

# Chapter 1

## Defining Listening: A Historical, Theoretical and Pragmatic Assessment

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This chapter provides a brief historical background to illustrate how the history of listening research has affected the conceptualization and measurement of listening as well as how this skill has been taught. Like all history, we write this one from a particular perspective. Both of us have doctorates in Communication Studies and have spent most of our academic careers in this discipline. We have both been heavily involved in both the *International Listening Association*, a scholarly society devoted to the teaching, practice, and research of listening, and the *National Communication Association*, the largest academic organization for the advancement of communication research and practice. Thus, even aside from space limitations, our review is necessarily partial and incomplete. Our purpose here is not to provide a full history of the field, but to provide enough of a background so that readers can understand the development of measurement practices that have shaped our understanding of listening.

We first trace the research as it advanced an expanding definition of listening, directing you to profiles of measures contained in Section III of this volume when appropriate. We then outline the growing recognition that taking listening seriously requires constructing and empirically testing theories of its essential components and consequential roles for individual and relational health and well-being. We conclude with an overview of the book.

### Listening: Distinctions and Definitions

While “to listen” is rooted in terms that connote attention and silent obedience, “to hear” has more to do with the perception of sound and the faculties of the ear (see Lipari, 2010; and the response by Bodie & Crick, 2014). This distinction often helps separate the focus of work by audiologists who study the physiological components of hearing from those, like communication scholars, who study the individual and relational components of listening.

In this latter work, listening is recognized as a multidimensional construct that consists of complex (a) affective processes, such as being motivated to attend to others; (b) behavioral processes, such as responding with verbal and nonverbal feedback; and (c) cognitive processes, such as attending to, understanding, receiving, and interpreting content and relational messages (Halone, Cunconan, Coakley, & Wolvin, 1998). As seen

in Table 1.1, scholars often stress one of these three categories, though examples do exist that synthesize all three (e.g., ILA, Steil et al., 1983).

**Table 1.1: Sample of Listening Definitions\***

<u>Author</u>	<u>Year</u>	<u>Definition</u>
<b>Tucker</b>	1925	An analysis of the impressions resulting from concentration where an effort of will is required.
<b>Rankin</b>	1926	The ability to understand spoken language.
<b>Nichols</b>	1948	The comprehension of expository materials presented orally in a classroom situation
<b>Barbe &amp; Meyers</b>	1954	The process of reacting to, interpreting, and relating the spoken language in terms of past experiences and further course of action.
<b>Brown &amp; Carlson</b>	1955	The aural assimilation of spoken symbols in a face-to-face speaker audience situation, with both oral and visual cues present.
<b>Barbara</b>	1957	A definite, usually voluntary, effort to apprehend acoustically.
<b>Spearritt</b>	1962	The active process involved in attach[ing] meaning to sounds.
<b>Barker</b>	1971	The selective process of attending to, hearing, understanding, and remembering aural symbols.
<b>Weaver</b>	1972	A process that takes place when a human organism receives data orally. The selection and retention of aurally received data.
<b>Kelly</b>	1975	A rather definite and deliberative ability to hear information, to analyze it, to recall it at a later time, and to draw conclusions from it.
<b>Steil et al.</b>	1983	Consists of four connected activities – sensing, interpreting, evaluating, and responding.
<b>Wolff et al.</b>	1983	A unitary-receptive communication process of hearing and selecting, assimilating and organizing, and retaining and covertly responding to aural and nonverbal stimuli.
<b>Wovin &amp; Coakley</b>	1988	The process of receiving, attending to, and assigning meaning to aural stimuli.

<b>Brownell</b>	1994	An overt behavior that conceptualizes the teaching and training process
<b>ILA</b>	1996	The process of receiving, constructing meaning from and responding to spoken and/or nonverbal messages.
<b>Cooper</b>	1997	Listening competency means behavior that is appropriate and effective. Appropriateness means that the content is understood and effectiveness deals with the achievement of interactive goals.
<b>de Ruyter &amp; Wetzels</b>	2000	[as perceived by customers] A set of interrelated activities, including apparent attentiveness, nonverbal behaviors, verbal behavior, perceived attitudes, memory and behavioral responses.
<b>Bostrom</b>	2011	The acquisition, process, and retention of information in the interpersonal context.

\*Definitions published prior to 1988 are drawn from Glenn (1989) and Wolvin and Coakley (1988).

*Affective* components of listening include how individuals think about listening and their motivation and enjoyment of the activity. Individuals' views about listening and their (often idiosyncratic) barriers to attending to others can have profound effects on comprehension and understanding as well as consequences for personal, professional, and relational success. Listening *behaviors* are actions such as eye contact and asking questions that serve to signal attention and interest to others. The responses that listeners enact while engaged with another are the only signals that listening is taking (or has taken) place. Finally, *cognitive* elements of listening are those internal processes that operate to enable individuals to attend to, comprehend, interpret, evaluate, and make sense of spoken language. The notion that listening is an information processing activity consisting of a stable set of practices that can be trained and improved is the most popular way to conceptualize the term and one that has framed all listening research at least since the early 1940s.

### **Cognitive components**

Whether sleeping or awake, humans are constantly processing sound; that is, vibrations pass through our ears and are processed in our brains continuously (Antony, Gobel, O'Hare, Reber & Paller, 2012). Not all of these sounds, however, are attended to consciously. Most sounds we hear are not "listened to" cognitively, that is comprehended, understood, and stored in memory for later retrieval and use. While communication scientists recognize the importance of hearing, most of the work on listening as a cognitive phenomenon has focused on how attended sounds are parsed

into words and phrases that are comprehended, understood, interpreted, evaluated, remembered, and recalled (e.g., Burlison, 2011).

The biggest emphasis in the literature has been placed on the factual recall of large chunks of spoken monologue, particularly in the classroom setting. The study that many cite as the catalyst for contemporary listening research was published in 1948 by Ralph Nichols. In that study, Nichols played six 10-minute audio-recorded lectures to a sample of undergraduate students who were asked to answer ten multiple choice questions after each. Items on the tests were designed to assess the amount of material from the lectures that students could recall without the assistance of note-taking. Student participants recalled an average of 68% of the lecture material with higher scores related to both individual (e.g., intelligence) and situational (e.g., listener fatigue) factors. Subsequent interviews with instructors of students scoring in the top and bottom tertiles of the test revealed that good, compared to poor, listeners were “more attentive during classroom activities and more conscientious in their...work habits” (p. 160). Nichols spent the remainder of his career attempting to convince others of the power of listening, largely through the publication of his “Listening is a 10-Part Skill” (Nichols, 1975) and his involvement in both the International Listening Association and the International Communication Association. Nichols’ work was instrumental toward motivating serious scholarly attention to factors likely to discriminate among good and poor listeners and to instructional efforts aimed at improving student ability to comprehend aural input. His approach to defining listening as a set of discernable skills (e.g., listening for main ideas, inference making) remains with us today.

The focus on how students comprehend aural information was shared by early listening scholars who emphasized the importance of comprehending and recalling lecture-based information for student success (e.g., Beighley, 1952; McClendon, 1958; Goldhaber & Weaver, 1968; Betty & Payne, 1984). From a research standpoint, it is instructive to note that short-term recall of information was the focus of the earliest measures of listening (Gilkinson, 1944) and remained a standard in major listening measures developed from 1950 until the 1970s (Brown & Carlsen, 1955; Dow, 1955). The more you retained, the better, more competent listener you were believed to be. The format of these early tests – multiple-choice with one correct and three or more incorrect answers – remains standard practice.

Issues related to retention and recall remained a strong component of listening research for many years. Nichols’s research suggested that listening (as measured by recall) was associated with individual intelligence, vocabulary size, and one’s ability to identify organizational elements of a message. This focus led early scholars to view listening ability as a separate, unitary skill and reduced listening to an activity of information acquisition (Bostrom, 1990). Kelly’s (1965, 1967) research suggested otherwise, however. His finding that early listening measures were more highly correlated with tests of intelligence than with each other led listening scholars to reevaluate listening and its facets in terms of a complex, multifaceted process.

Kelly's criticism of early listening tests suggested that cognitive ability contributed to listening ability, and later work has supported this perspective (Thomas & Levine, 1994). A primary cognitive component that entered into listening research around the time of Kelly was the role of memory. The relationship between listening and memory was most extensively theorized by Bostrom and Waldhart (1980), who suggested that the separation of short- and long-term memory could be usefully applied to the development of measures of listening comprehension. Their Kentucky Comprehensive Listening Test (KCLT), which is now out of production, was designed to measure five components of listening comprehension: (1) short-term listening, (2) listening with rehearsal, (3) interpretive listening, (4) lecture listening, and (5) short-term listening with distractions (Bostrom & Waldhart, 1983). By incorporating memory models into a conceptualization of listening, Bostrom and his colleagues were able to tease apart relations among certain types of listening and particular individual predispositions. The relation between listening and memory (and thus, recall), however, remains unclear (Bostrom, 1990, 2011; Glenn, 1989; Thomas & Levine, 1994).

The emphasis on retention and comprehension ultimately begs the question of how much retention and recall is necessary. Even in Nichols's work, the average recall score hovered around two-thirds. Moreover, recall of lecture material is qualitatively different from recall in an interpersonal context where emotional overtones may affect retention. Recognitions such as these led to the development of other measures of listening comprehension including the Watson-Barker Listening Test (Watson & Barker, 1988; Watson, Barker, Roberts & Roberts, 2001; see profile) and rubrics designed to assess memory for conversation (Stafford, 1982; Stafford, Burggraf, & Sharkey, 1987; Stafford & Daly, 1984; see profile). But even these later measures suffer from insufficient evidence of validity (Bodie, Worthington, & Fitch-Hauser, 2011) and perhaps even a misunderstanding of how people remember conversational details and themes (Janusik, 2005, 2007).

### **Affective components**

The focus on retention drove listening research for a number of years, with scholars focusing on the relation between comprehension and other cognitive constructs (e.g., Kelly, 1965; Sperritt, 1962). With advances in measurement techniques such as video-taped presentations (as opposed to simply audio-taped) and the recognition that elements of the voice and characteristics of speakers and messages can influence comprehension, others started to turn attention to inference making and evaluation rather than simple regurgitation (Fitch-Hauser, 1984; 1990). How and why individuals come to the conclusions they do as they listen has been studied under the auspices of message interpretation (Edwards, 2011), relational framing (Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999), and other research programs like constructivism (Bodie & Jones, in press) and schema theory (Edwards & McDonald, 1993) – all assume comprehension of aural information is more complex than simply remembering uttered speech. Research in psychology seems to confirm that memory is not as simple as repeating what is seen or heard and that people have “false memories” even with short lists of words or phrases

(Loftus & Palmer, 1974). Extrapolating to interactive contexts, individuals often come away from the same oral event with different information or at least different interpretations and evaluations of that information (Edwards, 2011).

A significant portion of research on affective components of listening has focused on associations between listening and trait-like personality factors that may affect individual motivation. A focus on individual predispositions and their influence on how people interpret and process aural information was implicit in the work of Nichols but was not formally included in cognitive models of listening until the 1972 publication of *Human Listening: Process and Behavior* by Carl Weaver. In his book, Weaver argued that a listener's "attitudes" should be incorporated as part of a "selective perception" model of listening. For the first time, a listener's willingness to or attitude toward listening was identified as a separate component of the listening process (see also Barker, 1971). In other words, individual choice was seen as a key element of listening – we choose to listen (or to avoid it).

Personal experience and academic research suggest that all listeners are not created equal. The central question is, why are some individuals more proficient (or at least more likely to put forth effort) at listening than other individuals? Much research energy has been devoted to the discovery of an overarching profile for good listening (see Bodie, St. Cyr, Pence, Rold, & Honeycutt, 2012). Scholars have investigated how differences in memory (Bostrom & Waldhart, 1988; Janusik, 2005), schema formation (Fitch-Hauser, 1984; 1990), anxiety (Schrodt, Wheelless, & Ptacek, 2000; Wheelless, Preiss, & Gayle, 1997; see Information Reception Apprehension profile), and individual preferences for (Bodie, Worthington, & Gearhart, 2013; Worthington, 2003, 2005, 2008; see Listening Style profile) and conceptualizations of (Imhof & Janusik, 2006; see Listening Concepts profile) listening potentially affect how listeners enact their role. Other examples of research into individual differences include studies between various listening concepts and empathic tendencies (Bodie, 2011a; Chesebro, 1999; Weaver & Kirtley, 1995; Bommelje, Houston & Smither, 2003), noise sensitivity (Worthington, Keaton, Imhof, & Valikoski, 2016; see profile) and related social skills (Gearhart & Bodie, 2011; see Active-Empathic Listening Scale profile).

As seen here, this area of study is quite varied. Unfortunately, comparisons of study findings are difficult due to conceptual and methodological differences. For example, studies examining listening style and personality have used the Eysenck Personality Questionnaire, the Kiersey Temperament Sorter, and the Hogan Personality Inventory (Pearce, Johnson, & Barker, 2003; Watson, Barker, & Weaver, 1995; Worthington, 2003). As noted by Bodie, Worthington, Imhof, and Cooper (2008), the research on individual differences presents a difficulty: the unique contribution of any single variable to the listening process is blurred primarily because each is typically studied in isolation. Rarely do studies include measures from a diverse population of constructs; instead, studies are often designed with a limited set of variables in mind. Of course, "People do not possess a 'single' individual difference; they are multifaceted, reflecting numerous personality, temperament, and learned qualities" (Bodie et al., 2008, p. 111). Researchers

are urged to use more sophisticated techniques to better understand the unique contributions that “various individual differences may make to both general listening processes and to specific listening skills” (p. 111). Systematic and quantitatively oriented reviews of the literature should follow this work.

### **Behavioral components**

While placing an emphasis on a listener’s motivation and willingness to listen in particular ways, Weaver’s book set aside the listening response as a viable research trajectory. It was not until the mid-1980s and the push to develop “speaking and listening competencies” in high school and college students that listening scholars were able to legitimately focus on behaviors. Prior to this time, the response phase was thought to begin a new process, one that was more speaking-focused in nature (see Ridge, 1993, for a discussion of this trend; Berger, 2011, addresses problems associated with this view).

The listening competency model that emerged from the research begun in the 1980s followed closely the communicative competency model made popular by Wiemann, Spitzberg, Rubin, and others (Morreale, Rubin, & Jones, 1998; Spitzberg & Cupach, 1984; Wiemann & Backlund, 1980; Wilson & Sabee, 2003). Models of listening competency placed the overt behaviors of listeners as central to whether a person could be deemed a “good” (or poor) listener. This focus was a natural outgrowth of previous research emphasizing outcomes of retention and recall. Nichols’s work was used to justify the need for training in cognitive elements of listening where observations made by educators were based solely on outward signs of attention and engagement within the classroom setting (i.e., listening behaviors). Even before Nichols, work by Rankin (1926) that asked adults to chart their waking hours devoted to several communication activities (including listening) suggested that what we *do* as listeners (i.e., how we behave as listeners) is important (see Time Studies profile). Even so, a behavioral view of listening was not mainstreamed until the movement toward assessment and measurement was tied to federal funding initiatives (see Beard & Bodie, 2014).

Fundamental to the “listening as competent behavior” perspective is “the view that an identifiable set of skills, attitudes, and abilities can be formulated and taught to improve individual performance” (Bodie et al., 2008, p. 107). What the research between the latter part of the 1980s and throughout the 1990s accomplished was to shift the focus from covert mental processes to overt behavioral ones. Two claims are central in this shift: (1) that our behavioral choices are moderated by our relationships and (2) that competency resides in the eye of the beholder. In other words, our listening competency is judged by others, and this judgment (or at least what is relevant for that judgment) varies with the context. As our listening competency is judged and as we judge the listening of others, we assess the appropriateness and effectiveness of the listening behaviors in specified contexts (Cooper & Husband, 1993; Spitzberg & Cupach, 2002).

Along with a conceptual shift, the behavioral perspective inspired new measurement techniques. Competency expanded beyond multiple-choice assessments of

comprehension to include multi-item scales that could be completed by listeners, their interlocutors, and their peers, co-workers, friends, and family members. Along with traditional self-report measures used to assess affective components of listening, researchers began utilizing a variety of other reporting techniques including third-party and critical incidents techniques (Rubin & Feezel, 1986; Welton, 1988). Moreover, there was a growing acknowledgment that listening competency was contextual, with researchers exploring listening competency in the areas of business, education, and health. Researchers in these areas have tied listening competency (measured in multiple ways) to attentiveness, memory, and understanding, as well as employee motivation, upward mobility in the workplace, and job and class performance (Brownell, 1985; Rubin & Feezel, 1986; Sypher, Bostrom, & Seibert, 1989; Worthington, 2001; Wanzer, Booth-Butterfield, & Gruber, 2004).

Even with all the advances afforded by a focus on behavior, there are at least two important limitations (Bodie et al., 2008). First, the emphasis on skills and training directed research attention away from identifying elements of listening competency. Thus, the skills that are taught in classrooms and in training programs may or may not capture the primary elements that should be taught. Second, the majority of studies in this area have been atheoretical in nature (Wolvin, Halone, & Coakley, 1999). No unified framework currently exists to organize and evaluate competency skills, and some even take issue with the need for theoretically oriented research more generally (Purdy, 2011; see response by Bodie, 2011b). Theory, however, is what provides measures with focus and what allows more sophisticated interpretation of results.

### The Role of Theory in Listening Research

The early history of the listening field and the drive to develop a single, mutually agreeable definition influenced the nature and type of research that was conducted by scholars. In this section, we highlight and explore the impact of these two forces on both theory development and the type of research that scholars conducted.

### Searching for “The” Definition of Listening

Our review may leave the impression that listening scholarship is completely void of theory. This is not the case. What is true is that scholars were slow to expand beyond an initial emphasis on lecture comprehension, and this emphasis drove a felt need to develop a single, all-encompassing definition of listening.

As we detailed above, early listening research focused on comprehension of orally delivered information in educational contexts, a narrow focus that restricted listening to a kind of information processing sans its broader connection to human communication and relational experiences (Bostrom, 2011). As a result, almost all early listening measures (e.g., Brown-Carlsen Listening Test, Brown & Carlsen, 1955; STEP, ETS, 1957; Watson-Barker Listening Test; see profile) emphasized listening comprehension and recall, a trend that continued for several decades. Moreover, test responses typically took the form of multiple-choice questions with absolute answers. This “right-or-



wrong” scoring conflicts with our common experience of partially understanding or comprehending messages (Janusik, 2005, 2007). The work of Kelly (1967) and others (Caffrey, 1955; Lundsteen, 1966; Weaver, 1972) pointed out the limitations of this approach and laid the groundwork for conceptualizing listening as a set of complex skills and abilities.

The set of skills and abilities that should be included in a definition of listening was debated furiously in the listening literature over the course of three decades (1970s–1990s). Some work was grounded in one or more theoretical perspectives, largely borrowed from cognitive psychology. The work of Bostrom and colleagues, for instance, stressed the role of memory, and several others proposed models grounded in human information processing approaches (Fitch-Hauser, 1990; Goss, 1982). During this time, models of listening proliferated with most stressing the internal, working apparatus thought to be necessary to process spoken language (see Chapter 4). A common theme in these approaches was the effort to streamline listening scholarship toward the construction of a single, unified definition upon which all could agree; the ultimate goal was to develop universal tests of competence. Emblematic of this view are the words used by Barker, Barker, and Fitch-Hauser (1987): “in order to develop a theory [of listening] we must first agree upon a definition” (p. 15).

Searching for the one, all-encompassing definition of listening, while admired by some, is ultimately rather like putting the proverbial cart before the horse. Instead of theories following definitions, definitions follow theory. Moreover, and in line with our view that listening is a multidisciplinary endeavor, given there are myriad theoretical frameworks appropriate for the study of listening, there too should be myriad definitions that help shape the field (Bodie, 2010, 2012). When viewed as a theoretical term, listening derives its meaning from the surrounding theoretical structure. And because different theoretical structures propose different terms and processes, *definitions*—instead of a single definition—are the goal. When various meanings of listening are allowed, each of which depends “on the practical purpose pursued by an individual or team of scholars” (Bodie, 2012, p. 114), our goal as listening scholars moves away from the pursuit of definitional consensus and toward exploring the many complexities of the listening process.

### Revisiting “The” Definition of Listening

We began this chapter by asserting that listening is a multidisciplinary field. Indeed, the term itself is much broader than past work suggests, and our review above illustrates at least three facets of the term that can guide both empirical work and theory-building efforts. Definitions by their very nature tell us what something is, and, by extension, what it is not. Early disagreement over how to correctly define listening reflects the history of the field, including debate surrounding what exactly constitutes listening, the differing philosophies in how it should be defined, and differing views on whether a single definition helps or hurts the field.

Conceptual definitions of a communication, psychological, or related construct serve two important purposes: (1) they describe internal processes and external behaviors that compose the construct, and (2) they delineate its relations with other variables. Unfortunately, many of the definitions provided in Table 1.1 lack the scientific rigor that should undergird a conceptual definition. Conceptual definitions should be grounded in theoretical frameworks and revised over time. The fact is that while the field of listening is over a half century old, much of what contributes to the listening process is not well understood. Such misunderstanding is exacerbated when we also consider differences between scholarly and lay definitions of the construct.

When the average individual refers to listening, they are referencing a state of interpersonal connection with and presence of others (Purdy, 2006). These implicit theories of listening are an important part of the cognitive and affective components of listening and may well determine how people judge others who enact particular behaviors (Bodie, et al., 2010; Bodie, Pence, Rold, et al., 2015). Conversely, when scholars have defined listening, they have tended to focus on the cognitive processes responsible for understanding, comprehending, evaluating, and responding to spoken messages. To ask which of these views is correct is like asking which of the various definitions of any term proposed in a dictionary is correct. Definitions are functional, not right or wrong, but more or less useful for some particular purpose.

Thus, we end this section by *not* providing you with *the* definition of listening. We are not convinced that a single definition of listening is practical or even desirable. While listening research has seen a resurgence in recent years, our understanding of key aspects of listening processes is woefully lacking. Instead, we suggest that researchers focus greater attention on first determining the key features of specific listening processes and/or behaviors of interest to their particular research project. We believe that the investigator's research goal(s) should be the guiding principle when choosing how listening and related concepts should be conceptualized and subsequently operationalized.

By not providing you with our definition of listening, we are encouraging you to explore the myriad theoretical frameworks appropriate for the study of listening. Bodie (2012) outlined several such frameworks drawn from the work of interpersonal communication scholars. Several measures profiled in this volume stem from one or more of these frameworks. For instance, Affection Exchange Theory views listening as an important way to communicate affection in close relationships (Floyd, 2014; see Affectionate Communication Index and Affectional Communication Scale profiles). When we are "listened to" and feel understood and valued, our interpersonal needs are being fulfilled. Such a definition of listening is similar in many ways to the one drawn from Interpersonal Adaptation Theory – that is, a behavior that signals involvement and engagement with a person or topic (Jones, 2011), often measured with one or more scales that assess nonverbal immediacy (see profile). Other theories propose definitions that have more to do with how listeners work through understanding messages rather than how they show understanding or communicate intimacy (e.g., Constructivism,

Burleson, 2011; Relational Framing Theory, Dillard, Solomon, & Palmer, 1999). These differences are not problematic as suggested by the “definition first” camp; they simply illustrate the multidimensional nature of the concept.

### Using this Book

This sourcebook was initially conceived as a means of aiding students and scholars in identifying areas of listening study and engaging in the best research practices. We also wanted to provide convenient access to a variety of listening and listening-related measures. Toward these goals, the first half of the book focuses on methodology and measurement issues. Chapter 2, primarily relevant for studies that utilize numerical data to make principled arguments, provides an introduction to measurement issues including scale development and assessing standardized scales for reliability and validity. Chapter 3 focuses on so-called qualitative methods appropriate for listening research with an emphasis on ethnographic methods. The remaining chapters outline the various ways in which scholars have operationalized the cognitive processes underlying listening (Chapter 4), have measured affective components (Chapter 5), and have assessed behavioral enactments of listening (Chapter 6)

The second half of the sourcebook offers 65 measurement profiles, tools for assessing the cognitive, affective, and behavioral facets of listening. Profiles utilize a standardized format and were selected from measures previously used in listening research as well as related measures that have implications for listening. Many of these profiles stem from a particular theoretical framework, and when conceptualizing this book we took seriously the need to expand listening scholarship beyond the standard cognitive model. All measures, if used appropriately, can add to our knowledge regarding the importance and ubiquity of one of the most consequential of life’s skills.

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