The Relationship Between Listening Styles and Conversational Sensitivity

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This study examines the relationship between the listening styles people tend to employ habitually and related levels of conversational sensitivity. Conversational sensitivity deals with the extent to which people enjoy listening in social interaction, can identify hidden meaning in conversations, and generally are highly aware of implicit messages that may be gained from conversations. One way in which conversational sensitivity might be apparent is in the listening styles which people rely on habitually. Conversationally sensitive receivers may favor one or two listening styles over others. The results indicate a positive relationship between the People listening style and conversational sensitivity, as well as weaker positive relationships between the Content and Action styles and sensitivity. Conversationally sensitive people are most likely to employ the People listening style. The results illustrate the conversational advantages of employing a People listening style.

Most people have encountered different types of listeners. Some people seem quite responsive and notice even the slightest of our nonverbal cues. Others carefully scrutinize and analyze our messages. Some people can't wait until we just get to the point. Others look at their watches with the hope that we will recognize that they would rather be somewhere else. The way in which our interaction partners listen is important to us when we are the

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ones doing the talking. We want them to pay attention, and to be aware of our nonverbal cues. However, everyone has been in situations in which their interaction partner was a poor listener. The effectiveness of an individual's listening is likely to influence the extent to which that person is an aware and responsive conversation partner. The failure of someone to listen effectively in conversation can translate into communication problems among acquaintances, friends, family members, and romantic partners.

The present study examines some of these aspects of the conversation process by investigating the relationship between listening styles (Watson, Barker, & Weaver III, 1995) and conversational sensitivity (Daly, Vangelisti, & Daughton, 1987). The way in which we tend to decode messages is likely related to the extent to which we are effective at participating in conversations, in terms of being sensitive to hidden meanings and nonverbal cues, and remembering the conversations. Some people devote more effort to this process and gain more enjoyment from their conversational activity. Others view it as a necessary burden and devote as little time and energy to the process as possible. The approach that receivers use is likely to have implications in terms of the extent to which they are sensitive conversation partners. The present study investigates this relationship in order to provide a greater understanding of the different approaches that individuals may use as receivers and the conversational implications of choosing one approach over the others.

Listening Styles

Although people do respond differently to different situations, research has suggested that people are likely to employ a single predominant listening style when communicating with others. Shiffin and Schneider (1977) indicate that most people listen as a function of habit and tend to rely on a single listening style. Furthermore, most listeners are hesitant to switch from this style (Langer, 1980), even when they would be better-suited by a different style at times. Recognizing this tendency to listen with a habitual style, Watson et al. (1995) developed the Listening Styles Profile (LSP) in order to assess an individual's preferred approach to listening. Listening preferences were conceptualized as attitudes, beliefs, and predispositions about the "how, where, when, who, and what of information reception and encoding" (Weaver III, Watson, & Barker, 1996, p. 382).

Watson et al. (1995) identified four listening styles: People-oriented, Action-oriented, Content-oriented, and Time-oriented. Those who employ the People style tend to listen with a concern or awareness for others' feelings and emotions. People style listeners are likely to seek and recognize areas of common interest with others. People listeners also are likely to be responsive to others. The people style is positively related to sympathetic responsiveness as well as other indicators of empathy (Weaver III & Kirtley, 1995). Action listeners prefer concise, efficient, and error-free messages. They are likely to be impatient with speakers who are disorganized or those who ramble on and fail to get "to the point" when speaking. Content listeners enjoy receiving complex or challenging information. They carefully evaluate incoming information before judging it or forming opinions. Time listeners prefer their interactions to be brief. They are likely to indicate their time constraints to others in order to manage the amount of time they have to devote to their interactions. The listening styles which individuals tend to employ are likely to be related to the extent to which those individuals are sensitive conversation partners.

Conversational Sensitivity

Daly et al. (1987) introduced the concept of conversational sensitivity in order to identify the elements that characterize those who are attentive and responsive conversation partners. Sensitive partners have been described as "savvy" about social interaction (Daly et al., 1987, p. 167). Furthermore, they understand implied meanings such as power relationships. They are likely to find conversations memorable and enjoyable. Those less sensitive in conversations are more likely to take conversations at face value, and therefore are unlikely to gain much of the meaning that is implicit in conversation. For example, they would be less likely to attend to nonverbal cues for additional meaning, such as the emotions of their interaction partner.

Research has identified several aspects of personality which are related to conversational sensitivity. Specifically, conversational sensitivity is positively related to self-monitoring, private self-consciousness, self-esteem, assertiveness, empathy, and social skills (Daly et al., 1987). It has a negative relationship with communication apprehension, social anxiety, and receiver apprehension (Daly et al., 1987). It is positively related to cognitive differentiation (Stacks & Murphy, 1993), and the interpersonal communication motives (Rubin, Perse, and Barbato, 1988) of pleasure-affection and relaxation (Hosman, 1991). This supports the reasoning by Daly et al. (1987) that conversationally sensitive people enjoy conversations and additionally indicates that they use conversation to relax.

As the reviews of listening styles and conversational sensitivity indicate, people approach the processes of listening and conversation with different motives and orientations. This study examines the relationship between the tendency to listen in a particular way and the extent to which one is a conversationally sensitive interaction partner. Previous research (Weaver III & Kirtley, 1995) identified a positive relationship between the people listening style and empathy. Given the positive relationship between empathy and conversational sensitivity, it would follow that a positive relationship exists between the People listening style and conversational sensitivity. Because it deals with the tendency to closely scrutinize messages, the Content listening style may be positively related to conversational sensitivity. However, it also might be unrelated or negatively related. Given the nature of the Action and Time listening styles, they probably are negatively related to conversational sensitivity.

H1: A positive relationship exists between the People listening style and conversational sensitivity.

RQ: What is the relationship between the Content listening style and conversational sensitivity?

H2: A negative relationship exists between the Action listening style and conversational sensitivity.

H3: A negative relationship exists between the Time listening style and conversational sensitivity.

METHOD

Students (N = 239, women = 51%) were asked to participate in a study involving the listening process. The students participating in this study were enrolled in introductory communication courses. This sample was used because the students in these courses come from all departments in the college/university. Participation was voluntary and students did receive extra credit for their participation. The questionnaire consisted of measures of listening styles and conversational sensitivity.

Instruments

Listening styles were measured with the Listening Styles Profile (LSP-16) (Watson et al., 1995). This questionnaire contains sixteen 5-point Likert-type items. Respondents were asked to indicate the extent to which each of the sixteen statements applied to their listening behavior (4 = always, 0 = never). The items in this scale cluster to form measures of each listening style. As opposed to scales that examine personality styles, the LSP-16 asks respondents to report on aspects of their *behavior* when they are in listening situations. For example, it asks respondents to report on the extent to which: "I focus my attention on the other person's feelings when listening to them," "I jump ahead and/or finish thoughts of speakers," and "I ask questions to probe for additional information." Thus, the results generated from this instrument are indicative of differences in listening behavior rather than only differences in personality. Although listening styles may be related to certain personality styles, they extend beyond that orientation in that they reflect differences with respect to the process of attending-to and decoding communicative messages.

Previous research has demonstrated the following alpha reliabilities for each style: People, .61; Action, .64; Content, .58; and Time, 65 (Watson, et al., 1995); People, .60; Action, .62; Content, .64; and Time, .66 (Sargent, Fitch-Hauser, & Weaver III, 1997). The alpha reliabilities for this study are as follows: People, .61; Action, .61; Time, .66; and Content, .54. Small significant ($p < .0001$) correlations have been identified between Action and Time styles ($r = .37$), and weaker correlations ($p < .05$) have emerged between the People and Action ($r = -.10$), People and Content ($r = .16$), People and Time ($r = -.16$), Action and Content ($r = .13$), and Content and Time ($r = .13$) styles (Sargent et al., 1997). Similar correlations emerged in this study: People and Action ($r = -.15, p < .05$), People and Time ($r = -.16, p < .05$), Action and Time ($r = .27, p < .001$), Content and Action ($r = .17, p < .01$), and Content and Time ($r = .17, p < .001$). With the exception of the content listening style, the LSP's performance for this study was comparable to its results in other studies. However, its weaknesses are recognized when interpreting the results.

Conversational sensitivity was measured using the instrument developed by Daly et al. (1987), which consists of items related to several factors of conversational sensitivity, including meaning detection, conversational memory, conversational alternatives, conversational imagination, conversation enjoyment, interpretation, and perceiving affinity. The measure was employed as a general global measure to assess overall conversational sensitivity. Participants respond on five-step scales. When used as a global indicator of conversational sensitivity, this instrument consistently has an alpha reliability of .80 or greater (.85 in this study).

RESULTS

Pearson correlations were computed to test the hypotheses and research question. Because some correlations exist between the individual listening styles, partial correlations were used to analyze the relationship between conversational sensitivity and each listening style while controlling for the other three styles. A significance level of .05 was set for the analyses.

Hypothesis one predicted a positive relationship between the People listening style and conversational sensitivity. The Pearson correlation between the People style and conversational sensitivity indicates a moderate positive relationship ($r = .43, p < .0001$). A partial correlation of the same variables also indicates a positive relationship ($r = .43, p < .0001$).

These results support the first hypothesis. Those whose listening style might be characterized as the People style are more likely to be conversationally sensitive interaction partners.

The research question investigated the relationship between the Content listening style and conversational sensitivity. The Pearson correlation reveals a positive relationship ($r = .18, p < .01$), as does the partial correlation ($r = .17, p < .05$). Although this would be characterized as a weak relationship, it does indicate that those who carefully scrutinize and consider messages are somewhat likely to be conversationally sensitive.

Hypothesis two predicted a negative relationship between the Action listening style and conversational sensitivity. The Pearson correlation was not significant ($r = .06, p < .4$), while the partial correlation was significant but weak ($r = .13, p < .05$). The results fail to support the second hypothesis. At best, a weak relationship exists between the Action listening style and conversational sensitivity. Those with an Action listening style may be slightly more likely to be conversationally sensitive, but that prediction is tentative at best.

Hypothesis three predicted a negative relationship between the Time listening style and conversational sensitivity. The Pearson correlation was not significant ($r = .05, p < .1$), nor was the partial correlation ($r = -.11, p < .2$). The results fail to support the third hypothesis and indicate that no relationship exists between the Time listening style and conversational sensitivity.

DISCUSSION

This study investigated the relationship between listening styles and conversational sensitivity. The results indicate positive relationships between the People and Content listening styles and conversational sensitivity. Although both relationships were statistically significant, only the relationship involving the People style was meaningful, because the correlation involving the Content style was weak in magnitude ($r = .17$). Therefore, this discussion will focus on the relationship between the People listening style and conversational sensitivity. This finding compliments research related to both the listening style and conversational sensitivity constructs. The people listening style is related to indexes of empathy such as sympathetic responsiveness (Weaver III & Kirtley, 1995). Conversational sensitivity also is related to empathy (Daly et al., 1987). Individuals who employ the People listening style are likely to be more conversationally sensitive, which includes being more empathetic.

From a message decoding perspective, it is clear that People listeners are more likely to be aware of the emotions and feelings communicated by their interaction partner during conversations. The implications of devoting different amounts of effort to the receiving and decoding processes may have significant impact for those in a variety of relationships with others, including families, friends, romantic-partners, as well as for those communicating within organizations. Future research might explore implications of employing different listening styles in these contexts and in many others in which conversation can be important. Such research might include identifying the relative percentages of people who tend to rely on each style predominately. This information, combined with existing research on listening styles, could lead to a greater understanding of the listening process. It would be useful to know which styles we are most likely to encounter in certain situations. Future research on listening styles in various contexts could help identify the ideal listening styles for certain occupations and the consequences of employing styles other than the ideal. Regardless of the direction in which future research on listening proceeds, it is clear from this

list of possible studies that much more research on the receiving process is needed to compliment the existing bodies of research on encoding and speaking processes.

There were a number of limitations in this study. The sample, which was only tested once, consisted of a college level population, which limits findings to college students. Additionally, the performance of the LSP could have been stronger. The reliabilities for the individual styles are weak and the intercorrelations between the styles may be greater than some would prefer. Future work should examine the LSP with greater scrutiny. For example, the low reliabilities for each style may be due to the fact that there are only 4 items used to measure each style. Given this small number of items devoted to each style, there is a greater probability for error. It should be noted that this study does not examine any causal relationship between conversational sensitivity and listening styles. The direction of the relationship cannot be determined by the methodological approach used for this study.

The results of this study point to the advantages of employing a People listening style. Those who do so are more likely to be conversationally sensitive. They are more likely to gain meaning from conversations which might elude other less attentive listeners. This advantage could have positive implications in a number of relationships, both personal and professional. These findings add to the foundation upon which future research can build.

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