Anthropological Listening as a Genre

Society for Linguistic Anthropology

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Linguistic anthropologists are accustomed to exploring the way speakers create structures of relevance that provide directionality to social activity. Could we also say the same for listeners? Listening has the potential to generate a specific context by listening “in a particular way,” for example, when a mechanic is deciphering the semantic meaning of the sounds of a broken car, when a psychoanalyst is listening emphatically to an analysand, or when a doctor is translating the sounds emitted from my body through auscultation. Just by turning the ear in a particular framework—what I call a genre of listening—the individual is transforming a particular social space where identities and social positionings get created.

I define a listening genre as a framework of relevance that surfaces at the moment of reception and orients the apprehension of sound. Sound reception is not neutral; it always involves a particular type of ideological and practical intervention, and it is never automatic. The listener, by focusing through a particular frame, creates a context, or more precisely a contextual configuration of reception that provides a unique interpretative lens by which sound becomes meaningful (Marsilli-Vargas 2014). Listening genres direct the listener's further conceptualization of a symbolic sound by establishing a hierarchical relationship between the sound reception and the frame, such that certain auditory signs come to have more significance than others. This movement is two-fold: listening creates contexts and at the same time is shaped by context (Goodwin & Duranti 1992).

I was struck by the importance of paying attention to listening practices after I conducted fieldwork in Buenos Aires, Argentina, among psychoanalysts, psychiatrists, psychologists, and their patients. I was interested in understanding why psychoanalysis was so prevalent in Buenos Aires. As a linguistic anthropologist, I became frustrated when I was repeatedly reminded about the private contract between analyst and analysand. Recording analytic sessions was out of the question, so my anxiety grew: “How am I going to get data?” After two years of getting different kinds of “data”—including recording multi-family psychoanalytic sessions, TV shows replicating analytic situations, graduate and undergraduate courses in psychoanalysis and psychology, among other sites—I began an arduous transcription process with no apparent direction. It was not until months after listening to my recordings over and over that I encountered the following statement by a young psychoanalyst working at a public mental health hospital: “When I listen as an analyst, I become an analyst.” She was explaining that even though she was in a space with no privacy, no couch, and no payment involved, she was able to perform psychoanalysis by listening in a particular way. The suggestion was that particular forms of listening can be intentionally deployed in specific situations. A trained psychoanalyst can become an analyst under conditions that differ greatly from the classic psychoanalytic setting, as far as there is room for a cumulative listening—the sedimenting of auditory signs over time—which provides the basis for transference and interpretation. The analyst’s statement opened the door to a new approach that turned my focus away from the performativity of speech. Instead, it became clear that it was through a psychoanalytic listening genre that new forms of knowledge were produced and social relations were transformed.

As anthropologists we are always listening to our informants through an anthropological ear or, I would argue, an anthropological genre of listening. Some informants do not know that they are informants, but “we” (anthropologists) know because we are listening as such. Our listening positions individuals—and ourselves—as occupying a particular social space. Sometimes we listen with a purpose, focusing on what we know is relevant for our research. But other times, we engage with our informants (and the “data” obtained) by listening through a sort of “free floating attention” mindset until the “data” finally speaks to us (as was my case). When we suspend attention, a process of accumulation of sounds, stories, interviews, and conversations begins. The sounds (and words) that were produced at different moments during our ethnographic exploration will at some point fit within, or transform, our developing conceptual framework, through the resonance that this auditory accumulation has created in ourselves. Anthropology as a listening genre shares this trait with psychoanalytic listening, and perhaps with other forms of listening too: a particular listening temporality, a non-linear process of aural accumulation in which the link between a sound and a meaning gets produced in an undetermined point in time. This means that the temporal dimension of assigning meaning to the accumulation of sounds is unique to each study case. Psychoanalytic listening and anthropological listening as genres share the fact that sounds surpass the here-and-now of sound production.

How can we get “data” from listening practices? Speech and non-verbal signs have the advantage that they can be recorded and filmed. We cannot record listening practices (some can be inferred, such as through next-turn conversational utterances, but not those that involve accumulative listening). A point of departure is to focus on how subjects talk about listening. In psychoanalysis, there are countless examples of reflexivity about listening. Psychoanalysts are acutely aware of their own ways of listening and speaking, and these forms of expertise travel outside the clinical setting. For example, the addressivity form “what you really mean is,” followed by a colloquial psychoanalytic interpretation, so frequent in casual conversations, replicates the psychoanalytic listening outside the clinic.
Another approach to listening practices is to analyze how they shape and direct behavior by examining bodily expressions, such as gestures, corporal dispositions, and physical emotions, that come into being at the moment of reception of sound (see Hirschkind 2006). And we can also be mindful of our own and our informants’ listening practices while in the field. These are just some possible ways to approach listening practices—and there are many others disciplines that have taken seriously listening and sounds as a site of inquiry, such as ethnomusicology, sound studies, acoustemology, and the social history of listening—that we can learn from.

In anthropology, listening is one of many interactional tools that we use in order to give meaning to social phenomena. But it is an important one. If, as linguistic anthropologists, we begin to focus on how social actors listen, our research will benefit greatly. The auditory field is saturated with preconceptions, ideas, and epistemologies that are as important as speech in creating contexts, identities, and social interactions. By paying close attention to the constitution of listening genres, we can begin to understand how listening practices direct behavior and create social relationships.

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