

# Listening

## Types and Competencies

### CASE STUDY 2.1

#### Listening Is Hard to Do

Man, I just heard the best lecture ever this morning. My mechanical engineering prof was on target. She lectured on properties of ceramic materials—you know, like the tiles on the space shuttle—and made half of the class want to apply to the space program.

Oh, Carter, you are such a nerd! I don't see how you stay interested in technical topics like that.

I was thinking about that question on my way here, Radley. This listening class has me thinking about a lot of things. Don't you think it's odd that I find it so easy to listen to lectures on ceramics or other materials of

engineering but have such a problem listening to my mom? I would think that if I'm a good listener in class, I would be a good listener in any situation. Just yesterday my mom caught me not listening when she was telling me about my sister, Clara—you know, the one who lives in Jackson Gap.

I know what you mean. Some information is just easier for me to listen to. Why is it that I have problems listening in music appreciation and none when I talk with your dad about his football team? ■

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### TYPES OF LISTENING

As a critical communication competency, listening is multifaceted. If we think about Listening MATERRS, it is easy to see that it will take a number of different skills to be a good listener. This chapter will focus on two topics that will clarify what skills we need to be competent listeners. First, we will discuss listening as a critical communication competency. Second, we will look at different types of listening and the situations in which you will want to use them. We will finish with a discussion of the importance of levels of listening as an additional layer of listening types.

## LISTENING AS A CRITICAL COMMUNICATION COMPETENCY

As you know, we feel strongly that listening is both a critical communication competency and a critical life competency. In fact, listening may well be the “key for the development and enhancement of language and learning skills.”<sup>1</sup> Think about what would happen if a piece of information were important to your success and you didn’t have the skills or abilities to understand the message as the sender intended. As communication professor Charles Swanson said, “Those who listen, learn. Those who do not or cannot listen, find the classroom frustrating.”<sup>2</sup> Of course, this frustration isn’t limited to the classroom. It also extends to other aspects of our lives. When you find yourself in a situation where you have failed to get information you need to respond appropriately to a friend or to complete a task properly, don’t you feel frustrated? Chances are you also feel frustrated when other people don’t listen to you. For example, how do you feel when you tell someone something that is important to you but that person ignores you? Clearly we can’t communicate at all if no one is listening. As the receiving component of the communication process, listening is essential to the completion of the act of communication. According to education professor Joseph Beatty, a “good listener focuses her attention on the other’s communication in order to understand the other’s meaning or experience.”<sup>3</sup> He went on to say that we need to understand the other party to achieve “a kind of fidelity to the meaning or intention of the other.”

To further underscore the importance of listening, the National Communication Association (NCA), the largest U.S. organization for scholars in the field of communication, has identified a number of competencies that are directly listening focused. The following section gives an overview of the competencies listed on the NCA Web site.<sup>4</sup> These competencies have been identified as essential to the success of all college graduates.

The NCA suggested that a competent listener should be proficient in two areas. The first of these is listening with **literal comprehension**. Literal comprehension includes the ability to identify main ideas, supporting details, and the relationships among ideas. A competent listener should also be able to recall the basic ideas and details. So as a competent listener, one level of listening in which you want to develop skills is focusing on the *denotative*, or literal, meaning of the message. In the example in the case at the beginning of the chapter, Carter must use literal comprehension to understand his professor’s lecture on ceramic materials. However, if he uses this same type of listening in his exchange with Radley, he will completely miss the intended message. So a good listener must also be able to listen beyond the literal message itself.

The second area of competence the NCA labeled **critical comprehension**. Under critical comprehension, the NCA suggested that a competent listener listens with an open mind. Listening with an open mind means that you are aware of your biases and recognize that everyone has a unique perspective. (The affect of biases will be discussed more fully in Chapter 5.) Listening with an open mind also means that you will send feedback that indicates your willingness to listen.

Critical comprehension also includes identifying the speaker’s purpose and pattern of organization of the ideas. You should also be able to identify the

### THINK ON IT

Can you think of a situation where you listened critically when you should have listened literally or vice versa?

speaker's bias and prejudice, the effect of that bias and prejudice, and the speaker's attitude. By focusing on these elements, you will be able to pick up the connotative meanings, or meanings that are intended rather than literally stated. So when Radley refers to his friend as a nerd, he isn't being literal; he is engaging in light banter. Since

Carter can listen beyond the words and pick up the entire message in the context, he understands Radley's intended meaning.

While their exchange is rather simplistic, it doesn't take much imagination to apply the principles to truly important aspects of your lives. Clearly competent listening involves much more than taking in only the words themselves; it is a complex process we use to take in the entire message and accurately assign meaning to an incoming piece of information. A truly effective listener must use a wide variety of knowledge sources, rapidly interpret incoming data, and make sense of the message.<sup>5</sup> One way to understand the complexity of listening is to look at the dimensions covered by those who measure listening.

## MEASURING LISTENING

One of the challenges faced by listening scholars is how to measure something without physical properties. Listening is a *hypothetical construct*, something you know exists but you can't physically see. You can see only the behavioral indicators supporting its existence. For example, communication is also a hypothetical construct. You can see most of the behaviors we associate with the act but can't put your finger on anything that actually, literally is communication. Listening is the same. You can see behaviors and experience feeling associated with listening but can't actually point to something and say, "That's listening." So how do you measure something that is abstract, and how do you know it actually exists? Researchers do so by identifying definable aspects of the skill and developing ways to measure those aspects.

A number of years ago, a researcher examined 25 different listening tests in an attempt to identify exactly what aspects of listening were being measured. The research identified 22 listening components, among them following directions, judging others' moods, and overall comprehension.<sup>6</sup> We can draw two conclusions from this study. First, there is some disagreement over the exact components of listening. And second, listening has many dimensions.

In this next section, we will examine a few of the attempts that have been made to add a sense of concreteness to the construct of listening.

### Listening Fidelity

The first way we will look at listening is to focus on the literal comprehension dimension of the skill. One way to do this is exploring the goodness of fit between what the receiver mentally processes and what the sender actually delivers. This goodness of fit is referred to as **listening fidelity**. When the concept of fidelity was first introduced, researchers David Brant and William Powers focused on how well a sender could communicate with a receiver.<sup>7</sup> They felt that a sender

should be able to communicate clearly enough that the receiver could create a representation of the message that was very similar to the original. Early research on fidelity looked at both concrete and abstract messages but did so from the sender's perspective, focusing on how the message was structured.<sup>8</sup> More recently the research on fidelity has shifted to looking at the issue from the receiver's point of view.

The work of Alice Mulanax and William Powers shifted the focus of fidelity research when they introduced the concept of listening fidelity.<sup>9</sup> Subsequent work has expanded what we know about fidelity from the listening point of view.<sup>10</sup> Listening fidelity is defined as "the degree of congruence between the cognitions of a listener and the cognitions of a source following a communication event."<sup>11</sup> In the listening-focused fidelity studies, cognitions have been measured by the listeners' abilities to reproduce an orally presented geometric form. In other words, this particular measurement of listening focuses on the goodness of fit between the sent message and the received message.<sup>12</sup> While this research has helped us understand the nature of listening fidelity, it falls short of looking at the role listening fidelity plays in our daily listening.

To clearly understand the importance of high-fidelity listening, we need only look at a common occurrence: getting directions. Whether you are getting directions on how to get somewhere or how to perform a particular task, you know the importance of being able to faithfully re-create the information in your mind so you can follow through with your objective. Have you ever found yourself in a situation where you ended up in the wrong place because you forgot a step in the directions? This happened the first time Professor Margaret Fitch-Hauser went to Portland, Oregon. She stopped at a convenience store and asked for directions to a particular hotel. Unfortunately she missed one critical piece of information and ended up several miles in the opposite direction from her hotel and had to make another stop to ask for directions. She listened more closely the second time and was able to get to her intended destination. Chances are you have probably experienced a variation of this challenge.

Now let's look a little deeper into how listening fidelity can be important on a personal level. When you are talking with someone who is very important to you, aren't you motivated to listen? Or if you really need to be listened to, don't you want the other person to truly focus on what you mean and feel? Achieving listening fidelity on the interpersonal level is challenging. It calls for you to engage in the type of listening appropriate for the situation and the relationship. As you read the rest of this chapter, think about how each of the dimensions and types of listening discussed can help you be a higher-fidelity listener.

## Multidimensional Listening

While it is important for a listener to focus on what the speaker says as you attempt to accurately reproduce the intended meaning, most messages require you to focus on more than just the spoken message itself to achieve fidelity. Usually other aspects of the message must be processed before you can understand what the sender

### THINK ON IT

Identify two listening situations, one that is impersonal and one that is personal. What are the differences in the listening skills you need to use to be a high-fidelity listener?

## TYPES OF LISTENING

If you are committed to high-fidelity listening, you need to think about listening to all types of information. One way to cope with the variety of information and situations that you face is to realize that listening is a multifaceted skill that you use to gather many types of information. That is, one size doesn't fit all when it comes to listening. Just as you would use different clubs to hit golf balls, depending on the conditions of the course, the length of the needed shot, and your goal, you also use a variety of types of listening, depending on the situation.

Wolvin and Coakley identified five categories of listening in their textbook.<sup>18</sup> They felt that each category represented different purposes of listening. Using a tree as a metaphor for listening, they made discriminative listening the root that feeds the tree; comprehensive listening the trunk that supports the branches; and critical, appreciative, and therapeutic listening the branches. We will talk about these as well as other types of listening.

### Discriminative Listening

Wolvin and Coakley defined **discriminative listening** as “listening to distinguish aural and sometimes visual stimuli.” In essence, it is the reception of the stimulus. If you don't physically receive the stimulus, you can't listen. When you engage in discriminative listening, you focus on whether a stimulus is worthy of paying attention to or not; how you should classify the sound (language, large truck); and detecting changes and nuances in a speaker's pitch, volume, rate, and language-related sounds. Discriminative listening also helps you determine from where the sound is coming.

This type of listening involves distinguishing between aural and other types of stimuli. In essence, discriminative listening is about being tuned in to the variations and differences in the sounds and visual stimuli around you. Our world is filled with noises. As you are reading this chapter, cars might be driving by, people might be talking in the hallway, the ventilation system might be switching on and off, and you might have your MP3 player or television turned on. With all of this noise going on, how do you make the decision about what to pay attention to and which sounds to ignore? You make the decision by using discriminative listening.

Discriminative listening is also critical to our survival. When we pick up a sound, one of the first things we do is decide whether the sound is friend or foe. If we hear something that is threatening, our fight-or-flight instinct kicks in. Think about what you do when you are walking down a street and suddenly hear a loud horn honking. Chances are you jump a little or in some other way physically react to the unexpected sound. You will probably also look for the source of the horn. The purpose of your physical reaction is to help you get out of harm's way if you determine you are in danger.

Discriminative listening is so crucial to your survival that you develop this capability *in utero* and continue to develop it during the first few months of your life. Research indicates that a fetus can distinguish among music, language, and other sounds.<sup>19</sup> Measurement of heart rate and motor responses clearly show a fetus can tell the difference in sounds. For example, a sudden sharp noise elicits a different response than a Mozart sonata. It is interesting that this discriminative capability is

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also illustrated by a newborn's ability to distinguish its mother's voice from other female voices.<sup>20</sup> Further research indicates that by four days old, babies are able to differentiate their mother language from other languages.<sup>21</sup> In truth, your discriminative abilities might be at their peak early in your life. For example, a child up to four months old can distinguish all 150 sounds that make up human languages.<sup>22</sup> However, as we noted in Chapter 1, you soon lose this ability as you gain more experience in the language or languages used in your environment; you lose the ability to distinguish among all of the sounds. Consequently as an adult, you probably have difficulty picking up fine distinctions between sounds that are very close if your ears are unaccustomed to hearing them.

Another way you use discriminative listening is to make sense out of human sounds. If you are flying on a crowded plane and hear the person sitting next to you make a sound, you will try to determine whether the person is talking or simply making a noise. If you notice the person's eyes are closed and his head is lolling forward, you will conclude that he isn't trying to talk to you. If, however, you notice that the person is looking at you, you will probably try to come up with an appropriate answer. As you learn a language, whether it is your native language or another one, you begin to learn the patterns of sounds associated with the language and begin to listen for those sounds.

One concept that helps clarify discriminative listening is **speech intelligibility**.<sup>23</sup> Speech intelligibility involves a sender and a listener who processes the signal to arrive at some level of understanding or intelligibility.<sup>24</sup> When you use discriminative listening, you pick up speaker affect and voice quality as well as the words themselves. **Speaker affect** is perceived by listening to the pitch, precision, and patterns of emphasis. Research by audiologists indicates that processing paralinguistic cues of this type is a parallel process to hearing the words. These findings led researchers to conclude that listeners have to work extra hard to decode speech that is different from what they are accustomed to hearing.

Unfortunately this increased degree of difficulty can create a listening barrier. For example, both authors of this book have spent the majority of their lives in the southern part of the United States. Consequently our ears are very accustomed to Southern English. When we travel to other areas of the country, we sometimes have difficulty recognizing words because the sound structures are different. The same thing occurs when we travel internationally.

Every language has its own sounds. While we are able to hear the nuances of southern U.S. English, we have difficulty physically picking up (and producing) the nuances of a language such as Korean. Discriminative listening is one key to learning

another language as adults. Research by Akiyo Hirai, an associate professor at the University of Tsukuba in Japan, found a relationship between listening and proficiency in a second language. He concluded that proficiency in a second language is dependent on the ability to process the spoken language, which we can get only through listening.<sup>25</sup>

Even though discriminative listening is physically receiving the stimulus, it is important that a listener doesn't use this first step in listening as an excuse not to listen. Many years ago, Professor Fitch-Hauser attended a speech

#### THINK ON IT

If you aren't personally familiar with one, get with a friend who is fluent in another language. What are some of the sounds that don't translate well into English? Or as in Chinese, a word whose meaning may change with a change in pitch? How can such differences affect how we listen and understand others?

in a large hall. The speaker chose not to use a microphone, and the acoustics of the hall didn't allow the speaker's voice to carry throughout. Since she couldn't hear what the speaker was saying, she couldn't listen completely. At that time she had to make some choices as a listener. First, she could watch the nonverbals: the facial expressions, the body postures, the gestures. Based on these visual elements as well as responses from the audience members who could hear, she could draw certain conclusions. Other options she had were to move to a location where she could hear or to inform the speaker that she couldn't hear. The main lesson of this example is that even at the discriminative level, an individual has the responsibility of making the choice of whether or not to attend to the stimulus or make an effort to attend to the stimulus.

Just as in the example of a nonnative language, discriminative listening also helps us distinguish among sounds in our own language. Many sounds are somewhat similar. For example, plosive sounds such as "p" and "b" take focus and concentration to distinguish in less-than-ideal conditions. The same can be said of distinguishing between "b" and "d." This problem can be extended even further as we think about how we pronounce certain words. For example, homonyms are words that sound alike (*to, two, too*). Only by listening to the context are we able to determine which word is being used. We have similar problems with words that aren't really homonyms but are regionally pronounced alike. For example, *pen* and *pin* and *aunt* and *ant* are pronounced very similarly in many parts of the United States. A good discriminative listener will be able to distinguish among these similar sounds.

As seen here, discriminative listening is crucial to our survival and forms a basis for our ability to understand others' messages. While distinguishing stimuli is very important to listening, we must also be able to establish what the stimuli mean. We do this as we begin to listen comprehensively.

## Comprehensive Listening

In comprehensive listening we strive for a level of listening fidelity that will allow us to assign meanings to a message that are as close as possible to what the sender intended. So we must learn to focus on the words plus all of the appropriate nonverbal elements that accompany the words. It is at this level that we try to truly achieve communication fidelity. According to Wolvin and Coakley, **comprehensive listening** is "listening for understanding of the message."<sup>26</sup> In comprehensive listening, then, we must pay attention to all of the information coming in: the words; the tone of voice and other paralinguistic cues; all nonverbal cues, including facial expressions; and the interactive situation itself.

Consider what happens in the following scenarios:

- a. Ben overhears his parents talking after work. His father is talking about a confrontation he had with a disgruntled employee. As he gets into the details of the incident, his voice begins to sound angry.
- b. Tamarah is taking a 911 call. Her voice is flat as she asks the caller to calm down and tell her where the accident has occurred.

As a listener to the first situation, one could conclude that Mr. Goleman, Ben's father, is angry. One might even assume that he is angry with Mrs. Goleman because



she is the person he is talking with. However, Ben is a good comprehensive listener who sees both parties in the interaction. He also takes into account the situation. Consequently he is able to understand that his father is expressing emotions that were appropriate to the situation at work, not showing anger toward Mrs. Goleman. He can understand that his father is frustrated about certain things at work.

In the second case, the person on the other end of the phone call could assume that Tamarah is uncaring. But instead the individual probably picks up the message to remain as calm as possible so the important information about the accident can be relayed.

Both of these cases illustrate the importance of assigning meaning to a message based on more than just the words themselves. In the previous section, we talked about the importance of a discriminative listener paying attention to speaker affect. A good comprehensive listener is able to interpret this affect and determine how it influences what the message really means.

Of course, it is also important for us to understand the words used to express the message. If we don't understand the words a speaker is using, we will have great difficulty assigning meaning to the message. Wolvin and Coakley suggest that one thing we can do to be better comprehensive listeners is to build our vocabularies.

In addition to assigning meaning to the message, comprehensive listening also involves storing the information in our memory banks. When we focus on what is being said, we process that information in such a way that we can store it in the appropriate place. One way we do this is by using schemata to make sense of information. Schemata are patterns we use to organize and interpret information. The role of schema and memory is discussed more fully in Chapter 3. So when you hear one of your friends start talking about his or her date last night, you listen with the expectation of hearing information that fits your "date story" schema. You will also store the information using that set of expectations.

Comprehensive listening allows us to understand and remember information. However, we seldom simply just take information in; we also evaluate the stimuli in some way.

## Critical Listening

The third type of listening described by Wolvin and Coakley is critical listening. Some listening scholars feel that this level of listening is the most important.<sup>27</sup> It is in **critical listening** that we think about the message, make inferences, and evaluate both the speaker and the message.<sup>28</sup> This type of listening is important any time we need to assess the value of information. It is perhaps most important when we are listening to information meant to persuade us.

One decision a listener should make when taking in a message concerns the type of information being heard. Is it factual or not? Whether listening to a newscast or to another individual, a competent critical listener will be able to distinguish between fact and information that isn't fact. Let's take a quick look at the difference in the types of information. Case Study 2.2 presents an actual news story about a college student. Read over the article and see if you can distinguish information that is fact from information that is opinion.