hand (see Table 2).

Table 2
Listening is driven by skills: Suggested set of listening skills required in the four phases of listening on the three levels of self-regulation

Level of self-regulation	Intention	Selection	Organization	Integration
Cognitive	Define goals and objectives	Focus attention, Activate prior knowledge, Use linguistic skills, activate word	Categorize information, Summarize input, Identify structure,	Connect with prior knowledge, Visualize information, Rehearse,

		recognition	Detect units of meaning	Review, Attach meaning
Metacognitive	Anticipate and control communication difficulties and barriers	Monitor and control input, Consider, compare and contrast various sources of information	Consider different perspectives, Identify missing information, Check for credibility and consistency	Evaluate, consider/add / subtract emotions, Separate attitudes and information
Self-Regulation and Resource Management	Decide what you want to do: Listen to whom, when, for how long? Prepare for effort investment	Take notes, Use memory strategies, Define type and scope of notes	Monitor comprehension, channels and interaction, Give and receive feedback	Switch and combine sources, Create, test, and complete situation model Develop deep understanding

This list of component skills which make the "good" listener may not be exhaustive. It is also an open question what the relationships between these subskills are, if they are all necessary or even sufficient for successful listening, if strengths in one aspect can compensate for weaker skills in another. I would not be surprised if research found that there is not one fixed set of listening skills which guarantee listening efficiency, but that it is scope of the repertoire and the ability to adjust the usage of a variety of listening skills to the specific demands of a communication situation which would be the best indicator of good listening. Thus, even though we have empirical evidence for the validity of the idea that listening performance is driven by specific skills and that metacognitive skills improve listening performance substantially (Bozorgian 2014; Imhof 2001; Janusik & Keaton 2011; Ramihirad & Shams 2014; Vandergrift & Tafaghodtari 2010), it is safe to say that the field of listening needs more research, too. To date, we know little as to when and how these skills develop and whether this is through learning and training or through talent and maturation. In fact, the most interesting question remains how to become a competent listener, what changes good listening performance could make in various fields of public and personal life, and what one can do to acquire and to teach the appropriate skills (Janusik 2002). With this said, I can only conclude with the notion that listening is a broad field wide open for further research.

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