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.¹ 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.

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.

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, Dzemiczic, 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 Wheelless, 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 reciprocity" 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)

describes this as dialogic listening. He characterizes the listener who truly engages in the dialogue with his/her fellow communicator: (1) genuineness; (2) accurate empathic understanding; (3) unconditional positive regard; (4) presentness; (5) spirit of mutual equality; and (6) supportive psychological climate. And it is the listener who assumes an active role in the interaction who can be characterized as a communicator. For he or she will consciously share the responsibility for the outcome of the communication and will engage in these behaviors that furthers/supports that outcome. Roberts and Vinson's work on willingness to listen (1998) offers further empirical support for listening attitudes and behaviors as positively correlated with communication skills. Their scale accounts for the level of acquaintance (friend, stranger, acquaintance), physical location (school, work, interpersonal), communication context (dyadic, small group, public speaking) and mediated/face-to-face interaction. Their research suggests that, while listeners are possibly predisposed to be willing listeners through personality trait, they can and do manipulate their level of listening willingness.

Interestingly, Cornwell and Orbe (1999) note that "throughout our research on building dialogic relationships, listening received very little explicit attention, if any at all, from scholars," leading them to conclude that "conceptualizing communication as dialogue ... requires a reconceptualization of listening" (p. 86). As we reconceptualize listening communication, Bentley (1997) argues that we need to pay more attention to speaker expectations in defining and describing effective listening, because effective listening behaviors in real-time listening are behaviors that are speaker-determined. "Listening as a linking function," explains Purdy (1997), "serves to build relationships. We build strong links with others by listening to why they are and what they mean" (p. 10).

Grounding Listening Theory

The construct of listening from physiological, psychological, sociological, and communication perspectives yields a description of how listeners (and listenable speakers) behave or ought to behave in communication transactions. Some researchers (Imhof, 1998; Stein, 1999) have expanded the methodological base to provide elaborated models of listening behavior before, during, and after the listener performs.

Goss (1995) stresses that the ability to gather, store, and retrieve information (human information processing) is at the center of our understanding of the intrapersonal, listening communicator. Beatty and Payne (1984) associate cognitive complexity with the listener's information processing ability.

This human information processing perspective of listening, however, is not without critics. Thomas (1992), for instance, argues that the information processing model is at best a metaphor, not a representation, for human developmental and communication processes. He notes that humans are not mechanical information processing devices. Humans are distinguished by continuously changing brain structures, ability to self-regulate, self-awareness, and internal processes. Emmert (1989) has emphasized that it is important that we abandon the notion of listening as "a" process and "begin to develop a multivariate/multiple process view of listening in our theories and definitions ..." (pp. 12–13). Janusik (2002) stresses that current models of listening neglect the more widely-accepted notion of working memory over the traditional short-term memory/long-term memory models, thereby limiting our conceptualization of the process.

Purdy (2000) also argues for an expanded model of listening. He believes that this cognitive, rational approach to understanding listening by focusing on stages in the listening process limits listening theory: "Listening (and actually most of communication) theory works to develop constructs that lump the characteristics/attributes of listening together into categorizations that fit some preconceived or data directed conception that can be perceived and interpreted in different ways (pp. 48–9)." Purdy (2000) suggests that listening research needs to expand beyond the more traditional qualitative and quantitative methodologies to a descriptive/phenomenological approach in order to reflect better the complexities of listening behavior. After all, Purdy (1991) notes, the resulting meaning that is constructed in a communication is more of a community event, something more than the results of the listener's assigned meanings alone.

While such an approach can indeed enrich our understanding of listening, it should be recognized that our (Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, and Wolvin, 1998) quantitative analysis of our qualitative exploration of the dimensions of listening does support a preliminary conceptualization of listening. The identifiable cognitive, affective, and behavioral dimensions of listening further the understanding of listening behavior as a multidimensional

communication phenomenon. And this multidimensionality also has been demonstrated (Halone, Wolvin, and Chung, 2001) in how listeners symbolically conceptualize what listening is/is not in human interaction. Additional support for our theoretical framework of listening competency suggests that listeners recognize behaviors specific to the taxonomic level of listening – discriminative, comprehensive, therapeutic, critical, appreciative – in which they engage (Ford, Wolvin, and Chung, 2000).

An Engagement Theory of Listening

It is clear that the listening models which have been developed to date assume that the listener is engaged in the communication with the speaker. (Beyond the scope of this chapter, another exploration of listening could take us to a consideration of non-human listening: listening to animals; listening to music; listening to the environment.) As Roberts and Vinson's work on willingness to listen exemplifies, the listening models assume listener engagement in the communication.

An engagement theory of listening might borrow from Shneiderman's work on the concept in electronic and distance education environments. "The fundamental idea underlying engagement theory is that students must be meaningfully engaged in learning activities through interaction with others and worthwhile tasks," note Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999, p. 1). Applying the model to computer-based learning, they argue that engagement offers a more sophisticated perspective on how students engage, not just interact, in cyber-learning. Using engagement as a conceptual framework for technology-based learning and teaching, Miliszewska and Horwood (2006) suggest that engagement theory may serve as a valuable paradigm for understanding how learners behave.

Extending this educational model, it is possible that the concept of engagement can serve a useful framework for understanding how listeners (like learners) function. Given the multidimensionality of listening competency, it is recognized that listeners are guided by their communication goals.

The taxonomy of listening functions, expanding on previous work on the hierarchical nature of listening skills by Lundsteen (1979), correlates with five general purposes of listeners – purposes which should be aligned with the speaker's goals (Wolvin and Coakley, 1979).

There are specific listening skills unique to each of these listening purposes, skills which operate in a hierarchical sequence depending upon the listener's need or objective at any particular time. Discriminative listening enables the listeners to distinguish the auditory and/or visual stimuli at the sensory level. Comprehensive listening requires the listener to use the discriminative skills while functioning to understand and recall the speaker's information. At a higher order, listeners build on their discriminative and comprehensive listening skills to be therapeutic (providing a sounding board for a person to talk through a problem), critical (assessing the acceptability of the speaker's message), or appreciative (enjoying the stimulus) listeners.

This taxonomy of listening functions, which has shaped instruction in listening skills, knowledge, and attitudes (Wacker and Hawkins, 1995), is consistent with perspectives that have been developed in communication theory. In a series of studies, for example, Berger and colleagues have utilized a communication plans model for understanding how communicators organize knowledge and skills necessary for reaching communication goals (see Berger, 2007, for a summary of this work). Berger suggests that understanding the interaction of communicators' planning dialogues and verbal dialogues could be useful to communication scholars to explain what is communicated and how. And uncovering these dialogues also may help explain how we decode messages from others.

Indeed, Imhof's (1998) important work elaborates students' listening plans with a model of communication content-related activities that listeners strategize before ("Before going to class, I think about the subject matter that I might be expecting"), during ("When I take notes, I am trying to catch every detail"), and after ("After class, I go over my notes as soon as possible").

Likewise, Stein's (1999) research on student listening described a similar metacognitive planning model: processes before listening (constructs goals and prepares to listen); processes during listening (evaluates, expresses affective reactions, infers, interprets, monitors and activates comprehension, selectively attends, integrates, and takes notes); and processes after listening (evaluates retrospectively, notes relevance to goals, asks questions, interprets retrospectively). Similarly, Pecchioni and Halone (2000) model listening in a relational context as pre-interaction, during interaction, and post-interaction.

A related communication perspective that can inform listening engagement theory is communication scholars' work on communication

goals. Kellerman (1992) notes that “communication is goal-directed ... We don’t communicate (i.e., engage in symbolic exchange) randomly” (p. 289). Clark and Delia (1979) identified the need for interaction goals which must be negotiated for the desired outcome of the communication to be achieved. Communicators may have both primary and secondary goals that drive their interaction behaviors. Dillard, Segrin and Harden (1989) have looked at influence goals in communicating: “the primary goals serve to initiate and maintain social interaction, while the secondary goals act as a set of boundaries which delimit verbal choices available to sources” (p. 32). Building on a model of interpersonal support in which listeners were found to assess a speaker’s goal as the basis for establishing a listening goal (Horowitz, Krasnoperova, Tatar, et al., 2000), Young and Cates (2004) looked at the listener’s goals in providing social support in peer mentoring. They determined that emotional listening (expressing empathy, support, sensitivity) and directive listening (offering opinions and perspectives) were negotiable listening goals that furthered the communicators’ relationship.

Another relevant perspective for understanding how listeners engage as communicators is Searle’s (1969) speech acts theory. Searles notes that “speaking a language is engaging in a rule-governed form of behavior” (p. 16) which results in speakers uttering words, referring and predicating propositions, and/or performing illocutionary acts such as stating, questioning, commanding, and promising – all of which are designed to fulfill an intention. If the speech act is successful, the listener will understand the speaker’s intention. It would follow, then, that listeners must engage in the process and negotiate their listening intentions with the speaker’s intentions in order to accomplish their communication objectives. Much like speech acts, listening acts derive from negotiated communication goals that are subject to variables (see Wolvin and Coakley, 1996, ch. 4) that can be manipulated and modified in the process.

The level of listening engagement also is guided by the listener’s level of involvement. Chaiken (1980) outlined a dual processing model of decoding messages. In her important work, recipients of persuasive messages were found to employ systematic information processing strategies (detailed processing of the persuasive content and strategies) when the messages triggered high involvement. Low involvement in the messages, however, led listeners to use heuristic processing strategies (utilizing simple rules from past experiences and

observations). Petty and Cacioppo (1986) expand on this dual processing model with their Elaboration Likelihood Model of persuasion. When exposed to persuasive messages, this model describes, listeners may take a central route to cognitively process the information, thoughtfully examining content issues. Rather than engaging in full elaboration of the content, however, listeners frequently use a peripheral route for processing in the information. Using simple decision rules, they may be more influenced by such heuristic factors as the speaker's credibility, if they like the speaker, or if they perceive that others believe/support the speaker's claim. Not surprisingly, much of what we receive as listeners (and that increases significantly in today's information-overloaded society) is processed peripherally. Only that information which we perceive to be of high personal relevance usually makes it into our central processing. Expanding this dual-processing theory beyond critical listening, interpersonal communication scholars are making some interesting applications of the model to listening outcomes in supportive communication (Burleson, 2009).

A listener's level of engagement in processing messages requires self regulation. We can turn back to work in the field of education on self-regulated learning to study how listeners can manage their listening engagement. Self-regulated learning has been defined as "an active, constructive process whereby learners set goals for their learning and then attempt to monitor, regulate, and control their cognition, motivation, and behavior, guided and constrained by their goals and the contextual features of the environment" (Pintrich, 2000, p. 453). Pintrich's influential education model of self-regulated learning organizes the regulatory processes in four phases: planning; self-monitoring; control; and evaluation. Pintrich's model, much like the work on listening strategies by Imhof (1998), Stein (1999), and Pecchioni and Halone (2000), aptly describes self-regulated listening – as listeners set goals for their listening and then apply their knowledge, attitudes, and skills as communicators to their listening acts. The core of listening self regulation is metacognitive self monitoring. Lundsteen (1993) has explained how listeners use their metacognitive capacity for "monitoring their comprehension processes, selecting and implementing specific strategies in pursuit of a goal" (p. 107). She observes that "younger and less able listeners tend not to apply productive metacognitive strategies" (p. 121) as they engage as listening communicators.

Thus, listeners bring different levels of engagement to the listening process. These levels of engagement will be modified depending upon the communication goals of the listeners (and their speakers) and the perceived degree of involvement the listeners bring to the process.

To expand the theoretical frame by which we study the complexities of listening behavior, then, we need to recognize from whence we come. The human information processing perspective has allowed us to build a theoretical base for explicating the definition of listening as receiving, constructing meaning from, and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages. The qualitative/quantitative approach to this model has enabled us to establish a theory by which we can, as Littlejohn (1999) stresses, functionally organize and summarize, focus, clarify, observe, predict, research, and communicate what we have come to know about listening communication. Indeed, we are at an important intersection whereby we can use the theoretical grounding of listening cognition, affect, and behavior to understand more fully how listening communicators function at various intrapersonal and interpersonal levels. At the same time, this theoretical grounding can help us shift our paradigm and lead us beyond describing how listeners function to understanding more fully what listening is – the complex construct of listening (see Halone, Wolvin and Chung, 2001, p. 15).

As we expand our study of listening in the 21st century, we can be informed by the physiological, psychological, sociological, and communication perspectives that ground our theoretical base. The intersection of these perspectives offers considerable opportunity for broadening our framework to listening cognition/behavior/affect in the broadest sense of listening engagement.

QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

- 1 What is listening? How should listening be defined? What characteristics of listening should be included in a definition of listening?
- 2 Discuss the perspectives on listening that inform a theory of listening: physiological, psychological, sociological, communication. Which perspective seems to offer the best approach to understanding the complexities of listening.
- 3 The research on listening and related human behaviors and cognitions demonstrates that listening is very much a multidimensional construct. What variables appear to be most relevant to understanding the complex nature of listening? What variables ought to receive more research attention?

- 4 How do the different perspectives on listening (physiological, psychological, sociological, and communication) intersect to create a listening model that could be used as the basis for listening research and listening instruction?
- 5 What is listening engagement? How does this serve as a foundation for understanding the self-regulated listener?

References

- An ILA Definition of Listening. (1995, April). *The Listening Post*, 53, 1, 4–5.
- Arnold, W.E., and Shirreffs, J.H. (1998). Patient perceptions of patient-physician communication with allopathic and naturopathic physicians. *International Journal of Listening*, 12, 1–11.
- Baddeley, A.D., and Hitch, G.J. (1974). Working memory. In G. Bower (Ed.). *The psychology of learning and motivation* Vol. 8, pp. 47–90. New York: Academic Press.
- Barker, L.L. (1971). *Listening behavior*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Beach, W.A., and Lindstrom, A.K. (1992). Conversational universals and comparative theory: Turning to Swedish and American acknowledgment tokens in interaction. *Communication Theory*, 2, 24–49.
- Beatty, M.J. (1981). Receiver apprehension as a function of cognitive backlog. *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 45, 277–81.
- Beatty, M.J., and Payne, S.K. (1984). Listening comprehension as a function of cognitive complexity: A research note. *Communication Monographs*, 51, 85–9.
- Beatty, M.J., McCroskey, J.C., and Valensic, K.M. (2001). *The biology of communication: A communibiological perspective*. Cresskill, NJ: Hampton Press, Inc.
- Bentley, S.C. (1997). Benchmarking listening behaviors: Is effective listening what the speaker says it is? *International Journal of Listening*, 11, 51–68.
- Berger, C.R. (2007). Plans, planning, and communication effectiveness. In B.B. Whaley, and W. Samter (Eds.). *Explaining communication: Contemporary theories and exemplars*. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Burleson, B.R. (2007). Constructivism: A general theory of communication skill. In B.B. Whaley, and W. Sampter (Eds.). *Explaining communication*, pp. 105–28. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Burleson, B.R. (2009). Understanding the outcomes of supportive communication: A dual-process approach. *Journal of Social and Personal Relationships*, 26, 21–38.
- Chaiken, S. (1980). Heuristic versus systematic information processing and the use of source versus message cues in persuasion. *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 39, 752–66.
- Clark, R.A., and Delia, J.G. (1979). Topoi and rhetorical competence. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65, 187–206.

- Coakley, C.G., and Wolvin, A.D. (1997). Listening in the parent – teen relationship. *International Journal of Listening*, 11, 88–126.
- Cooper, L.O., and Husband, R.L. (1993). Developing a model of organizational listening competency. *Journal of the International Listening Association*, 7, 6–34.
- Cornwell, N.C., and Orbe, M.P. (1999). Critical perspectives on hate speech: The centrality of “Dialogic Listening.” *International Journal of Listening*, 13, 75–96.
- Cowan, N. (1995). *Attention and memory: An integrated framework*. New York: Oxford.
- Craig, R.T. (1993). Why are there so many communication theories? *Journal of Communication*, 43, 26–33.
- Daly, J. (1975). *Listening and interpersonal evaluations*. Paper presented at the Central States Speech Convention, Kansas City, MO.
- Dillard, J.P., Segrin, C., and Harden, J.M. (1989). Primary and secondary goals in the production of interpersonal influence messages. *Communication Monographs*, 56, 19–38.
- Driver, J. (1992). A selective review of selective attention research from the past century. *British Journal of Psychology*, 92, 53–79.
- Edwards, R., and McDonald, J.L. (1993). Schema theory and listening. In A.D. Wolvin, and C.G. Coakley, (Eds.), *Perspectives on listening*, pp. 60–77. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Emmert, P. (1989). *The reification of listening*. Paper presented at International Listening Association research conference, Atlanta, GA.
- Floyd, J.J. (1985). *Listening: A practical approach*. Glenview, IL: Scott, Foresman.
- Ford, W.S.Z., Wolvin, A.D., and Chung, S. (2000). Students’ self-perceived listening competencies in the basic speech communication course. *International Journal of Listening*, 14, 1–13.
- Frost, J.A., Binder, J.R., Springer, J.A., Hammeke, T.A., Bellgowan, P.S.F., Rao, S.M., and Cox, R.W. (1999, February). Language processing is strongly left lateralized in both sexes. *Brain: A Journal of Neurology*, 122, 199–208.
- Gilbert, M.B. (1988). Listening in school: I know you can hear me – but are you listening? *Journal of the International Listening Association*, 2, 121–32.
- Goss, B. (1995). *The Psychology of human communication*. Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland.
- Hall, E.T., and Hall, M.R. (1989). *Understanding cultural differences*. Yarmouth, ME: Intercultural Press.
- Halley, R. D. (2001). *Listening models and procedures*. Paper presented at Listening Summit, Washington, DC.
- Halone, K.K., Cunconan, T.M., Coakley, C.G., and Wolvin, A.D. (1998). Toward the establishment of general dimensions underlying the listening process. *International Journal of Listening*, 12, 12–28.

- Halone, K.K., Wolvin, A.D., and Chung, S. (2001). *The everyday language of (not) listening*. Paper presented at International Listening Association convention, Chicago, IL.
- Heisel, A.D., McCroskey, J.C., and Richmond, V.P. (1999). Testing theoretical relationships and non-relationships of genetically-based predictors: Getting started with communibiology. *Communication Research Reports*, 16, 1–9.
- Hewes, D.E., and Graham, M. (1989). Second-guessing theory: Review and extension *Communication Yearbook*, 12, 213–48.
- Horowitz, L.M., Krasnoperova, E.N., Tatar D.O., Hansen, M.B., Person, E.A., Galvin, K.L., and Nelson, K.L. (2000). The way to console may depend on the goal: Experimental studies of social support. *Journal of Experimental Social Psychology*, 37, 49–61.
- Imhof, M. (1998). What makes a good listener? Listening behavior in instructional settings. *International Journal of Listening*, 12, 81–105.
- Imhof, M. (2004). Who are we as we listening? Individual listening profiles in varying contexts. *International Journal of Listening*, 19, 36–45.
- Janusik, L.A. (2002, March). *The intent to communicate. What role does attention play on listening?* Paper presented at the International Listening Association annual convention, Scottsdale, AZ.
- Janusik, L. (2005). Conversational listening span: A proposed measure of conversational listening. *International Journal of Listening*, 19, 12–30.
- Johannesen, R.L. (1971). The emerging concept of communication as dialogue. *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 57, 373–82.
- Johnson, M.K., Weaver, J.B.III, Watson, K.W., and Barker, L.B. (2000). Listening styles: Biological or psychological differences? *International Journal of Listening*, 14, 32–46.
- Just, M.A., Carpenter, P.A., and Keller, T.A. (1996). The capacity theory of comprehension: New frontiers of evidence and arguments. *Psychological Review*, 103, 773–80.
- Kane, M.J., and Engle, R.W. (2000). Working-memory capacity, proactive interference, and divided attention: Limits on long-term memory retrieval. *Journal of Experimental Psychology: Learning, Memory, and Cognition*, 26, 336–58.
- Kearsley, G., and Shneiderman, B. (1999). Engagement Theory: A framework for technology-based teaching and learning. Retrieved on July 28, 2007, from: <http://home.sprynet.com/gkearsley/engage.htm>.
- Kellerman, K. (1992). Communication: Inherently strategic and primarily automatic. *Communication Monographs*, 59, 288–300.
- King, P.I., and Behnke, R.R. (2004). Patterns of state anxiety in listening performance. *Southern Communication Journal*, 70, 72–80.
- Kuhn, T.S. (1977). *The essential tension: Selected studies in scientific tradition and change*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Kuhn, T.S. (1998). Objectivity, value judgment, and theory choice. In I. McCord, and J. Coven, (Eds.) *Philosophy of Science: The Central Issues*, pp. 102–18. New York: Norton.
- Lang, A., and Basil, M.D. (1998). Attention, resource allocation, and communication research: What do secondary task reaction times measure, anyway? *Communication Yearbook*, 21, 443–73.
- Littlejohn, S.W. (1999). *Theories of human communication*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Lundsteen, S.W. (1979). *Listening: Its impact on reading and the other language arts*. Urbana, IL: NCTE ERIC.
- Lundsteen, S.W. (1993) Metacognitive listening. In A.D. Wolvin and C.G. Coakley (Eds.) *Perspectives on listening*, pp. 106–23. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- McCroskey, J.C. (1971). Human information processing and diffusion. In L.L. Barker, and R.J. Kibler (Eds.), *Speech communication behaviors*, p. 172. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall.
- Miliszezwska, I., and Horwood, J. (2006). Engagement Theory: A universal paradigm? *SGCSXE'06 Bulletin*, 38, 158–92.
- Miller, J.B., deWinstanley, P.A., and Carey, P. (1996). Memory for conversation. *Memory*, 4, 16–31.
- Mulanax, A., and Powers, W.G. (2001). Listening fidelity development and relationship to receiver apprehension and locus of control. *International Journal of Listening*, 15, 69–78.
- Mullen, T.P., and Narain, M. (2005). I Understand All That ... But What's the Strategy? Working Paper. New York: Park Li Group.
- National Eye Institute (2002). National Eye Institute Report on Blindness and Visual Impairment in the USA. Hospital Management.Net. Retrieved on March 24, 2002, from: <http://www.hospitalmanagement.net/informer/breakthroughs/break126/>.
- National Institute on Deafness and Other Communication Disorders (1996). National Strategic Research Plan: Hearing and Hearing Impairment. Bethesda, MD: HHS, NIH, 1996.
- Newby, H.A., and Popelka, G.R. (1992). *Audiology*. Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall.
- Nichols, R.G. (1948). Factors accounting for differences in comprehension of materials presented orally in the classroom. PhD dissertation, University of Iowa.
- Pecchioni, L.L., and Halone, K.K. (2000). Relational listening II: Form and variation across social and interpersonal relationships. *International Journal of Listening*, 14, 69–93.
- Perry, R.L. (1996). *Toward a construct of feedback and its relationship to listening*. Paper presented at the International Listening Association convention, Sacramento, CA.

- Petty, R.E., and Cacioppo, J.T. (1986). *Communication and persuasion: Central and peripheral routes to attitude change*. New York: Springer-Verlag.
- Phillips, M.D., Lowe, M.J., Lurito, J.T., Dzemidzic, M., and Mathews, V.P. (2001). Temporal lobe activation demonstrates sex-based differences during passive listening. *Radiology*, 220, 202–7.
- Pintrich, P.R. (2000). The role of goal orientation in self-regulated learning. In M. Boekaerts, P.R. Pintrich, and M. Zeidner (Eds.) *Handbook of self regulation*, pp. 451–502. San Diego: Academic Press.
- Powers, J.H. (1995). On the intellectual structure of the human communication discipline. *Communication Education*, 44, 191–222.
- Purdy, M. (1991). Listening and community: The role of listening in community formation. *Journal of the International Listening Association*, 5, 51–67.
- Purdy, M. (1997). What is listening? In M. Purdy, and D. Borisoff, (Eds.). *Listening in everyday life*, pp. 1–20. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Purdy, M. (2000). Listening, culture, and structures of consciousness. *International Journal of Listening*, 14, 47–68.
- Purdy, M. (2003). *Listening and community*. Paper presented at Eastern Communication Association convention, Washington, DC.
- Purdy, M. (with N. Newman). (1999). Listening and gender: Characteristics of good and poor listeners. International Listening Association convention, Albuquerque, NM.
- Reisner, R. (1993). How different cultures learn. *Meeting News*, 17.
- Rhodes, S.C. (1993). Listening: A relational process. In A.D. Wolvin, and C.G. Coakley, (Eds.). *Perspectives on listening*, pp. 217–40. Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Roberts, C.V., and Vinson, L. (1998). Relationship among willingness to listen, receiver apprehension, communication apprehension, communication competence, and dogmatism. *International Journal of Listening*, 12, 40–56.
- Rokeach, M. (1969). *Beliefs, attitudes, and values: A theory of organization and change*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.
- Ross, C.S., and Glenn, E. (1996). Listening between grown children and their parents. *International Journal of Listening*, 10, 49–64.
- Rubin, D.C., Hafer, T., and Arata, K. (2000). Reading and listening to oral-based versus literate-based discourse. *Communication Education*, 49, 121–133.
- Rubin, D.L. (1993). Listenability = oral-based discourse + considerateness. In A.D. Wolvin and C.G. Coakley (Eds.) *Perspectives on listening*, pp. 261–81, Norwood, NJ: Ablex.
- Ryan, E.B., Kwong See, S.K., Meneer, W.B., and Trovato, D. (1994). Age-based perceptions of conversational skills among younger and older adults. In M.L. Hummert, J.M. Wiemann, and J.F. Nussbaum (Eds.). *Interpersonal communication in older adulthood*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
- Salk Institute (2002) Salk scientists demonstrate for the first time that newly born brain cells are functional in the adult brain. La Jolla, CA: Salk Institute.

- Retrieved on February 27, 2002, from: <http://www.salk.edu/NEWS/gage>.
- Schrod, P., and Wheelless, L.R. (2001). Aggressive communication and informational reception apprehension: The influence of listening anxiety and intellectual inflexibility on trait argumentativeness and verbal aggressiveness. *Communication Quarterly*, 49, 53–69.
- Searle, J. (1969). *Speech acts: An essay in the philosophy of language*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smith, M.J. (1982). Cognitive schemata and persuasive communication: Toward a contingency rules theory. In M. Burgoon (Ed.). *Communication Yearbook 6*, pp. 33–62. Beverly Hills, CA: Sage.
- Snider, J., and Osgood, C. (Eds.) (1969). *The semantic differential technique*. Chicago: Aldine.
- Stein, S.K. (1999). Uncovering listening strategies: Protocol analysis as a means to investigate student listening in the basic communication course. Unpublished PhD dissertation, University of Maryland, College Park, MD.
- Thomas, L.T., and Levine, T.R. (1994). Disentangling listening and verbal recall: Related but separate constructs? *Human Communication Research*, 21, 103–27.
- Thomas, R.M. (1992). *Comparing theories of child development*. Belmont, CA: Wadsworth.
- Thomlison T.D. (1997). Intercultural listening. In M. Purdy, and D. Borisoff (Eds.). *Listening in everyday life*, pp. 79–120. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.
- Trahan, B.C., and Rockwell, P. (1999). The effects of listening training on nursing home assistants. *International Journal of Listening*, 13, 62–74.
- Van Dijk, T.A., and Kintsch, W. (1983). *Strategies of discourse comprehension*. New York: Academic Press.
- Villaume, W.A., Brown, M.H., Darling, R., Richardson, D., Hawk, R., Henry, D.M., and Reid, T. (1997). Presbycusis and conversation: Elderly interactants adjusting to multiple hearing losses. *Research on Language and Social Interaction*, 30, 235–62.
- Wacker, K.G. and Hawkins, K. (1995) Curricula comparison for classes in listening. *International Journal of listening*, 9, 14–28.
- Walker, K. (1997). Do you ever listen?: Discovering the theoretical underpinnings of empathic listening. *International Journal of Listening*, 11, 127–37.
- Weaver, C.H. (1972). *Human listening*. Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill.
- Witkin, B.R. (1990). Listening theory and research: The state of the art. *Journal of the International Listening Association*, 4, 7–32.
- Wolvin, A.D. (1989). Models of the listening process. In C.V. Roberts, and K.W. Watson, (Eds.). *Intrapersonal communication processes*, pp. 508–27, New Orleans: Spectra.

- Wolvin, A.D., and Coakley, C.G. (1979). *Listening instruction*. Urbana, IL: ERIC.
- Wolvin, A.D., and Coakley, C.G. (1994). Listening competency. *Journal of the International Listening Association*, 8, 148–60.
- Wolvin, A.D., and Coakley, C.G. (1996). *Listening*. New York: McGraw-Hill.
- Wolvin, A.D., Berko, R.M., and Wolvin, D.R. (1999). *The public speaker/the public listener*. Los Angeles, Roxbury.
- Wolvin, A.D., Halone, K.K., and Coakley, C.G. (1999). An assessment of the “intellectual discussion” on listening theory and research. *International Journal of Listening*, 13, 111–29.
- Worthington, D. (2004). Exploring the relationship between listening style preference and verbal aggressiveness. *International Journal of Listening*, 19, 3–11.
- Wyer, R.S. Jr., and Adaval, R. (2003). Message reception skills in social communication. In J.O. Greene, and B.R. Burleson, (Eds.). *Handbook of communication skills*, pp. 291–355. Mahwah, NJ: Erlbaum.
- Young, R.W., and Cates, C.M. (2004). Emotional and directive listening in peer mentoring. *International Journal of Listening*, 18, 21–33.