

INTERPRETIVE LISTENING: AN ALTERNATIVE TO EMPATHY

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Listening has been a central concern of communication theorists, teachers, and practitioners, clinical psychologists, psychiatrists, and even some philosophers for especially the last thirty years. Models of communication inevitably include listening in one way or another; basic texts and courses provide instruction in critical and empathic listening skills; tens of thousands of executives and managers learn Sperry listening, psychotherapists are taught how to infer from subtle facial, auditory, and postural cues, and a contemporary philosopher writes of *Listening and Voice: The Phenomenology of Sound*.¹

One might expect this widespread interest to have generated extensive research and a considerable degree of consensus regarding the nature and function of listening. But it has not. For example, some writers emphasize the distinction between hearing and listening, while others equate listening with auditory perception and therefore emphasize the contrast between listening and visualizing.² One author applies a three-stage information processing model to listening,³ another distinguishes between listening as a “receiver” and listening as a “critic,”⁴ and a third treatment distinguishes “non-assertive” and “assertive” listening.⁵ Several textbooks treat listening exclusively, but they emphasize practical skill development rather than conceptual clarification or empirical research.⁶ As a result, although listening is widely viewed as a primary skill in the organizational context⁷ and as an important component of the basic speech communication course,⁸ there is relatively little research that carefully identifies the nature of the listening process or specifies its qualities or components.

Empathic listening is especially problematic. On the one hand, it seems intuitively obvious that effective communication requires one somehow to “put oneself in the place of the other. That is why virtually every treatment of interpersonal communication, interviewing, counseling, and psychotherapy argues for the importance of this kind of listening, and why Carl R. Rogers, its primary proponent, has even elevated empathy to the status of a “Way of Being.”⁹

On the other hand, scholars have been frustrated in their attempts to go beyond intuitively obvious descriptions of empathy or empathic listening. In 1975 Deutsch and Madle concluded from their review of the psychological literature on empathy that “Despite the variety of conceptualizations of empathy, few empirical advances have been made. One reason for this paucity of significant research appears to be a lack of consensus for operational definitions of empathy.”¹⁰ In 1981 Hill and Courtright wrote similarly, from a speech communication perspective, about the “different and frequently inconsistent operational definitions” of empathy.¹¹ Thus, despite even the philosopher Herbert Spiegelberg’s brief attempt to sketch “the essential nature of the phenomenon ‘Putting Ourselves into the Place of Others’,” we remain without a clear understanding of an aspect of the communication process that virtually everybody agrees is of central importance.¹²

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One fundamental problem is that, regardless of the view of empathy that one adopts, it becomes necessary to ground this theoretical and cognitive/behavioral construct on a fiction. I cannot actually “put myself in your place” or “see the world through your eyes,” but, according to the empathic paradigm, I am to communicate *as if* I could. Rogers especially emphasizes the importance of the “as if quality” of empathic listening.¹³ As he explains, “to be with another in this way means that for the time being, you lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another’s world without prejudice. In some sense it means that you lay aside yourself. . . .”¹⁴

David Berio’s accounts, the source for most speech communication treatments of empathy, describe the fiction differently. What Berio calls the “inference theory of empathy” requires the communicator to act on the assumption that the other’s experience is, as Ogden and Richards put it in 1923, “similar in all relevant respects” to mine, and therefore that I can infer by analogy to my own experience.¹⁵ What Berio calls the “role-taking theory of empathy” is based on the fiction that one can successfully and accurately recreate the other’s experience in one’s imagination.¹⁶

At the risk of belaboring the obvious, it is important to remember that one cannot actually “lay aside” one’s views, values, or self. In the first place, the effort to do so would itself reflect a value; that is, one would be choosing a behavior because it was viewed as preferable or somehow better than its alternatives. Moreover, the organism making that choice would clearly be functioning as a self, a locus of intentionality. Thus Rogers’ suggestion is inherently impossible to follow. In addition, although there are obviously similarities across all human experience, that part of experience which empathic listening purports to contact is the subjective or idiosyncratic, that which, by definition, one cannot accurately “imagine” or infer by analogy.

In the most recent thorough treatment of empathy by a speech communication scholar, William S. Howell appears to recognize some of these problems. Howell argues that empathy “is *not* feeling what another person feels, or putting yourself into the other person’s shoes, or projecting your consciousness into another being.”¹⁷ Instead, Howell defines empathy as “the ability to replicate what one perceives.”¹⁸ In other words, Howell treats the process as an *intrapersonal* one: one person replicates what *he or she* perceives. Thus, ironically, Howell’s attempt to avoid psychologism leads him to treat what he identifies as a fundamentally *communicative* phenomenon as if it were an *individual* process. As a result, his treatment becomes vulnerable to all the hoary arguments against solipsism.

It is apparent, as Arnett and Nakagawa demonstrate in the previous essay, that the empathic paradigm breaks down when its conceptual coherence or its underlying assumptions are subjected to critical scrutiny. Yet, effective communication, genuine understanding *does* occur. Each of us has experienced something we would call mutual clarity, genuine contact, or perhaps “oneness.” How can we accurately describe that phenomenon?

I believe that contemporary hermeneutic phenomenology offers a description of the listening process which avoids the shortcomings of the empathic paradigm and points toward some fruitful new directions for listening research and teaching.

Hermeneutics and Listening

Although “hermeneutics” is becoming a familiar term to readers of speech communication literature,¹⁹ it is probably not readily apparent how hermeneutic phenomenology may be linked to listening theory and practice. The connection is rooted in hermeneutics’

fundamental concern with developing *understanding*, a goal it shares with empathic listening. Originally the task of the Greek god Hermes was to help mortals interpret or understand the words of the gods; later hermeneutics focused on the interpretation of sacred and then secular texts. The discipline gained special prominence in the sixteenth century as an arbiter in the Catholic-Protestant debate regarding the authentic text of the Bible. Later, the development of processes of juridical interpretation also contributed to the significance of hermeneutics. Currently two varieties or types of hermeneutics exist, and each can be viewed as an analogue of two different approaches to listening.²⁰

Empathic listening parallels the approach to hermeneutics developed by Fr. D.E. Schleiermacher, Wilhelm Dilthey, and the contemporary theorists Emilio Betti and E.D. Hirsch. The distinguishing feature of this approach is its determination to provide “objective,” “valid” interpretations. Betti argues, for example, that whatever the role of the subject may be in the process of developing understanding, the *object* of understanding or interpretation, in Richard Palmer’s words, “remains object and an objectively valid interpretation of it can reasonably be striven for and accomplished.”²¹ Hirsch concurs; according to David Couzens Hoy, “Hirsch strives to guarantee the objectivity of interpretation by reviving the notion of the author’s intention.”²²

This approach to hermeneutics is thus *reproductive* rather than *productive*; these theorists argue that one understands a text when one *reproduces* the meaning that was originally produced by the author. That meaning is typically viewed as synonymous with the author’s *intent*. In contrast to one of the primary tenets of New Criticism, Hirsch argues that a correct understanding will necessarily be identical with the author’s intended meaning.

As soon as anyone claims validity for his interpretation (and few would listen to a critic who did not), he is immediately caught in a web of logical necessity. If his claim to validity is to hold, he must be willing to measure his interpretation against a genuinely discriminating norm, and the only compelling normative principle that has ever been brought forward is the old-fashioned ideal of rightly understanding what the author meant.²³

Empathic listening is also an attempt to achieve understanding by reproducing in one’s own awareness “the psychological intentions or internal states of the speaker.”²⁴ As Arnett and Nakagawa clarify, that approach is grounded in a psychologism that reifies the self and focuses attention away from the communicating to the individual communicators. As I noted above, a reproductive approach to listening also rests on the fiction that one can “lay aside one’s self” and “look through another’s eyes.”

A contrasting contemporary approach to hermeneutics offers an alternative to the empathic paradigm for listening. This alternative begins with Heidegger’s development of hermeneutic phenomenology and continues especially in the works of Hans-Georg Gadamer and Paul Ricoeur. The basic point of contrast between Dilthey-Betti-Hirsch and Heidegger-Gadamer-Ricoeur is that the latter develop a *productive* rather than a reproductive approach. Heidegger-Gadamer-Ricoeur do not view the development of understanding as a process whereby an interpreter/ listener recreates the objectifiable meaning originally created by the author/speaker. As Gadamer emphasizes, “when we try to understand a text, we do not try to recapture the author’s attitude of mind -----”²⁵ Hoy clarifies the centrality of Gadamer’s point that understanding cannot be reduced to the epistemological relation between a subject and an object of interpretation. As he puts it,

This analogy tempts us to say that there is a subject-subject relation involved. The suggestion is misleading, however, because Gadamer’s “subject” is not a Cartesian “mind,” an *inner* subjectivity that in some mysterious way has to see into the inner subjectivity of an external other. On the contrary, Gadamer’s theory presupposes Heidegger’s analysis of *Dasein* as being-already-in- the-world. *In hermeneutic experience what is being analyzed is*

the act of communication, and the participants exist in a world of previously shared meanings; that is to say, they share a language. In contrast to earlier, more psychological hermeneutic theories, Gadamer's contribution is to insist that hermeneutical understanding is "not a mysterious communion of souls, but rather a participation in shared meaning."²⁶

Ricoeur concurs; as he puts it, "Hermeneutics can be defined no longer as an inquiry into the psychological intentions which are hidden beneath the text, but rather as the explication of the being-in-the-world displayed by the text."²⁷

An approach to listening consistent with this perspective enables one to give up the subjectivity and psychologizing of the empathic paradigm and not to depend on the occurrence of some "mysterious communion of souls." The remainder of this paper will be devoted to an outline of what I take to be the primary qualities or characteristics of this "productive" or "interpretive" listening and to some suggestions for how listening research and teaching might be improved if this perspective is adopted.

Four major themes, discussed by Gadamer and Ricoeur, identify qualities of this approach to listening. Because both authors treat language and understanding as living, changing processes, neither offers a closed set of concepts which purports unambiguously to capture the object of study. These four themes, however, will characterize interpretive listening accurately enough to demonstrate how it differs from current approaches and to suggest the practical impact that a shift in perspective could create. The themes are openness, linguisticity, play, and the fusion of horizons.

OPENNESS

Like several other late twentieth-century intellectual programs, e.g., General Systems Theory and Post-Newtonian physics, hermeneutics argues against the possibility of objective, positive knowledge. From the hermeneutic perspective, verifiable certainty is unattainable in the human sciences, and that fact is not the cause for epistemological despair but simply a reaffirmation of the inherently contextual, historically situated nature of human knowledge.

Ricoeur, for example, begins his treatment of "the first locus of interpretation" with a discussion of the "polysemy of language," that is, "the feature by which our words have more than one meaning when considered outside of their use in a determinate context."²⁸ His point is that because language is fundamentally polysemic, all interpretation must be sensitive to context; interpretation "consists in recognising which *relatively* univocal message the speaker has constructed on the polysemic basis of the common lexicon."²⁹ "The use of natural languages," Ricoeur continues in another essay, "rests on the polysemic value of words" which "contain a semantic potential which is not exhausted by any particular use, but which must be constantly sifted and determined by the context."³⁰ Thus "interpretation is the process by which, in the interplay of question and answer, the interlocutors collectively determine the contextual values which structure their conversation."³¹ As Ricoeur emphasizes, the process of developing hermeneutic understanding is necessarily open. Positive meanings are not "given" in language or even "in persons"; instead, the interpreter participates in the development of understanding as he or she encounters the discourse. By direct extension, in a conversation characterized by genuine interpretive listening, both/all persons participate in the ongoing process of constituting meanings. It is not the case that a listener attempts to grasp a speaker's intent; fidelity of transmission and reception is not what is most fundamentally at issue. Rather, what occurs is the co-constituting of understanding in talk. The process, again, is productive not reproductive, and the understandings that emerge are contingent and context-dependent, not positive or "objective."

Gadamer develops this same point when he contrasts the knowledge of experience sought by hermeneutics with the objective knowledge pursued in the natural sciences. He summarizes,

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Thus experience is experience of human finitude. The truly experienced man is one who is aware of this, who knows that he is master neither of time nor the future. The experienced man knows the limitedness of all prediction and the uncertainty of all plans.

... Thus true experience is that of one's own historicity.

... The hermeneutical experience is concerned with what has been transmitted in tradition. This is what is to be experienced. But tradition is not simply a process that we learn to know and be in command of through experience; it is language, ie [sic] it expresses itself like a 'Thou'. A 'Thou' is not an object, but stands in a relationship with us.³²

Like Ricoeur, Gadamer is emphasizing that interpretation or understanding is developed in a mutual process between historically contextualized subjects—an interpreter, and tradition-manifested-in-language, or an 'I' and a 'Thou'. This understanding is not static or closed; it is open to continuing development and change.

Moreover, this understanding is essentially affected by the prior understandings or prejudices of the interpreters. Here is where Gadamer's well-known argument for the positive impact of prejudice contacts our understanding of listening. As he points out, it was not until the Enlightenment that the concept of prejudice acquired its negative connotations. "Actually 'prejudice' means a judgment that is given before all the elements that determine a situation have been finally examined" (p. 240). That, of course, describes the human condition. Since history is never "over,"³³ "all the elements" affecting a judgment are *never* "given." Thus human understanding is always provisional, open to present and future change. The problem is that the human studies have been limited, Gadamer argues, by the Enlightenment's "prejudice against prejudice itself" (p. 240). When Carl R. Rogers suggests that empathic listening requires one to "lay aside your own views and values in order to enter another's world without prejudice," he is reflecting precisely this "prejudice against prejudice itself."³⁴ Gadamer suggests instead that prejudice, or what Heidegger calls the "fore-structure of understanding,"³⁵ needs to be recognized as inherent in persons and constitutive of the ground of all human understanding.

Gadamer's summary directly illustrates how openness applies to the listening process and how productive openness is different from the reproductive openness characteristic of the empathic paradigm:

In human relations the important thing is, as we have seen, to experience the 'Thou' truly as a 'Thou', ie not to overlook his claim and to listen to what he has to say to us. To this end, openness is necessary. But this openness exists ultimately not only for the person to whom one listens, but rather ***anyone who listens is fundamentally open***. Without this kind of openness to one another there is no genuine human relationship. ... When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person 'understands' the other, in the sense of surveying him. Similarly, to hear and obey someone does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires. We call such a person a slave. Openness to the other, then, includes the acknowledgement that I must accept some things that are against myself even though there is no one else who asks this of me.

... The hermeneutical consciousness has its fulfillment, not in its methodological sureness of itself, but in the same readiness for experience that distinguishes the experienced man by comparison with the man captivated by dogma.³⁶

Thus the listener is not simply "open to what the other means," so that he or she can reproduce it; instead, the listener is open to the meanings that are being developed *between* oneself and one's partner. These meanings, moreover, are also open—fluid, and continuously context-dependent. Rather than simply being brought to the conversation,

they are, to a significant degree, a product of the persons' meeting.

LINGUISTICALITY

The meaning of the term translated "linguisticality" (*Sprachlichkeit*) can be difficult to grasp,, especially if one's understanding of language is anchored in general semantics, the work of Suzanne Langer, semiotics, or descriptive linguistics. All those traditions view language as fundamentally representational, i.e., their view is that units of language function as outward and social manifestations of inward and more or less private, *non* linguistic "referents," "concepts," or "meanings."³⁷

Heidegger, Gadamer, and, to a lesser extent, Ricoeur, give language much more ontological priority. Expressed as a strong thesis, their notion of linguisticality questions whether one can meaningfully identify any "non-linguistic entities" that language could be said to "represent." Heidegger's argument that "language is the house of Being"³⁸ is taken to mean that everything in the human world comes into existence in language, so that language does not "represent" reality but *discloses* it. The weaker thesis is that all human experience is expressible in language; as Ricoeur puts it, "To bring [human experience] into language is not to change it into something else, but, in articulating and developing it, to make it become itself."³⁹ In *Truth and Method* Gadamer develops this notion, first by praising the early linguistics scholar Wilhelm von Humboldt, because he "recognised the living act of speech, linguistic *energeia*, as the essence of language, and thus overcame the dogmatism of the grammarians."⁴⁰ Humboldt did not realize, however, as Heidegger did, that this language-as-living-speech "is not just one of man's possessions in the world, but on it depends the fact that man has a world at all. For man the world exists as world in a way that no other being in the world experiences. But this world is linguistic in nature."⁴¹ By "world," of course, both Heidegger and Gadamer mean not our environmental scientific world or universe, but our lifeworld.⁴²

In "Man and Language," Gadamer enlarges this view by offering a critique of the counterview, i.e., that language is a "tool," something humans use to represent and manipulate their nonlinguistic reality. A tool, he argues, can be picked up and used and then laid aside for future use. But language cannot. We never find ourselves outside language; "Rather, in all our knowledge of ourselves and in all knowledge of the world, we are always already encompassed by the language that is our own— Learning to speak does not mean learning to use a preexistent tool for designating a world already somehow familiar to us; it means acquiring a familiarity and acquaintance with the world itself and how it confronts us."⁴³ In short, Gadamer contends that, because humans are always, as Carl Sagan might say, immersed in a soup of language, it cannot make sense to talk of language being a tool that we use to designate non-linguistic objects. Language—or more accurately 'linguaging'— is a mode or medium of human be-ing; it is not a tool or system we use but a way we be who we are.

Gadamer supports this view in part by arguing that the distinctively *human* mode of awareness is that through which we perceive our environment as a lifeworld (*Welt*) rather than simply a habitat or environment (*Umwelt*). ". . . unlike all living creatures [who may perceive their environment or habitat—*Umwelt*], man's relationship to the world is characterised by freedom from habitat. This freedom includes the linguistic constitution of the world. Both belong together. To rise above the pressure of what comes to meet us from the world means to have language and to have 'world'."⁴⁴ Human infants probably initially perceive their environment in ways that are similar, if not identical to the perceptions of some animals. But the developing, uniquely human aspects of even the infant's awareness are the linguisti- cally-sensitive, language-directed or language-

influenced aspects. Thus the lifeworld is not the “object” of language; “Rather, the object of knowledge and of statements is already enclosed within the world horizon of language.”⁴⁵ Or, as Plato concluded in the *Phaedo*, “the true being of things becomes accessible precisely in their linguistic appearance.”⁴⁶

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Richard Palmer puts this point succinctly: persons, he writes, do not have meanings and then find words to express them; “the imagining of such a procedure is a pure construction of linguistic theory.” As Palmer summarizes, “The nature of experience is not a nonlinguistic datum for which one subsequently, through a reflective act, finds words; experience, thinking, and understanding are linguistic through and through, and in formulating an assertion one only uses the words already belonging to the situation.”⁴⁷

Linguisticity is a development of Heidegger’s fundamentally important analysis of truth as *aletheia* or disclosure. Briefly put, Heidegger sought to redirect philosophy away from a concern with propositional truth, which philosophers since Descartes had pursued by designing methods to insure a correspondence between fact and proposition. Heidegger argued that this approach skips a step; it begins after the existence of things has been assumed and thus it is never able to inquire into the more fundamental, ontological question about the Being of beings. Thus, Heidegger wanted to go beneath a discussion of what language-seen-as-a-system *does* to an analysis of what persons are *doing* as they speak. He argued that, for example, *in* asserting (not *by* asserting), one uncovers or discloses whatever one is asserting- about. In *Being and Time* he writes, “Asserting is a way of Being towards the Thing itself that is. And what does one’s perceiving of it demonstrate? Nothing else than *that* this Thing *is* the very entity which one has in mind in one’s assertion. What comes up for confirmation is that this entity is pointed out by the Being [be-ing] in which the assertion is made—which is Being towards what is put forward in the assertion; thus what is to be confirmed is *that* such Being *uncovers* the entity towards which it is.”⁴⁸ In *Introduction to Metaphysics* Heidegger is even more direct. “• • . words and language are not wrappings in which things are packed for the commerce of those who write and speak. It is in words and language that things first come into being and are.”⁴⁹ Especially in his later work, Heidegger emphasizes how language “unveils” the Being of beings, and this emphasis is what Gadamer develops as his notion of linguisticity.

An awareness of linguisticity can help to keep listeners focused on the present language-event that the communicators are bringing into being. Rather than primarily listening “behind” or “beyond” the words for clues to covert intentions or psychological states, each listener attends to the happening-now of the communicators’ verbal and nonverbal language. Listeners do this because they recognize that each person’s speaking is functioning to disclose—in the Heideggerian sense—not just to represent or symbolize. Moreover, since human being happens in speaking, what is disclosed is all the “subject matter” of the conversation: both subject matter in the sense of topic or content and matter-of-the-subject, the human or personal tradition or horizon which meets one. As Palmer notes, the notion of linguisticity clarifies that “What is understood through language is not only a particular experience but the world within which it is disclosed.”⁵⁰ Ricoeur also supports this approach to interpretive listening when he emphasizes that the “sense” of a text, and by “text” he means both written documents and acts of speaking,⁵¹ “is not behind the text, but in front of it. It is not something hidden, but something disclosed.”⁵²

PLAY

Although most treatments of Gadamer mention his comments about play, none that I know of emphasizes the importance of this construct for his ontology of language.

Gadamer indicates its centrality when he calls the section in *Truth and Method*, “Play as the Clue to Ontological Explanation.”⁵³ Clearly he sees the dynamic of play not as an ancillary quality of language but as a metaphor for its essential form. Moreover, as I have noted elsewhere, by “language” Gadamer means not structure or rules, but speech, living conversation.⁵⁴

It is not surprising, therefore, that Gadamer uses the term “play” to refer not to an “attitude” or “state of mind,” but to “the mode of being” of a work of art and later, of discourse. The fundamental dynamic of this mode of being is “the to-and-fro movement which is not tied to any goal. . . .”⁵⁵ This to-and-fro is characteristic, Gadamer argues, of all that we designate as “play,” including sporting events, cards, and even the “play of colors.”

Indeterminacy is also characteristic; “the movement which is play has no goal which brings it to an end; rather, it renews itself in constant repetition” (p. 93). Here, Gadamer does not mean that a played game never ends but that, for example, no completed football game will ever end the game of football; the activity is continually renewed in each playing.

Another insight the metaphor offers is that play is not simply an activity which an individual intends and in which he or she engages. “As far as language is concerned, the actual subject of play is obviously not the subjectivity of an individual who among other activities also plays, but instead the play itself” (p. 93). This idea implies that “all playing is a being-played. The attraction of a game, the fascination it exerts, consists precisely in the fact that the game tends to master the players” (p. 95). The frontispiece to *Truth and Method*, a verse by Rainer Maria Rilke, effectively captures this aspect of play:

Catch only what you’ve thrown yourself, all is
mere skill and little gain;
but when you’re suddenly the catcher of a ball
thrown by an eternal partner
with accurate and measured swing
towards you, to your centre, in an arch from the great bridgebuilding of God: why
catching then becomes a power— not yours, a world’s.

As the verse suggests, when we are engaged in spontaneous conversation, the form of the-to-and-fro itself can generate insight and surprise. This is another dimension of the productive quality of genuine conversation. No unselfconscious, mutual discourse is ever simply an outward replay of inner intentions and meanings. Instead, the conversational partners enter a dynamic over which they do not have complete control, and the outcome of their talk can be a surprise to both of them, a creation of their meeting.

Ricoeur also uses Gadamer’s metaphor. He discusses the dynamic of play in an explication of how a reader “appropriates the meaning” of a text. He begins by arguing against a psychologized treatment of understanding. It is not, he says, a process of projecting oneself into a text but of receiving “an enlarged self” as a result of one’s encounter with the text.⁵⁶ One can develop this kind of understanding, Ricoeur argues, by engaging in play with the text. He also emphasizes the heuristic impact of play; new insights are made possible because in order to enter the game the player has to put himself, to some degree, at risk. “Whoever plays is also played: the rules of the game impose themselves upon the player, prescribing the to and fro and delimiting the field where everything ‘is played’.”⁵⁷

Thus, to say that interpretive listening follows the dynamic of play is to emphasize the importance of the structural to-and-fro that engages the interlocutors in a genuine conversation. At least as important as one’s intent, expectations, or attitudes is the turn-

taking form, what Gadamer calls “the logic of question and answer.”⁵⁸ Because each participant must, to some extent, give herself up to the game in order to play, because of the inherently heuristic quality of the to-and-fro, and because of the open-endedness of the enterprise, each genuinely “playful” conversation is creative, productive of insight not simply reproductive of individual psychological states.

FUSION OF HORIZONS

The term both Gadamer and Ricoeur use to characterize the event of understanding that occurs between an interpreter and a text is “fusion of horizons.” Gadamer defines a horizon as “the range of vision that includes everything that can be seen from a particular vantage point.”⁵⁹ In philosophy he says, the term is used “to characterize the way in which thought is tied to its finite determination, and the nature of the law of the expansion of the range of vision. A person who has no horizon is a man who does not see far enough and hence overvalues what is nearest to him A person who has an horizon knows the relative significance of everything within this horizon . . . ” (p. 269). One’s horizon is constituted by his or her prejudices, but that does not mean, says Gadamer, that an horizon is a static or closed thing. “The horizon is, rather, something into which we move and that moves with us. Horizons change for a person who is moving” (p. 271).

When one understands another, one does not disregard oneself in order to place oneself in the place of the other. In Gadamer’s words, the process of understanding is not the empathy of one individual for another, nor is it the application to another person of our own criteria, but it always involves the attainment of a higher universality that overcomes, not only our own particularity, but also that of the other” (p. 272). In other words, the event of understanding may usefully be viewed as a move *from* the separate, to some degree “thesis” and “antithesis” positions of the individual interlocutors *to* a synthesizing position that subsumes relevant aspects of each.

Importantly, this event does not put an end to all differences. Although with understanding the interpreter’s horizon expands to include the horizon of the text or the other, the term “fusion” does not mean that the horizons are *reconciled*. Differences still remain, and one critical aspect of hermeneutic consciousness is acceptance and even celebration of the *tension* between irreconcilable horizons. Ricoeur highlights this element and contrasts this mode of interpretive understanding from both empathic and absolutist modes when he writes,

By restoring the dialectic of points of view and the tension between the other and the self, we arrive at the culminating concept of the ***fusion of horizons***. . . . This is a dialectical concept which results from the rejection of two alternatives: objectivism, whereby the objectification of the other is premised on the forgetting of oneself; and absolute knowledge, according to which universal history can be articulated within a single horizon.

... This relation between the self and the other gives the concept of prejudice its final dialectical touch: only insofar as I place myself in the other’s point of view do I confront myself with my present horizon, with my prejudices. It is only in the tension between the other and the self. . . that prejudice becomes operative and constitutive of historicity.⁶⁰

In short, to conceptualize the event of interpretive listening as a “fusion of horizons” is to emphasize the global breadth of prejudices that always affect one’s interpreting, to highlight the open, fluid nature of those prejudices, and to underscore the fact that understanding is not a static state but a tensional event, a *stasis* defined by the contact of two lifeworlds.

SOME IMPLICATIONS

The Heidegger-Gadamer-Ricoeur approach to heremeneutics does not offer a precise formula for effective listening, but these four themes—Openness, Linguisticity, Play, and the Fusion of Horizons—can fruitfully inform our conceptualization of the listening process. The contrast between this perspective and the empathic paradigm may be summarized in this way:

	<i>Interpretive</i>	<i>Empathic Listening</i>	<i>Listening</i>
FOCUS		on the other's internal experience (psychologizing) a. to	on mine and the other's verbal and nonverbal communicative action
GOALS		"get inside the other's experience"	a. to be present to the other and aware of the other's presence to me
		b. to suspend my prejudices so I can replicate or reproduce the other's experience 'in' me.	b. to affirm and use my prejudices as I co-produce with the other meanings that we share.
MODE OF ACTION		problem-solving identify an achievable goal strive toward it in a stepwise way play	engage in the to-and-fro do not expect closure or finality; stay open move in many directions at once
OUTCOME		empathy (verstehen): understanding-viewed-as-a-product. One grasps the other's view as a unit of objective knowledge. fusion of horizons: understanding-viewed-as-a-tensional event. Two persons subjectively build an understanding between themselves.	

There are several theoretical and pedagogical advantages of the interpretive approach to listening. The first is perhaps most obvious: in the place of an approach to listening based on psychologizing and on communicative fictions that are impossible to operationalize consistently, this approach offers a conceptually rigorous foundation which is grounded in a developed philosophical tradition. Of course, one may argue with that tradition; for example, one may wish to adopt the view of Betti or Hirsch. But if one does, the disagreement will be over substantive concepts rather than the presence or absence of some “mysterious communion of souls.”

A second conceptual advantage of this approach is that it begins not with a psychological event but with a communication event. The focus is not on what is happening “inside” communicators but on what transpires between them. This discipline’s distinctive strength, of course, is that it brings precisely that focus, to the human studies. This perspective thus facilitates our doing what we do best.

One pedagogical benefit of this perspective is that it enables the communication teacher to shift the emphasis of the listening unit away from the excesses of the “Age of Narcissism.” As Arnett and Nakagawa clarify, the empathic paradigm encourages a “reification of self” which can easily get out of hand, especially among adolescent and late-adolescent students. The communicative focus of the interpretive approach can help turn students away from the tendency to objectify selves which is inherent in the empathic view. As students become aware of the concept of linguisticity, their attention can focus more on what is being co-produced by the communicators than on the psychological states “behind” the talk. Thus, in the place of sidewalk psychologists, this approach can help train persons sensitive to the communicating that is happening between or among persons.

A second classroom benefit is that this approach can make it easier to teach what is probably the most useful set of listening skills, perception checking. The skills of paraphrasing, mirroring, asking clarifying questions, and what Gary D’Angelo and I call adding examples and listening beyond can all be taught as ways to maintain the focus and attain the goals outlined above.⁶¹ Students can also be relieved of the need to infer or guess what the other “really means;” they can learn to focus on and to encourage the talk that is presently occurring, because this is where the interpersonal meanings are being transacted.

A third pedagogical benefit is that this approach emphasizes the productive, creative quality of conversation. Actors in roles recite to one another, and little occurs that is surprising; each speaks and responds more or less predictably. In genuine I conversation, however, I actually do not know what I am going to say next, and I interlocutors frequently surprise themselves with what “comes out.” This is the I beauty of the dynamic of play; just as no football, chess, or Pac-Man game is ever I identical with any other one, so each real conversation is new, creative, surprising. I Students can learn that conversation, “shoptalk,” is one of the best ways to come up with new ideas, innovative solutions to problems. Sometimes the form of the | exchange itself can be enough. One does not necessarily need to have “all the {information” or “all the best ideas” so long as one is willing freely to enter the creative to-and-fro of conversational play. Students can also learn that not only can it I be productive to “listen your way into new ideas,” but it also works best to “listen 1 your way into new relationships.” Friendships form not because of the clever things lone person says but more because of the mutually-creative contact that occurs between persons.

Finally, we should be able to expect this firmer conceptual foundation to ground more productive listening research. Scholars should be able to overcome the problems

of operationalizing noted by Deutsch and Madle, and Hill and Courtright. Listening research can focus on the participants' communicative action rather than intentions or internal states. As a result, our intuitive belief that listening is centrally important can be complemented by more clear and consistent understandings of the nature and functions of the process.

NOTES

¹Don M. Ihde, *Listening and Voice: A Phenomenology of Sound* (Athens, Ohio: Ohio University Press, 1976).

²See, e.g., Ihde, chapters 1, 4, 5, and 8.

³Blaine Goss, "Listening as Information Processing," *Communication Quarterly*, 30 (1982), 304-307; Blaine Goss, *Processing Communication* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982).

⁴Charles M. Kelly, "Empathic Listening," in *Small Group Communication: A Reader*, ed. Robert S. Cathcart & Larry A. Samovar (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1970), pp. 251-259.

⁵Baxter and Corinne Geeting, *How to Listen Assertively* (New York: Monarch Press, 1976).

⁶See, e.g., Lyman K. Steil, Larry L. Barker, and Kittie W. Watson, *Effective Listening: Key to Your Success* (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1983); Madelyn Burley-Alien, *Listening: The Forgotten Skill* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, 1982); Andrew Wolvin and Carolyn G. Coakley, *Listening* (Dubuque, IA: Wm. C. Brown Co., 1982); and Florence I. Wolff, Nadine C. Marsnik, William S. Tacey, and Ralph G. Nichols, *Perceptive Listening* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1983).

⁷Vincent S. DiSalvo, "A summary of Current Research Identifying Communication Skills in Various Organizational Contexts," *Communication Education*, 29 (July 1980), 283-290. See also Burley-Alien.

⁸James W. Gibson, Charles R. Gruner, Michael S. Hanna, Mary-Jeanette Smyth, and Michael T. Hayes, "The Basic Course in Speech at U.S. Colleges and Universities: III," *Communication Education*, 29 (January 1980), 1-9.

⁹Carl R. Rogers, "Empathic: An Unappreciated Way of Being," in *A Way of Being* (Boston: Houghton-Mifflin, 1980), pp. 137-163.

¹⁰Francine Deutsch and Ronald A. Madle, "Empathy: Historic and Current Conceptualizations, Measurement, and a Cognitive Theoretical Perspective," *Human Development*, 18 (1975), 267-287.

¹¹Susan E. Kogler Hill and John A. Courtright, "Perceived Empathy: Its Relationship to Selected Interpersonal Variables and Student's [sic] Interpersonal Laboratory Performance," *Western Journal of Speech Communication*, 45 (Summer 1981), 214.

¹²Herbert Spiegelberg, "Putting Ourselves into the Place of Others: Toward a Phenomenology of Imaginary Self Transposal," *Human Studies*, 3 (April 1980), 169-173.

¹³Carl Rogers, "The Interpersonal Relationship: The Core of Guidance," *Harvard Educational Review*, 32 (Fall 1962), 419.

¹⁴Rogers, *A Way of Being*, p. 143.

¹⁵David E. Berio, *The Process of Communication* (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1960), pp. 122-123. Cf. C.K. Ogden and I.A. Richards, *The Meaning of Meaning* (New York: Harcourt, Brace, and World, 1923), pp. 205-206.

¹⁶Berio, pp. 124-127.

¹⁷William S. Howell, *The Empathic Communicator* (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1982), p. 108.

¹⁸Howell, p. 107.

¹⁹See, e.g., Michael Hyde and Craig Smith, "Hermeneutics and Rhetoric: A Seen But Unobserved Relationship," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 65 (1979), 247-363; John Stewart, "Philosophy of Qualitative Inquiry: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Communication Research," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 67 (1981), 109-121; and Leonard C. Hawes, "Toward a Hermeneutic Phenomenology of Communication," *Communication Quarterly*, 25 (1977), 42-50.

²⁰Much fuller treatments of the history and development of hermeneutics and heremeneutic phenomenology can be found in Zygmunt Bauman, *Hermeneutics and Social Science* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978) and Josef Bleicher, *Contemporary Hermeneutics: Hermeneutics as Method, Philosophy and Critique* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980).

²¹Richard E. Palmer, *Hermeneutics: Interpretation Theory in Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Heidegger, and Gadamer* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1969), p. 56.

²²David Couzens Hoy, *The Critical Circle: Literature, History and Philosophical Hermeneutics* (Berkeley, CA: Univ. of California Press, 1978), p. 5.

²³E. D. Hirsch, Jr., *Validity in Interpretation* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1967), cited in Hoy, p. 32.

²⁴Ronald C. Arnett and Gordon Nakagawa, "The Assumptive Roots of Empathic Listening," *Communication Education*, present issue, 370.

²⁵Hoy, pp. 61-62, citing Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Warheit und Methods: Grundzuge einer philosophischen Hermeneutik*, 3d ed. (Tubingen: J.C.B. Mohr, 1975), p. 276. Italics added. Cf. Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 260.

²⁷Paul Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in *Hermeneutics and the Human Sciences*, ed. and trans. John B. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1981), p. 112.

²⁸Paul Ricoeur, "The Task of Hermeneutics," in Thompson, ed., p. 44.

²⁹Ricoeur, "The Task," p. 44. Italics added.

[^]Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in Thompson, ed., p. 107.

³¹ Ricoeur, "Phenomenology and Hermeneutics," in Thompson, ed., p. 107.

³²Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 320-321.

³³Even, one could argue, in the wake of a nuclear holocaust. History continues as “the wake,” whatever form it takes.

³⁴Rogers, *A Way of Being*, p. 143.

³⁵For an explication of this notion, see Hyde and Smith, 351-352.

³⁶Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 324-325. Italics added.

³⁷See John Stewart, “Concepts of Language and Meaning: A Comparative Study,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 58(1972), 123-133.

³⁸Martin Heidegger, “Brief uber den ‘Humanismus’,” in *Wegmarken* (Frankfurt: v. Klostermann, 1967), p. 145, cited in Bleicher, p. 115.

³⁹Ricoeur, “Phenomenology and Hermeneutics,” in Thompson, ed., p. 115.

■^Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 401.

⁴¹Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 401.

⁴²The term “lifeworld” is generally attributed to Edmund Husserl. Alfred Schutz calls this “the world of directly experienced social reality.” See Schutz’ *The Phenomenology of the Social World*, trans. George Walsh and Frederick Lehnert (Evanston, 111.: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1967), pp. 163 ff.. Wilhelm Dilthey labels a similar notion *Erlebnis* or “lived experience.” See, e.g., H. P. Rickman, *Wilhelm Dilthey: Pioneer of the Human Studies* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1979), pp. 113ff.

⁴³Hans-Georg Gadamer, “Man and Language,” in *Philosophical Hermeneutics*, ed. and trans. David E. Linge (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1977), pp. 62-63.

^Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 402.

⁴⁵Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 408.

⁴⁶Gadamer, “The Nature of Things and the Language of Things,” in Linge, ed., p. 77.

⁴⁷Palmer, p. 203.

⁴⁸Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. John Macquarrie and Edward Robinson (New York: Harper and Row, 1962), pp. 260-261. Cf. section 68.

⁴⁹Martin Heidegger, *An Introduction to Metaphysics*, trans. Ralph Manheim (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1959), p. 13.

⁵⁰Palmer, p. 206.

⁵¹This is a fairly recent development. See his “A Response by Paul Ricoeur,” in Thompson, ed., p. 37.

⁵²Paul Ricoeur, *Interpretation Theory: Discourse and the Surplus of Meaning* (Fort Worth, Texas: Texas Christian Univ. Press, 1976), p. 87.

⁵³Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 91 ff.

⁵⁴See John Stewart, “Philosophy of Qualitative Inquiry: Hermeneutic Phenomenology and Communication Research,” 120.

⁵⁵Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 93.

⁵⁶Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” in Thompson, ed., pp. 182-183.

⁵⁷Ricoeur, “Appropriation,” in Thompson, ed., p. 186.

⁵⁸See Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, pp. 333-341. Cf. Palmer, pp. 198-201.

⁵⁹Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, p. 269.

“Ricoeur, “Hermeneutics and the Critique of Ideology,” in Thompson, ed., pp. 75-76.

⁶¹ John Stewart and Gary D’Angelo, *Together: Communicating Interpersonally*, 2nd ed. (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley, 1980), pp. 203-215.