

THE SCIENCE AND SANITY OF LISTENING

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Introduction

Listening, we are told, is a vital part of our daily lives. Listening is the only way we can properly learn new information or understand how to do things. Beyond this, one often hears, listening is necessary for esthetic pleasure, relationship building, and to advance one's career. Still, it seems to be an aspect of communication with which many people struggle. Indeed, although aware of the instrumentality of listening, even trained communicators often fail to listen correctly or at opportune times. This article will argue that part of the difficulty with listening may not come from a true failure to listen, but from the abstract nature of word "listening" itself.

Listening is done in a variety of situations and for a variety of reasons, many of which do not involve an overlapping skill set. When one listens to music, one is not involved in the same sort of activity as when one listens to a friend vent after a difficult day of work or when one listens to one's employer give instructions on a new procedure. The wildly different nature of these activities and the skills involved in them mean that one can easily be listening, and yet simultaneously fail to listen. In fact, as will be shown later, some forms of listening actually preclude other forms; that is to say that in the case of listening $A \neq A$. Because of this, listening is a slippery term and one who wishes to become a good listener is inevitably prone to failure.

On the other hand, there are a series of tools that come from the discipline of general semantics that allow us to properly navigate thorny abstract terms such as "listening." The purpose of this article is to use some of these tools to help us come to a better understanding of the abstract nature of the

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term listening. The article will show that through the application of what general semanticists refer to as “extensional devices,” listening can become a less abstract and more manageable skill set, which will allow us to perform better the basic operations that fall under the abstract heading of “listening.” To accomplish this, the article will first examine the literature arising from the field of interpersonal communication regarding listening. Next, the article will consider how the notion of extensional devices, which comes from the discipline of general semantics, can be applied to better understand the concept of listening. The article will go on to show that applying these devices to the types of listening can help clarify the listening that is needed at a particular time and a particular place. Finally, the article will recommend procedures whereby a communicator can apply the devices for his or her listening to arrive at a saner experience.

Listening in Interpersonal Communication

Listening is a popular subject among scholars of interpersonal communication for a number of reasons. The fact that interpersonal scholars are often teachers and that listening is understood as an important part of our students' lives undoubtedly plays a role in the reason for the popularity of the subject matter. According to Buckley, “Students listen to the equivalent of a book a day; talk the equivalent of a book a week; read the equivalent of a book a month; and write the equivalent of a book a year” (1992, p. 622). According to another study, college students spend 55% of the time they spend communicating in listening (Emanuel et al., 2008), a number that only rises as they enter the workforce (Wolvin & Coakley, 1981, 1996). The need for teaching about listening appears evident, and so research by teaching professors logically flows as an outgrowth of this necessity.

Another reason that listening is such a popular subject for researchers of interpersonal communication is that listening is understood as having such an intense impact on the interpersonal relationship, the most common unit of analysis in interpersonal communication. Most people see listening as among the most important interpersonal skills (Wolvin, 1984). It has been argued that to truly be interpersonal communication, and not merely personal communication, both parties must be listening (Bunkers, 2010). Interpersonal communication researchers have shown that to find any relationship satisfying, it is vital that both partners engage in active listening (Prager & Buhrmester, 1998). Lacking particular listening skills is one of the most frequent communication problems among romantic couples and families (Vangelisti, 1994).

In addition to the needs of students and relationships, listening has become a popular subject among researchers of interpersonal communication because it is seen as essential in almost any vocational setting. Business professionals have been shown to require advanced listening skills to succeed at their profession (Flynn et al., 2008). For medical professionals, failure to listen has been blamed as a cause for improper diagnosis or inadequate treatment (Nyquist, 1992; Underwood & Adler, 2005; Davis et al., 2008). Thus, the research in interpersonal communication is quite clear. Listening is an important skill to have.

Insanity of Listening

Despite the importance of this skill, researchers in interpersonal communication recognize that listening means a great many things that cannot be simultaneously managed. Witkin (1990) points out the performance of listening is primarily cognitive, the perception of listening is behavioral. Therefore, Janusik warns, "cognitions and behaviors are not always congruent, creating a greater challenge because no specific behaviors are consistent with cognitions" (2007, pp. 139–140). This means that two parties in a particular interpersonal dyad can have wildly different ideas of the quality of listening taking place. For instance, studies of children in the foster care system have shown that different understandings of what listening is have had negative impacts on perceptions and relationships within that system (McLeod, 2001, 2006). These differences are not the result of one party or the other not understanding what listening is. Indeed, from a general semanticist perspective, the problem lies in something much deeper.

That problem lies in the conception that listening "is" anything at all. From the perspective of general semantics, saying listening "is" one thing or another meets the criteria for showing a lack of sanity in the word–thing relationship and fails to take into account the inherent abstract nature of language. To further validate that position, one need only look at some of the different ways of understanding listening that have been considered by scholars in interpersonal communication.

There are differences in appropriate mindfulness in listening. There are different goals of listening, which are appropriate in different situations. Finally, there are different listening styles, which cannot be simultaneously engaged. Each of these differences will be discussed in this article to fully pose the problem which application of general semantics' principles can solve. By outlining these differences in listening, the article will clearly show that, to use general semantics terminology, listening₁ is not listening₂ is not

listening₃, a fact that will be expanded later in this article when application of general semantics principles will be fully developed to restore sanity to the various listening processes.

Researchers have identified two different ways of processing information to which one is listening. One can process the information mindfully or mindlessly (Burgoon et al., 2000). These can be differentiated from merely hearing, the sensory stimulation caused by sound, in that they both require a cognitive reaction. According to Adler and Proctor (2011), "Mindless listening occurs when we react to messages automatically and routinely without much mental investment" (p. 237). Research has shown that often this is precisely the type of listening called for in many situations (Burgoon et al., 2000). When a person asks another for the time of day, one need not always consider all the deep meanings of time or carefully consider why one is asked. One merely needs to pull out one's mobile phone and provide the inquirer with the requested information. If one is not listening, but simply hearing, one might not respond at all, or only after the inquirer gets one's attention in another way. Mindless listening allows for quick reactions and very little consideration of what the speaker is saying.

Often, however, mindless listening is detrimental to relationships. In these cases, we should engage in mindful listening which "involves giving careful and thoughtful attention and responses to the messages we receive. You [sic] tend to listen mindfully when a message is important to you, and also when someone you care about is speaking about a matter that is important to him or her" (Adler & Proctor, 2011, p. 238). Mindful listening is necessary to get at the root of deep emotional situations. It is necessary to be certain that one has all the facts. It is required if one wants to carefully consider the most intimate aspects of a situation.

So, one might assume that in one's closest interpersonal relationships one should always be engaged in mindful listening. According to researchers in relationship communication, however, this is not always the case. Sometimes, mindless listening is helpful in the development of relationships as well. In their work with spouses of people whose parents were alcoholics, Douglas Bey and Deborah Bey recommend a type of mindless listening which they say is similar to Rogerian therapy:

Do not give advice, do not correct them and don't criticize.... Paraphrase what your companion says and reflect it back to her or him. Validate your partner's feelings whenever you have an opportunity to do so and remind your loved one that there are basically four feelings (mad, sad, glad and fear) and the rest are variants of these. (Bey & Bey, 2007, p. 563 of 2643)

The listener is not supposed to interact with the information, simply feed it back mindlessly.

There are, therefore, times when a good listener carefully interprets and attempts to understand the speaker's messages. There are other times when a good listener must mindlessly react to the speaker without careful consideration. The attempt to "be a good listener" by engaging in the activities that made one a good listener last time might fail because the situation has changed. Just as Heraclites pointed out regarding one's inability to step into the same river twice, the skills and interaction that produce good listening at one moment are not necessarily transferable to another moment. The river has changed.

The shifting between mindful and mindless listening is not the only place that the river changes. Another constantly shifting aspect of listening is what researchers refer to as the different goals of listening: listening for appreciation, empathic listening, informational listening, and critical listening (Hogan et al., 2011, p. 81). Listening for appreciation involves avoiding analysis and critique but simply focuses on the sensory pleasure one can receive from the nuances of sound. Empathic listening attempts to show emotional support and shared emotion with the speaker, validating his or her emotions even if there is factual disagreement. Informational listening is using one's ability to hear to garner new facts and information. Critical listening involves analysis and evaluation of what a speaker says.

The goals of listening listed above do not necessarily preclude each other. One can, for instance, learn something while simply enjoying the pleasures of a song. One can also analyze what one learns. However, unless the speaker and the listener have compatible goals at a particular moment, it can seem from one partner's perspective that the other is not a good listener. The stereotype of one spouse telling the other spouse about a problem at work, expecting empathic listening while the other spouse engages in critical listening and attempts to problem solve is the source of multiple self-help seminars and comedian's jokes. It is not that the partner who was involved in critical listening was not listening or failing to be a good listener. Rather, the partner failed to meet the expectations of the other person's listening. However, there was no reasonable way to know what was to be expected.

Besides the differences between mindful and mindless listening and the differences in the goals of listening, there are also differences in types of listening that have been identified by experts in interpersonal communication. A listening style can be defined as one's habit or pattern of behavior regarding

listening, which reflects one's predisposition, attitudes or beliefs regarding the role and function of listening (Watson et al., 1995). Bodie and Worthington (2010) have labeled the four different listening styles: action-oriented listeners, time-oriented listeners, people-oriented listeners, and content-oriented listeners.

Action-oriented listeners become impatient when speakers are not brief and to the point. For an action-oriented listener, listening is seen primarily as a means of problem solving. Time-oriented listeners "tend to let others know in advance exactly how much time they have available for each conversation" (McCornack, 2013, p. 161). Listening must be done according to a schedule. People-oriented listeners see listening primarily as a means of connection; listening is a way of reaching out and touching people to create a connection. Content-oriented listeners are looking to be challenged intellectually by listening to what people are saying.

Although all of these styles may have an appropriate time and place at which they are most useful, most people only use one or two styles (Chesboro, 1999). Even for those who use two styles, the simultaneous use of more than one simultaneously is difficult if not impossible. Therefore, a person who is naturally a good listener, because his or her personal listening style is appropriate to a particular situation, might find that she or he is a poor listener when listening requires one of the other three styles.

Restoring Sanity to Listening

To general semanticists, the abstract nature of a term like listening comes as no surprise. What is true of the term, "listening" is true of most terms. Namely: "that the concepts produced by the human mind, when formulated in a slightly vague form, are roughly valid for reality, but that when extreme precision is aimed at, they become ideal forms whose real content tends to vanish away" (De Broglie, 1949, p. 149). Korzybski wrote that "there is no escape from the fact that we must start with undefined terms which express silent, structural creeds or metaphysics" (1958, p. 373). He explained that most of our terms suffer from a sense of "allness" related to the way that language has developed and that the way we communicate causes us to suffer from a misunderstanding of reality that comes from forgetting the differences between language and reality. For instance, he speculates on early human beings abstracting the term "dog":

If we saw an animal and called it 'dog' and saw another animal roughly resembling the first, we said, quite happily 'it *is* a dog', forgetting or not knowing that the objective level is unspeakable and that we deal with

absolute individuals, each one different from the other. Thus the mechanisms of identification or confusion of orders of abstractions, natural at a very primitive stage of human development, became systemized and structurally embodied in this most important tool of daily use called ‘language’” (1958, p. 372).

The structural embodiment in language of what Korzybski repeatedly calls the “‘is’ of identity” (1958), inherently ascribes to the terminologies that we use a kind of false comparison:

Our analysis of the ways of acquaintance of the inexhaustible characteristics of nature, its manyness, its legion of details, and the segmented isolating, and limiting character of human awareness should make clear [that] whenever we respond we abstract some details from a total situation so that others must be left out” (Lee, 1941, p. 57).

Korzybski wrote: “Speaking about speaking, let us be perfectly aware from the beginning that when we make the simplest statement of any sort, this statement presupposes some kind of structural metaphysics” (1958, p. 372). This metaphysics says that two things that are actually uniquely individual are in essence the same.

Listening, it falsely seems from our language, *is* listening. If one is expecting certain behaviors to logically follow from listening and another’s current conception of listening is different, it appears to each other that the alternate partner is simply “not listening.” However, if we are to talk about listening in a way which escapes from these linguistic traps, we would need to use “an actional, behaviouristic, operational, functional language. This type of language involves modern asymmetrical implications of ‘order’ and eliminates the ‘is’ of identity, which always introduces a false evaluation” (Korzybski, 1958, p. 374).

When discussing listening, then, it is essential that we step away from the “is” of identity. To say that this action or that action “is” listening, closes the door to further conceptions. However, to say that a certain skill set may be useful for understanding listening in a particular time, place, and social situation might be more useful:

If I think of my knowledge as provisional and uncertain, (but in many cases as useful working knowledge) I may develop more flexible ways of thinking and reacting, and navigate with greater safety among the dangerous reefs and shoals of life. I will seek feedback from the external world, as I try to develop an extensional orientation, a way of making sense of

the world that lets my observations 'educate' my verbal definitions, rather than attempting the reverse (Johnston, 1994).

Understanding the concept of listening is a map, which is not the territory of the actual behaviors, and skills involved in every type of listening is essential if we are actually going to improve in the various behaviors and techniques involved in listening. Different maps may be abstractions of the same territory, but using one conception of listening in response to another's expectation may be similar to attempting to use a surveyor's terrain map to navigate highways. Perhaps with hard work one can be successful, but a road map would be better for that purpose.

The theory of general semantics provides a means whereby issues of finding the most useful "map" for a particular activity within a particular "territory" can be ascertained. Although these symbols continue to be abstractions, the recognition of the particularity of the object and time-bound nature of the symbolizing are recognized. Specifically, general semanticists have proposed that we can better understand high-order abstractions and help ourselves retreat from the "is" of identity through the application of "a few simple devices called *extensional devices*, [with which] the structure of language could be modified in such a way as to take into account process, duration of time, uniqueness, specificity, generality, environmental factors, holistic principles, etc." (Read, 1973, pp. 68–69). These extensional devices include what Korzybski referred to as "working devices" namely indexes, dates, and *etcetera* and those he called "safety devices," namely quotation marks, hyphen, and quotes (Korzybski, 1958). These are the primary tools used by general semanticists to make more appropriate maps for particular actions in particular territories. Many general semanticists have gone beyond Korzybski's early devices. In fact, there are likely "innumerable extensional possibilities in language and syntax" (Brooks & Brooks, 2006, p. 66) that general semanticists can apply. For instance, Johnson added plurals, quantifying terms, actional terms, operational terms, and conditional terms (Johnson, 1946, pp. 218–224). Others also include the use of the *Exempli gratia*, the *Id est*, italics, parentheses, the ellipses, the neologism, footnotes/endnotes, colons, color-coding, and hypertext (Brooks & Brooks, 2006). The application of each of these extensional devices would be the fodder for further study into the general semantics of listening. Indeed, it is probably reasonable to imagine that there are extensional devices that could be developed specifically for the purposes of studying listening. However, for purposes of this article, only Korzybski's original five

devices will be applied to help us begin to come to terms (in a very literal way) with listening.

Listening and the Extensional Devices

The first of the extensional devices is called "indexing." Johnson (1946) gave a succinct description of how this device is used by describing them as similar to the index numbers used in algebraic mathematics: "Now, after all, x is like any ordinary word. The word *house*, for example, is a variable term. It can be used to refer to my house, or to your house, or to any one of all the possible buildings one might want to talk about. And $house_1$ is not $house_2$ " (p. 211). What such indexing reminds us is that we cannot treat two distinct things the same way simply because we apply the same symbol to both things. We can easily make use of the extensional device of indexing by creating an index of listening terms based on the variations that were described by researchers earlier in this chapter.

For instance, one can refer to mindless listening as $listening_1$ and mindful listening as $listening_2$. By recognizing $listening_1$ and $listening_2$ are different, we are taking into account that while we refer to both terms as "listening" they might be as different from one another as my house is from your house, to continue with Johnson's example. We can go further and consider the goals of listening. One can refer to the goals of listening as appreciative, as $listening_A$, empathic listening as $listening_E$, informational listening as $listening_I$, and critical listening as $listening_C$. The problem to which we referred earlier in the article during which one spouse expected an empathetic ear, and the other spouse providing a critical analysis can easily be explained. One spouse was expecting what we can call $listening_E$ and other spouse was engaged in $listening_C$. The spouse who engaged in $listening_C$ had no way of knowing that the other spouse was expecting $listening_E$, unless he or she were specifically told. Even if he or she were informed that this was a special occasion for listening, he or she would not know which kind of listening were appropriate unless specific cues were given by the speaker that a particular type of listening were appropriate. By indexing listening, one can clearly see that there was not a failure of the spouse to listen, but actually, a failure on the part of both parties to discuss the particular skills desired in the particular moment. By engaging in a mental indexing by both parties, the resultant lack of desired behavior on both parts is not solved. However, feelings can be saved and arguments avoided in which one partner accuses the other of "not listening," a statement that one should see by this point is not helpful nor, technically, even correct.

The second of Korzybski's extensional devices that can be applied to better help us find the right listening map for the listening territory and activity is the concept of dates which "are a special kind of index; they refer to time" (Johnson, 1946, p. 213). Basically, this is to say that the listening that was appropriate on March 23, 2013 is not the same kind of listening that will be appropriate on November 28, 2016. Just as Smith₁ is not Smith₂, (no two individuals are the same) so Smith¹⁹⁴⁰ is not Smith¹⁹⁴² (no one individual stays the same). This can also refer to skill sets, and in our case, specifically, to listening. Recognizing that the skills and behaviors involved in listening^{March 23, 2013} are different than the skills and behaviors involved in listening^{November 28, 2016} allows us to grant each other some grace in the extent to which we expect each other and ourselves to "listen well." Furthermore, it prevents one from engaging in a perception of oneself and others, which is inherently obsolete. It protects us from the "is" of identity by recognizing that no one is a good listener all the time nor a poor listener all the time. Recognizing that each case and time is unique allows one to better interact with others with regard to listening.

The third extensional device is the "*etcetera*." This extensional device helps us escape from this "is" of identity by recognizing that variations can and do occur between individual events *ad infinitum*. This is especially helpful in helping us consider skill sets, such as listening. To say make a list of skills involved in listening, such as apprehending, understanding, remembering, and *etcetera* is to recognize that the particular set of skills required in a particular listening situation are unending. There is recognition in using the *etcetera* that allows one to recognize that even in this particular time and at this particular place one can never be wholly a "good" or "poor" listener. Rather in this situation some of the criteria for "good" listening are being met while some are not. The ideal of perfection is unattainable and while one should always strive to be a better listener, one will never be a perfect listener.

The fourth extensional device that Korzybski describes, which can help us better come to terms with listening is the extensional device of the "hyphen." The purpose of this device is that there are often times when a particular action, event or object is inextricably tied to another action, event or object to the extent that they are not actually separate. Recognizing that "listening" may actually be "listening-relationship building," "listening-working," "listening-arguing," "listening-ignoring," and etc. will help one understand that "listening" does not always exist in a vacuum. The variations of goals, skills, and activities involved in all of the things in which we combine listening make it quite impossible to extract listening from its context.

The final extensional device that Korzybski asks us to apply is one that has been used extensively throughout this essay though not always with the general semantics application: the quotation mark. The quotation mark is in many ways a recognition that all of the extensional devices can be of use in each case. So, we may speak of “listening” and place it in quotation marks as a means of recognizing that we are really only speaking of one circumstance of listening and that each of the other extensional devices must still be brought to bear to fully understand it.

But We Still Must Listen

General semantics in general and the extensional devices in particular can help us approach listening in a way that is more sane, as Korzybski would say. Actually, using them aloud in everyday speech, or except as a critical device in writing, would cause many people to view the communicator askance. Instead, it might be better to change the way we talk about listening so that we include the behaviors we want, rather than the abstract term. Instead of asking someone to “listen” to, one should explain that one wants their opinion, a shoulder to cry on, or for them simply to be there mindlessly as one rants. By asking more specifically for the behaviors we need from our partners, we can probably improve the relationship. Of course, one can also ask that one’s partner refrain from using the term listening as well, but one cannot force others to engage in general semantics principles. Rather, the extensional devices should be at the back of our mind as we communicate. This should especially be the case when we are critiquing others or ourselves with regard to “listening.” It should allow us to consider the concept with a little more humility, and a little more grace.

Nonetheless, the extensional devices do not need to force us into some kind of existential paralysis in which we feel that we can say nothing. Nor should they lead us to believe that we cannot develop skills and knowledge. This includes skills and knowledge regarding listening. What they do show us is that our skills and knowledge are always limited, particular and (if we are seeking perfection) inadequate. Then, it is with limited skills and knowledge that we interact with each other and try to live in the world. Still, we do interact; we do try to live; and we do try to listen to each other.

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