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Review

When listening is spoken

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Abstract

Feeling heard is critical to human flourishing—across domains, relationships are strengthened and individual well-being is enhanced when people feel listened to. High-quality conversational listening not only requires the cognitive processes of *attention* and *processing*, but also behavioral *expression* to communicate one's cognitive engagement to others. This need to behaviorally express listening introduces the possibility of deception. Listening can be expressed using non-verbal, paralinguistic, and verbal behaviors. However, recent work reveals that perceptions of conversational listening are often inaccurate—dishonest portrayals of listening often go undetected, while honest portrayals are sometimes mistaken for deception. This article will review work on listening, arguing that honest high-quality conversational listening is most effectively conveyed (and detected) using *verbal expressions of listening*, in part because these cues cannot be faked.

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“Words are, in my not-so-humble opinion, our most inexhaustible source of magic.”

— Albus Dumbledore

Feeling listened to in conversation is critical to human flourishing across domains. At work, employees who feel that their supervisor listens to them report reduced emotional exhaustion, are more committed to their jobs, and show greater internal motivation (among other benefits) [1–5]. In the healthcare domain, individuals are more satisfied with their medical care when they feel heard by their healthcare providers [6,7] and show greater medication adherence [8]. In

romantic relationships, signals of listening are associated with improved dyadic coping and overall relationship satisfaction [9–13]—even responsive strangers are better liked in get-to-know-you conversations [14]. Individual well-being is also enhanced when people feel heard—they report less anxiety [15–17], greater self-awareness [18], and reduced loneliness [19]. At the most basic level, feeling listened to activates the reward centers in the brain [20].

Clearly, good listening is critical to our social lives. However, to be good interpersonal listeners our conversation partners must both *be* and *feel* heard—one without the other falls short of high-quality listening. Emerging work reveals that perceptions of conversational listening are often inaccurate [21]—dishonest portrayals of listening are common, and often go undetected (a target is *feeling* heard without *being* heard); and, in some cases, honest portrayals of listening are dismissed (a target is *being* heard without *feeling* heard). Conversational listening presents a challenge of deception detection—how can honest listeners be credited as such, and how can dishonest listeners be discovered? In this article, I will review work on listening, arguing that to effectively convey (and detect) honest high-quality listening, people must rely on valid behavioral cues that cannot be feigned: *verbal expressions of listening*. Counterintuitively, the very best listening is spoken.

Cognitive listening: a two-stage model

Listening is often conceptualized as a two-stage process: (1) *attention*, directing one's attention to conversational content, and (2) *processing*, interpreting and evaluating conversational content cognitively. A long history of research in cognitive psychology and psycholinguistics has defined listening as a process of “selecting, organizing, and integrating information” [22]. Distinct from hearing and seeing, which are the automatic perception of sound waves and visual stimuli, listening is an intentional process that requires attentional capacity and cognitive effort as one selects which conversational content to attend to and commit to working memory for further processing [23–25]. The cognitive processes of listening facilitate information exchange and learning [26,27], and as such, are required for successful interpersonal communication [28–31]. However, this two-stage model describes cognitive processes that occur in the mind of the listener, and as such, are unobservable to others [32,33]. This *intrapersonal* model does not

consider the complex interpersonal dynamics that occur when listening is performed interpersonally, amidst conversation.

Conversational listening: a three-stage model

Conversational listening unfolds over time as two (or more) individuals take turns speaking and not speaking across several “turns” within a conversation (Figures 1–2). Conversations occur across modalities, from synchronous face-to-face conversation to asynchronous written conversation (e.g., email). Conversational content always includes verbal information (written or spoken text) and may include nonverbal and paralinguistic content as well. Thus, depending on modality, listeners must utilize their auditory and/or visual attention to monitor behavior across channels of expression—*attending to* and *processing* non-verbal, paralinguistic, and verbal content (Table 1).

The interpersonal benefits of listening relate to *perceived* listening in and across conversations [1–20]—they occur when people sense that others are listening to them. Feeling heard cannot directly follow from this two-stage cognitive model of listening, as the processes involved are imperceptible. This suggests that there must be a critical third stage of listening unique to conversation: (3) *expression*, enacting observable behaviors that convey attention and processing of antecedent conversational content (Figure 1). In this stage, a listener communicates the cognitive work they are

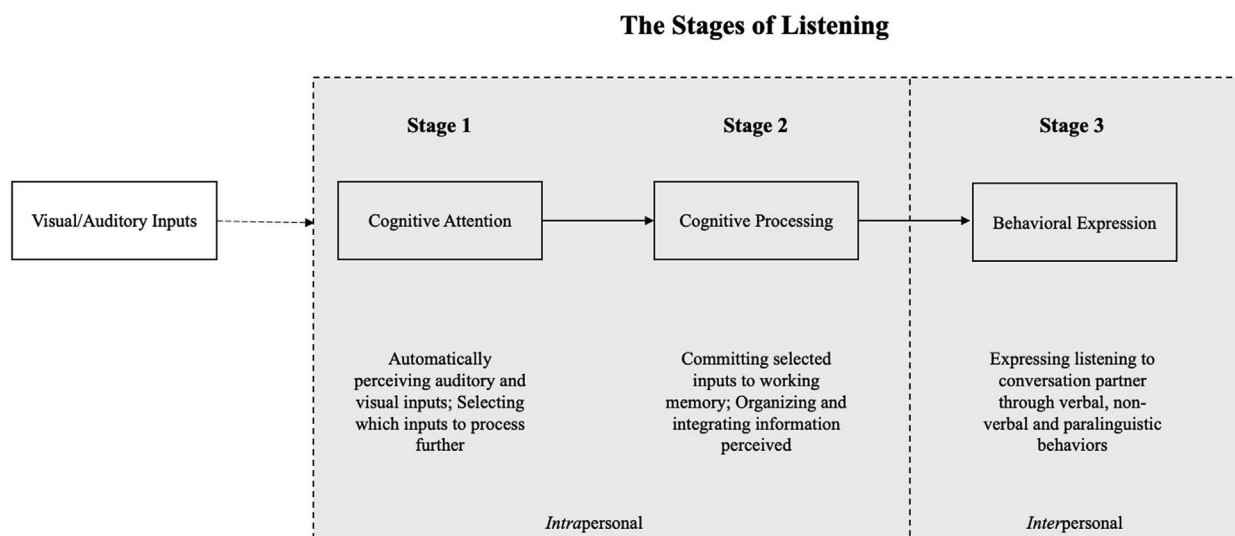
doing in order to *show* that they’re listening to their conversation partner(s) [34]. This third stage is critical to conversational listening—without it, no one will feel heard.

Listening expression: non-verbal, paralinguistic, and verbal cues

Though it is a key step in the process of conversational listening, this third stage also introduces the possibility of deception. Perceivers must infer listener’s cognitive engagement (the truth of which cannot be directly observed) from their expressed behavior (which can be misrepresented). Research suggests that the expression of listening can take many forms across the different channels of conversational content—there are nonverbal (e.g., facial expressions, body language), paralinguistic (e.g., pauses, laughter, tone of voice), and verbal (e.g., words, grammar, syntax) signals of attentiveness.

Listening can be expressed through various nonverbal cues of good listening [21,35,36], such eye contact [31,37,38], head nodding [39,40], smiling and frowning [41], and forward trunk lean or close physical distance [42]—indeed, these non-verbal behaviors are the primary focus of conversants’ lay beliefs about what good listening looks like. Additionally, there are paralinguistic cues of listening. Back-channels are short verbal utterances such as “uh-huh,” “mhmm,” and “um,” produced by one participant in a conversation while another is talking. Such utterances are extremely common in conversation—approximately 19% of utterances constitute back-

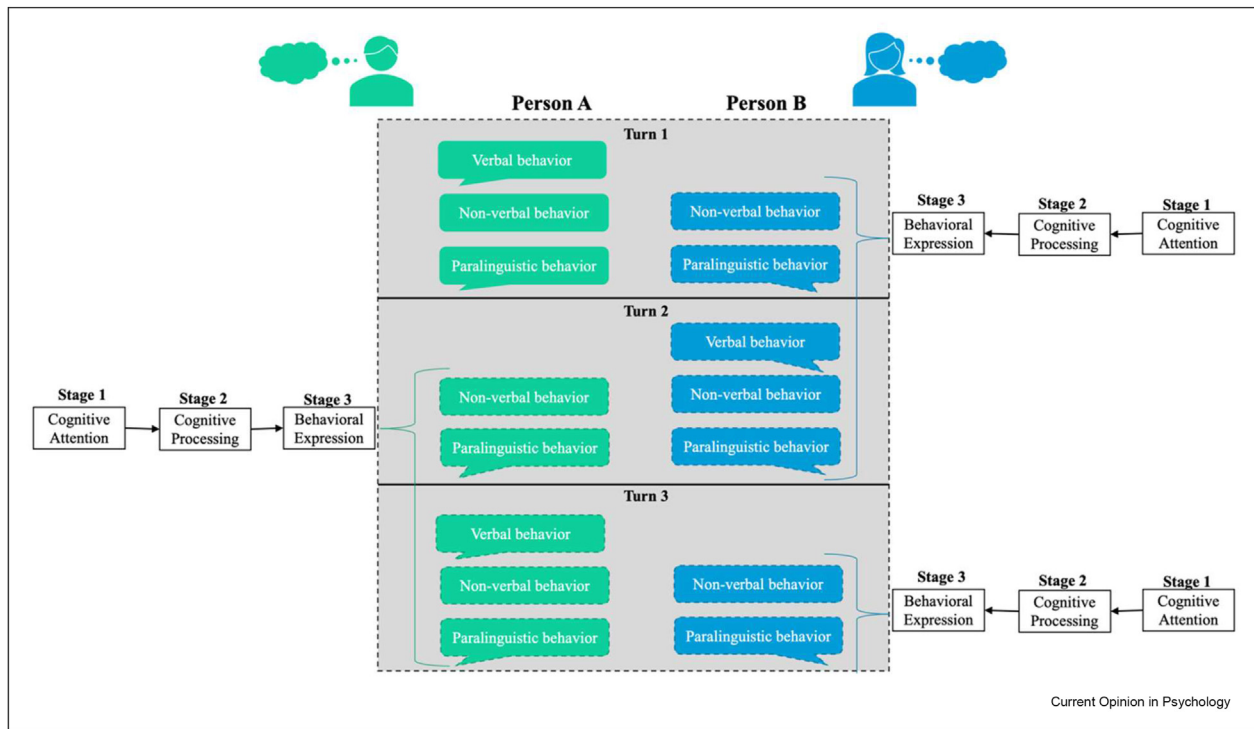
Figure 1



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Three-stage model of conversational listening.

Figure 2



Conversational listening enacted over multiple turns of a conversation.

Table 1

Examples of nonverbal, paralinguistic, and verbal cues that may (or may not) receive auditory and visual attention from listeners during conversation.

		Listener Attention	
		Auditory Attention	Visual Attention
Conversational Content	Non-verbal	non-spoken sounds (e.g., sniffing, clapping, tapping, footsteps)	body language, nodding, facial expressions, eye gaze
	Paralinguistic	voice pitch, back-channels, laughter, pauses, stutters	written response speed, capitalizations
	Verbal	spoken words	written text

channel feedback [43]—and serve to communicate attention and establish rapport [44]. Indeed, back-channels as well as vocal entrainment (i.e., the mirroring of a conversation partner’s vocal characteristics such as pitch) have been shown to communicate attention and understanding in conversation [45].

But the expression of listening does not end with non-verbal and paralinguistic behaviors—conversational listening can be expressed verbally as well [34]. This can include verbal behaviors such as paraphrasing [46–48], asking questions (especially follow-up questions) [14],

and conversational uptake behaviors—when one acknowledges, repeats, or reformulates what someone else has said, which predicts satisfaction and learning [49]. There are many verbal cues of attentiveness, such as verbal affirmations [50], requests for clarification (e.g., repair questions) [51], providing solicited advice [35,36], and calling-back to previous topics, that have yet to be empirically linked to the experience of listening.

Given the myriad cues that signal cognitive engagement in a conversation, which should people rely on to

transparently express (and detect) honest high-quality listening? After all, the informational (e.g., learning, information exchange) and interpersonal (e.g., trust, relationship satisfaction) benefits of high-quality listening require that counterparts not just *be* heard but *feel* heard.

Deceptive cues in conversational listening

Prior work has uncovered which behaviors are associated with *perceptions* of good listening [14,31,38–48], and has delineated lay beliefs about good listening by asking people to describe its cognitive (e.g., “to not judge”), affective (e.g., “to empathize”), and behavioral correlates (e.g., “to make eye contact”) [35,36]. This work reveals what people *believe* good listening looks like. Unfortunately, recent work shows that deception is common in conversational listening—listeners’ expressive cues are often misrepresented in conversation (intentionally and unintentionally), and, consequently, dishonest portrayals of listening often go undetected by conversation partners (and honest portrayals can be mistakenly dismissed) [21,52].

The internal cognitive experience and external behavioral expression of listening misalign to a staggering degree, similar to phenomena such as emotional and verbal deception [53–55]. Most conversation partners err in the direction of believing more attention and processing have occurred than is actually the case [21]. Emerging evidence suggests that this over-attribution of listening may be a two-sided problem. Similar to findings in the lie detection literature, behavioral differences between attentive and inattentive listeners in conversation are minimal, making it difficult to decipher another’s true level of cognitive engagement [21,56]. Indeed, attentive listeners neglect to display behaviors that effectively signal listening (even when they are), while inattentive listeners engage in behaviors that signal listening (even when they’re not) [21]. This work points to a critical distinction between our current understanding of the behavioral cues that inform perceptions of listening and the cues that *truthfully* represent listeners’ cognitive engagement. Though the illusion of attentive listening (i.e., dishonest expressions of listening) may be sufficient to achieve short-term relational motives, such as enjoyment or avoiding awkwardness, such deception likely impedes the pursuit of high-informational motives in conversation, such as achieving mutual understanding—especially over time, across multiple conversations [57]. Therefore, the effectiveness of high-quality conversational listening requires that listeners engage in (and perceivers look for) behavioral cues that effectively (and not deceptively) make the true cognitive effort of listening transparent. What are these cues?

Verbal cues: transparent expressions of listening

Bublitz [58] expressed concerns about deceptiveness of backchannels like “yea” and “uh huh,” noting that such simple, short utterances that occur frequently may be the perfect device for “pretending to listen.” This concern seems relevant for many non-verbal (e.g., nodding) and paralinguistic cues (e.g., laughing) as well. For example, sustained eye contact is considered by lay people to be one of the key signals of good listening [59]. However, eye contact follows established coordination patterns during conversation, wherein eye gaze is directed to whoever is speaking regardless of the content [60]. Indeed, eye contact can be used to deceptively signal listening even when one’s mind wanders far beyond the content of the conversation. Critically, many of the non-verbal and paralinguistic behaviors associated with perceptions of listening are only loosely related to the verbal content of the conversation, which allows them to be performed even in the absence of attention and processing. Therefore, the most commonly relied upon cues of “good listening” (e.g., nodding, eye contact) [21,35,36] can be misleading—they may not be honest representations of the internal cognitive process of listening.

To transparently express (or detect) listening, interlocutors must learn to engage in (or focus on) behaviors that cannot be faked. In contrast to nonverbal and paralinguistic signals of listening, which may be easily faked, most (if not all) verbal cues of listening respond directly to a partner’s verbal content. Thus, they cannot be effectively enacted if one has not *attended* to and *processed* the information communicated. For example, paraphrasing requires that a listener both attend to and process what someone else is communicating so that they can then restate it in their own words. Follow-up questions are similarly contingent on the cognitive act of listening, since these questions build from what has previously been communicated. Verbal expressions of listening may be the most effective way to express (and detect) honest conversational listening. Though speakers should not abandon the use of nonverbal and prosodic cues—these are important signals of engagement that form a core part of the lay schema of good listening—content-dependent verbal cues are more direct and reliable indicators of the cognitive process of listening. If someone puts in the cognitive effort to listen attentively, they should claim the rewards of their work by expressing it clearly and transparently.

Another powerful advantage of verbal expressions of listening is that they may actually change the cognitive process of listening for the better. People’s intentions

guide the information that they attend to, filter, and process [61]. Thus, when a person engages in a conversation with the intent to express their listening with content-dependent verbal cues, they will inevitably look for conversation content that they can later paraphrase, acknowledge, ask follow-up questions about or call-back to. In doing so, they must actively *attend* to and *process* the content that is being communicated, thus improving their underlying cognitive engagement in the process. Verbal expressions of listening may not only increase the extent to which people *feel* heard, but also the extent to which they are *being* heard, in positive feedback loops amidst live conversation.

Listening unfolds not only within a single conversation (inter-turn listening), but also across multiple conversations within a relationship (relational listening). Listening can be expressed in the moment that it occurs (e.g., providing back-channel feedback while someone is speaking), during the next turn (e.g., paraphrasing what someone has said), several turns later (e.g., calling back to something mentioned earlier), or in a separate conversation (e.g., asking a follow-up question about something discussed yesterday). Non-verbal and prosodic cues that do not depend on conversation content can only be used to signal listening in the moment that it is occurring (e.g., nodding can signal that one is listening *right now*, but not that one was listening yesterday). However, since verbal cues are content-dependent, they can signal listening beyond a single conversational turn. Consider a colleague who, in a separate email chain days later, acknowledges a point you made in your last team meeting. In this example, the cognitive act of listening that occurred during an earlier conversation is being expressed later. Just as inter-turn listening may be fundamental to an effective conversation, relational listening may be fundamental to a successful relationship [62]—and verbal expressions of listening are integral to both.

Finally, such transparent expressions of listening may also promote reciprocal honesty. Indeed, preliminary research suggests that people are more willing to disclose information to high-quality listeners [63]—understandably, honest disclosures may not be beneficial if people are not certain they are truly *being* heard. This seems especially likely over the course of multiple conversations, as transparent expressions of listening build trust and promote relationship satisfaction. Future work should seek to better understand the role of high-quality listening—and its various expressions—in eliciting honesty from others.

Conclusion

Making others feel heard is a critical interpersonal skill that improves relationships and enhances well-being across domains. However, *feeling* heard is not always

the same as *being* heard. Conversational listening is a three-stage process, consisting of *attention* and *processing* which occur *intrapersonally* and cannot be observed, and finally, *expression*, which makes the cognitive act of listening observable to others. Without *expression*, nobody would feel heard. However, this final stage of the listening process introduces the possibility of deception. Indeed, conversants tend to focus on non-verbal and paralinguistic cues as signals of listening, but these behaviors are not always honest signals of the underlying cognitive processes of listening. Verbal expressions of listening may be the most effective signals of listening, in part because these content-dependent behaviors cannot be effectively faked in the absence of cognitive listening. Thus, although it sounds counterintuitive, it's possible that the best listening is spoken.

Declaration of competing interest

Nothing declared.

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