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Who Are We as We Listen? Individual Listening Profiles in Varying Contexts

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Abstract

Using the Barker & Watson Listening Styles Profile (2000), this study investigates the adaptability of individual listening profiles to varying listening contexts (study, family, friends, work) and listening goals. A sample of 50 students completed the Listening Styles Profile for three different situations of their choice. Stability and variability of the profiles were explored. Results suggest considerable intraindividual variability in listening orientation. This may have ramifications both for further research and for listening training, since aspects of the situation and the setting need to be taken into account more systematically.

Stability and Variability in Listening Behavior

Listening has always been discussed as a sequence of perceiving and processing activities which can occur in different varieties. Changes in the character of listening have been associated with the very purpose for listening (Wolvin & Coakley, 1996), with the type of interaction possible or required in a listening situation (Rost, 1990), but also with personal dispositions (Sargent, Fitch-Hauser, & Weaver, 1997; Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 1996), gender in particular (Johnston, Weaver, Watson & Barker, 2000; Purdy & Newman, 1999; Sargent & Weaver, 2003; Tannen, 1990), and cultural context (Hall, 1970; Kiewitz, Weaver, Brosius, & Weimann, 1997). Research along these lines suggests that there are trait-like individual patterns of listening styles, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, that there is also considerable variability in the patterns of listening behavior.

Watson, Barker, and Weaver (1995; see also Watson & Barker, 2000) have designed an instrument to measure this variability. Their Listening Styles Profile (LSP) is a paper-pencil-inventory that contains four descriptive scales to characterize differing listening styles. Listening style is defined as a set of "attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the how, where, when, who, and what of the information reception and encoding process" (Watson et al., 1995, p. 2). Four dimensions of listening styles have emerged from the research:

People-oriented listening style: The concern for other people, their emotions and interests is most emphasized. A listener who

endorses a people oriented listening style tries to find common areas of interest with the other.

Action-oriented listening style: This type of listener is characterized by an interest in straight, concise, error-free and well-organized presentations.

Content-oriented listening style: This reflects an interest in intellectual challenge and in complex information. Listeners who endorse this listening style attend to details and withhold judgement.

Time-oriented listening style: This listening style is characterized by the strife for time-efficient communication. A time oriented listener would let his partner know how much time there is for an interaction and would see to it that the interaction is concise and to the point.

Watson and Barker (2000) point out that each listening style has its strengths and weaknesses, so that in general, one would not just recommend adopting one particular listening orientation. Neither would the different orientations be mutually exclusive. According to research done with this instrument, it can be assumed that about 40 % of all listeners have one strong preference to which they resort especially when under pressure and in situations in which they feel unsure, another 40 % would indicate multiple preferences, and 20 % would be lacking a specific preference altogether; this is interpreted as listening avoidance due to introversion or listening burnout.

The Listening Styles Profile has been established as a valid and prolific instrument in listening research since it has been used in a number of studies investigating individual differences in listening behavior, e.g., listening style and the need for cognition (McCord, 2004; Worthington, 2003, 2004) or listening style and communication apprehension (Bodie & Villaume, 2003).

Efficiency in communication increases as a person understands the varying patterns of listening behavior, both in him- or herself and in the communication partner. It would, therefore, be worthwhile to know how to identify one's own and the other person's listening style and how to react to the respective styles in a way that facilitates the ongoing interaction. The problem is, however, that individual listening styles are very probably not really trait characteristics. Watson and Barker (2000) suggest that individual listening profiles ought to be assessed for a variety of situations and communication partners in order to account for the respective demand characteristics and the communication patterns of the

pertaining interactions. This aspect, however, has rarely been addressed empirically. Typically, investigations using the Listening Styles Profile Inventory were administered with no specific definition of a situation within which participants were supposed to anchor their responses. An investigation was designed to tap into listening profiles as they vary across different situations. Specifically, the following research questions were to be addressed:

1. What are the listening preferences within different situations?
2. How do the listening profiles vary within individuals across situations?

Method

Participants and Procedure

A total of 50 (16 males and 34 females) students in a German university participated in the study. All students were enrolled either in teacher training or in general education. Each participant received a three-page questionnaire with a German translation of the Listening Styles Profile in the 20-item version published by Watson and Barker (2000). Participants were instructed to complete the questionnaire three times, each time with a distinct situation in mind. Participants were free to select from four different communication contexts, including their family, instructional settings, communication with friends, and professional communication. The questionnaires were handed out in class and were to be returned anonymously a week later. This exercise was not related to grading in the course.

The questionnaire contains five items to represent each of the four dimensions of the listening profile which had been extracted based on factor analytical work (Watson et al., 1995). The answer format was presented on a five-point scale ranging from always (= 5) through often, sometimes, rarely, never (= 1). On a cover page, participants were asked to indicate the specific situation they were having in mind when completing the questionnaire, what their main purpose in listening was, how much two-way interaction there was in the situation, and gender of speaker and listener.

The 20 rating items were subjected to quantitative analysis as suggested by the authors of the Listening Profile (Watson et al., 1995): First, separate scores were calculated for the four dimensions of listening orientation by summing up the scores of the pertaining items. Second, tertiles of the raw score distributions were determined in order to have a representation of the relative weight associated with the scales within each profile. A clear preference was determined by a score in the top tertile in any one of the four dimensions.

Results

Scale characteristics

The first step for the analysis of the questionnaire data was to check for scale reliabilities. As it turns out, alpha values for internal consistency are quite satisfactory for three out of the four scales. Especially considering the sample size and the small number of items per scale makes the values that were returned quite acceptable for the subscales of people-orientation ($\alpha = .70$), action orientation ($\alpha = .47$), and time orientation ($\alpha = .61$). The reliability for the content-orientation, however, is not satisfactory ($\alpha = .20$) and requires revision.

What are the listening preferences within different situations?

The first research question aimed at the description of listening preferences within the selected situations. The pertaining analyses were performed for those two situations which had been selected most often and therefore contained the highest frequencies, namely the instructional setting ($n = 46$) and friends ($n = 45$). As can be seen in table 1, the scores in each dimension of listening orientation show that the listeners seem to accommodate for the nature of the situation in their listening preferences, since people orientation is, in absolute value, more prominent in the context of friends than in instruction (see table 1).

Table 1

Means and standard deviation for the different orientations in listening preferences across situations (Instructions and Friends)

Orientation	Situation Instruction ($n = 46$)		Situation Friends ($n = 45$)	
	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
<i>People orientation</i>	14.02	3.65	19.40	3.09
<i>Action orientation</i>	14.87	2.64	13.44	3.12
<i>Content orientation</i>	17.91	2.50	17.07	2.09
<i>Time orientation</i>	11.87	3.05	14.13	3.31

The profiles vary significantly across situations. To illustrate this, it was checked how many profiles contained a score in the top tertile in each of the situations. People orientation was significantly more pronounced in the friends context (Chi-square (2, $N = 91$) = 38.79, $p < .001$), as was time orientation (Chi-square (2, $N = 91$) = 13.02, $p < .001$), whereas action orientation was more strongly endorsed in the instruction context (Chi-square (2, $N = 91$) = 8.32, $p < .01$). Content orientation seemed to be rather similar in both contexts. This may or may not be a stable finding due to the low reliability of the scale.

The number of individual profiles with a distinct orientation or with

multiple orientations can also be used to compare the listening profiles across situations. For this analysis, it was counted how many profiles had one or more scores in the top tertile or none at all. The breakdown of the count came down as shown in table 2. The distribution represents a higher number of profiles without a distinctive orientation in the instruction context. If this is correctly interpreted as listening avoidance, as suggested by the authors of the inventory, this finding would certainly need to raise some questions about what is going on in the respective instructional settings.

Table 2

Breakdown of listening profiles with a single orientation, with multiple orientations or no specific orientation in the contexts of instruction and friends

	<i>single orientation</i>	<i>multiple orientations</i>	<i>no specific orientation</i>	<i>total</i>
<i>instruction</i>	21	10	15	46
<i>friends</i>	19	20	6	45

As previous research suggests a gender bias in the listening preferences, it was of interest if this finding could be replicated here. As it turned out, the current set of data yielded no such trend. Neither the gender of the listener nor the gender of the person one listens to had a significant impact on the listening preferences that were expressed in each situation.

How do listening profiles vary within individuals across situations?

The second research question focused on the intraindividual shift of listening preferences in different situations. For this analysis, the scores of each participant were compared across the three situations that everybody had selected. The emphasis of this analysis was placed on the intraindividual differences, no matter what the actual contexts were. The data of one participant had to be eliminated from further processing, because this person had only selected two different situations. A total of 147 profiles, 3 from each of the 49 participants were considered. The raw scores for each dimension were subjected to analyses of variance for repeated measures. The results suggest that people orientation and action orientation are the two dimension on which the most significant changes are to be found (people orientation: $F(2, 46) = 13.40, p < .001$; action orientation: $F(2, 46) = 4.19, p < .05$). Neither time orientation nor content orientation seem to be susceptible to shifts across different situations beyond chance variation.

In order to describe the relative shifts in listening orientation that had

occurred, the scores for the different situations were paired and it was checked on how the two scores compared. Table 3 displays the results and brings together the number and nature of intraindividual shifts in listening orientation for the four styles across the situations. Data entries in the cells above the diagonal indicate the number of cases in which the respective orientation is weaker in the situation defined by the row than in the situation defined by the column, whereas data entries in the cells below the diagonal indicate the number of cases in which the respective orientation is more strongly endorsed in the situation listed in the row than in the situation listed in the corresponding column.

Table 3

Number and nature of intraindividual shifts in listening orientation across different situations

	Professional	Instruction	Family	Friends
People orientation				
Professional	...	1 (17)	15 (8)	8 (12)
Instruction	13 (17) ^{2,3}	...	17 (21)	24 (28)
Family	0 (8)	2 (21)	...	4 (17)
Friends	0 (12)	2 (28)	6 (17)	...
Action orientation				
Professional	...	7 (17)	3 (8)	3 (12)
Instruction	4 (17)	...	8 (21)	5 (28)
Family	3 (8)	9 (21)	...	1 (17)
Friends	4 (12)	16 (28)	8 (17)	...
Content orientation				
Professional	...	7 (17)	4 (8)	4 (12)
Instruction	8 (17)	...	8 (21)	10 (28)
Family	4 (8)	9 (21)	...	8 (17)
Friends	4 (12)	11 (28)	4 (17)	...
Time-orientation				
Professional	...	4 (17)	2 (8)	3 (12)
Instruction	8 (17)	...	12 (21)	9 (28)
Family	2 (8)	6 (21)	...	3 (17)
Friends	6 (12)	6 (28)	8 (17)	...

1 Cells above the diagonal: Number of cases in which the respective dimension is less strongly endorsed in the situation defined by the column than in the situation defined by the row.

2 Cells below the diagonal: Number of cases in which the respective dimension is more strongly endorsed in the situation defined by the column than in the situation defined by the row.

3 Numbers in brackets provide the total amount of pairs for each combination.

Overall, at least two thirds of all scores differed across situations. People orientation shifted in 80 % of all cases, action orientation in 69 %, content orientation in 78 % and time orientation in 67 %. As these percentages are significantly above chance, this represents quite a substantial amount of intraindividual flexibility in listening orientations. This can be taken to reflect a high situative adaptability of individual

profiles.

Inspection of the individual profiles across situations reveals that hardly anyone had maintained the specificity of their listening orientations, as the scores of most individuals fell into different tertiles as different situations were encountered. In fact, not a single individual had the same profile across the three situations that he or she had selected. A total of three participants maintained the level of people orientation in all contexts, no more than eight endorsed action orientation to the same degree across the board, nine had a stable relative content orientation, and 11 maintained the emphasis on time orientation in their listening profiles.

For the analysis of the data across situations, the tertile distributions can also be used to characterize the profiles. There were 29 or 19.7 % profiles that did not endorse a specific orientation, 58 (39.4 %) profiles showed a single preference, and 60 (40.8 %) profiles had multiple preferences. These results reflect quite accurately the observations made by Watson and Barker (2000) about the distribution of listening style preferences. There was only one individual who did not score in the upper tertile in any one of the measures in the three situations that he had selected.

As to gender differences, again no significant statistical differences could be detected, neither of the gender of the listener nor for the gender of the speaker. As it turned out, the other variables, namely listening objective and kind of interaction, were not at all informative, due to too low variance within the selected situations, so, e.g., most listening situations within the context of friends were interactive, and listening goals were very much just as uniform. It would take an alternative research design to tap into these variables more efficiently.

Discussion and Interpretation

The current study was designed to look at individual listening profiles in different situations and the subjective theories behind the listening behavior. Results from a quantitative analysis of data collected with the LSP suggest that especially the dimension of people orientation and action orientation are susceptible to situational adjustments.

As the results are to be interpreted and discussed, several issues need to be addressed. First of all, the problem with the original questionnaire needs to be tackled and, obviously, the translation of the instrument needs to be reviewed to increase reliability for all scales.

Second, it is notable that the current study does not replicate the gender differences. Traditionally, it was found that males and females prefer different listening styles. Sargent, Fitch-Hauser, and Weaver (1997)

found that males endorse action, content, and time oriented listening more strongly than females who prefer a people oriented listening style (cf. also Johnston, Weaver, Watson, & Barker, 2000). Since significant shifts in listening behavior occurred from people to action orientation depending on the nature of a listening situation, one may wonder if the differences found in earlier studies might rather be due to the different situations that females and males had in mind as they filled out the questionnaires than due to genuine gender specific behavior. This is at least one possibility to account for the lack of a gender difference here. This might, however, also be attributed to the fact that all participants in this study were enrolled in education which may entail that they share a concern for people and that females and males have more in common in this particular group than they otherwise would. This interpretation can be supported by findings which show that listening styles may be determined by personality just as much as by biology (cf. Johnston, Weaver, Watson & Barker, 2000). Whatever the answer will be to the problem, this pattern of results suggests that gender issues be more carefully investigated and that some more fine-grained distinctions ought to be used in the research designs. If gender plays a role in listening, its role is mitigated by listening goals and contexts, especially the nature of the listener-speaker interaction.

The general interpretation of the data is quite plain: It needs to be recognized that individuals tend to adjust swiftly to the perceived characteristics of a situation. Communicative behavior is not pervasively uniform across situations. These findings are in line with other work which found that in particular those communication patterns which are pertaining to social adaptability are rather flexible and that interindividual differences in this area are both distinct and reflect the individual's social learning experience (Beatty, Marshall, & Rudd, 2001).

From these considerations, there are consequences to be drawn both for listening training and for further research. For listening training it might be a good point of departure to make listeners aware of their (varying) orientations, of the different choices they make across situations and to encourage them to critically assess the adequacy of their listening behavior. Listening training might include to challenge people to change listening orientations, to go beyond the obvious and to think about possible gains if they monitored their listening orientations in a better way: Why not take a lecture in an instructional setting with a personal orientation? Why not check for time orientation in a family meeting? It might also be helpful to explore the implicit rules according to which an individual's listening behavior functions. To uncover dysfunctional attitudes which limit a broader perception might be the first important step for a listening skills training.

The implications for further research would certainly be that listening style research needs to be more strongly embedded into specific situations. Since listening styles vary quite considerably across contexts, one can never be sure how to interpret data if they have been collected with a general instruction instead of a specific one. The present research would also underline the importance of the study of subjective theories on listening. It is safe to assume that listening behavior is influenced by individual beliefs and attitudes and that these have not yet been sufficiently explored.

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