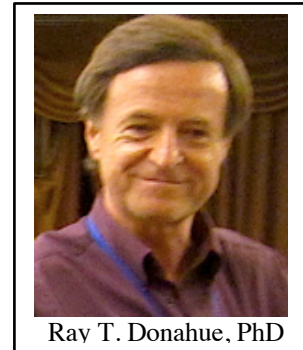


Global Listening: The Challenge of the Mixed Message

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*Global listening*¹ is a contextualized or multimodal approach. It involves being attuned to the totality of verbal and nonverbal inputs. Let's consider how the mixed message can derail otherwise effective listening, an illustration meant as a small contribution to the field of listening. Take Box 1² by way of illustration: This person a distraught loner smiles to you—whether an HR professional, health care provider, social worker, counselor, colleague or close friend— as he says: “My whole life I didn’t know I existed.” You would . . . (select one, please):

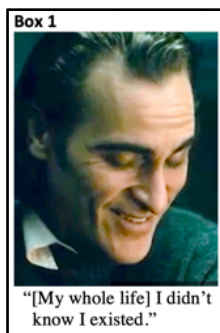


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- A) be silent B) smile C) go, “hmm” D) say, “I see.”

If not silent, most people would likely reply by (B). If in human relations, perhaps, even (C) or (D). Each of these choices, however, could be problematic because they might merit this loner’s retort: “You don’t listen, do you? Do you ever really hear me.” Crushing words to the listening professional.

This poignant scene from the film, *Joker*, is instructive for the art of listening and the trouble from a common element of social or relational difficulty—mixed messages. Precisely when telling his social worker that he feels completely isolated he smiles. His words and nonverbals (smile, raised eyebrows, and downcast eyes) conflict with the content. The mixed message can thwart even experienced therapists. Generally, if not fully empathic in such moments, we will likely miss the import. Backchannels such as (c) and (d) can normally aid effective listening but not if mechanically used. They might



backfire here because they could emit insincerity, the diminishing of the other person’s plight. He might also take it as belittlement. Such exemplifies how attitude and skill must work together for effective listening. Applying elements of active listening without mindfulness will prove futile. Thus the mixed message can become an object of study, serving as a foil in the course of acquiring facilitative skill. Mindful that mixed messages could be a “landmine,” the astute listener avoids randomly placed backchannels as if would be spice sprinkled over food. Rather backchannels must be given artfully in sync with what the client is expressing.

How best to handle the mixed message is beyond present scope. Much depends on purpose or role of the listener as well as other situational constraints. Some points are worth noting nonetheless. For the non-therapist, presumably he or she desires a good relationship and wants to help this other person. That help would be attentive listening and being supportive. If one were to bypass the mixed message, well, it happens to the best of us. Social accommodation is a strong force that invites us to smile or chuckle along with the speaker. In the therapeutic situation, it could be manipulative by the client, such that would not be beneath the character of Joker in the scene studied.

Or it could be to the test the water, for he or she might wonder about the extent of personal matters allowed with the non-therapist, or what might be the mettle of the person to whom they speak. The bottom line is how comfortable the listener is in opening

a potentially Pandora's box and would it be in line with one's role, purpose, and so on. One reply could be, "You smile but it sounds hurtful. Is it?"³ Here one opens the way for the other person to express their feelings. But always the other person decides how far, for this is not therapy.⁴ Open the door but don't cross the threshold. Even if the invitation is declined, the client usually will feel positive, validated, and satisfied that someone really listened.

Finally, let me note something else remarkable about the *Joker* scene considered: The use of *hear* and *listen* in juxtaposition. They are typically distinguished in the former as automatic (physiological); the latter, conscious (mental). Their distinction is necessary when conceptualizing the act of listening, which educators hasten to do. These terms, however, do not always follow so neatly this distinction in English. *Hear* in use can go well beyond the mere physiological into the mental, for it can mean *listen attentively* (*Cambridge Dictionary*, "Hear," 2020a) or even *understand* (*MacMillan Dictionary*, "Hear" 2020b). More than a mere curiosity is this example I found in a Shanghai airport (Pudong International), a financial services company advertisement with this promise: "We don't listen to you. We hear you."⁵ A clever reversal of these two words' typical relation, but in line with what the *Cambridge* and *MacMillan* dictionaries inform us. At least in one case, hear is privileged more than listen. And why the juxtaposition of terms in *Joker* is instructive: It concretely distinguishes the terms as technically drawn. By such it helps set in the mind of learners or trainees this important distinction, for they may be aware of the contrary uses of *hear* in English [see Strate (2019) for similar discussion].

Returning to *Joker*, he seemed to mean that not only the social worker didn't listen but more egregiously she didn't even "hear" him despite being just feet away. Here he exploited the usual physiological meaning of *hear*, by which he adds poignancy to the scene, reinforcing his tragic belief that he is as if non-existent in the world. So to *Joker* his social worker wouldn't even hear him out. By her (in his view) not hearing him (= not listening attentively), reminds us of the importance of listener attitude. However skilled we might be, as presumably this (psychiatric) social worker, it is all for naught without the sufficient attitude to listen closely and attentively.

In conclusion, the *Joker* scene serves several functions educatively: 1) illustrates mixed messaging; 2) provides a helpful foil toward advancing active listening skill; 3) helps distinguish terms *hear* and *listen*; and 4) possibly enhances empathy by appreciation of a tragic figure. This dramatic scene therefore encapsulates what global listening strives for and demands—the attuning to the totality of a listening context empathically if for no other reason than the love of humanity.

Notes

¹I lay no claim, of course, on the term "global listening," but it otherwise came naturally from "global" as I applied it in text linguistics (Donahue & Prosser 1997) as well as the intercultural context of listening (e.g., Donahue 1998). Further, I was honored by the Global Listening Center to lead discussions on a definition of listening for GLC in its online *Forum* in the Summer of 2016 and subsequently appointed with Graham Bodie to jointly produce an official definition for the Organization, aided by Graham's scholarly works on the subject; Michael Purdy's early scholarly works for ILA and the field, as well as his valuable advice; and my own background in active listening as a trained Rogerian counselor. (Carl Rogers, father of active listening, is known as an "early pioneer" in the field of listening [*History of ILA*, 2014]).

²Contents of which come from the motion picture, *Joker* (2019).

³The situation will dictate wording. The intent here is providing a serviceable expression but purposely restrictive for general use.

⁴I am reminded when someone in personnel management mentioned to me that he had read a book by Carl Rogers and so was going to “do counseling.” Reading about Rogers’s active listening can help make us great listeners but ipso facto counselors it does not. Much training is required.

⁵As I reported in the online *Forum*, Global Listening Centre, July 12, 2016.

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