

Interpretation in Classroom Listening

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Article abstract

Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and the author have debated about the meaning of listening in education. For Haroutunian-Gordon, listening implies mental acts of questioning. By contrast, the author has offered a dual process account of listening, distinguishing between listening that involves explicit, consciously directed mental effort and listening that is direct and immediate and requires no effort. The topic of “interpretation in listening” offers an opportunity for further consideration of these two types of listening. We can ask whether listeners are always interpreting speakers’ utterances, or whether there are some acts of listening that are immediate and direct, and thus do not involve interpretation. This paper argues, based on a close analysis of the concept of listening, that many typical acts of listening in classrooms are of the second, immediate, type.

Interpretation in Classroom Listening

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Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon and the author have debated about the meaning of listening in education. For Haroutunian-Gordon, listening implies mental acts of questioning. By contrast, the author has offered a dual process account of listening, distinguishing between listening that involves explicit, consciously directed mental effort and listening that is direct and immediate and requires no effort. The topic of “interpretation in listening” offers an opportunity for further consideration of these two types of listening. We can ask whether listeners are always interpreting speakers’ utterances, or whether there are some acts of listening that are immediate and direct, and thus do not involve interpretation. This paper argues, based on a close analysis of the concept of listening, that many typical acts of listening in classrooms are of the second, immediate, type.

Introduction

This paper takes as its starting point an ongoing conversation I’ve been having with Sophie Haroutunian-Gordon about listening in classrooms.¹ To summarize the two positions in our dialogue: Haroutunian-Gordon has developed what I and others have construed as a cognitive theory of listening, though she has expressed discomfort with this label. For her, listening involves a cognitive response by a listener to a speaker’s utterances; in particular, for her, listening implies mental acts of questioning. On her theory, a listener, L, listens to a speaker, S, because L entertains some question, to which S’s utterance bears some relevance. Any listener, furthermore, already approaches questions with a background of beliefs and assumptions, what Gadamer calls “prejudice.” In listening to S, in all cases but especially where S has a “challenging perspective,” that is, involving different concepts, beliefs, and assumptions, L questions S’s prejudice as well as his/her own. Haroutunian-Gordon has bolstered this analysis with several examples of listening drawn from philosophical and real-world classroom cases.

By contrast, I have offered a *dual process* account of listening.² Dual process theories draw a functional distinction between two types of mental processes: (a) *rational, analytical cognitive* processes; and (b) *spontaneous, non-cognitive, intuitive* processes. The first type involves explicit, consciously directed mental effort, while the second type involves implicit, subconscious processes, where the results are direct and immediate and require no effort – they “come of themselves.” I have thus emphasized a distinction

¹ For our respective positions, see Haroutunian-Gordon (2004) and Waks (2010). The latter paper was initially presented at the American Educational Research Association (AERA) annual meeting in 2004 and has subsequently gone through a number of drafts. Sophie critiques my view in “Listening and Questioning” (Haroutunian-Gordon, 2007), and I respond in “Listening and Questioning” (Waks, 2007).

² The dual process model is found in William James’ 1894 theory of emotion. See James (1983). I have argued elsewhere that John Dewey also adopted a version of the dual process model. The model has been extensively researched by a number of contemporary psychologists, most notably Daniel Kahneman (2011).

between listening processes mediated by questioning and other cognitive processes on the one hand, and those that are direct and immediate on the other.

The topic of “interpretation in listening” offers another opportunity for further consideration of these two types of listening. To return to Haroutunian-Gordon’s theory, we can ask whether L, in listening to S, is always interpreting S’s utterances, or whether there are some acts of listening that are immediate, where L simply and directly “gets” S’s utterances and hence where those utterances require no interpretation. These questions have both theoretical and practical implications: *theoretical* because they bear on both the theory of listening and also on popular theories of constructivism that emphasize the role of interpretation in the construction of knowledge in classrooms, and *practical* because in our attempts to improve the listening of teachers and students we need to know whether to focus on the improvement of cognitive skills such as interpretation and questioning, or on non-interpretive dimensions such as psychological openness or empathy.

In keeping with my dual process view, this paper is directed at establishing that not all listening, or even good, successful listening resulting in L’s understanding of S and his/her utterances, is interpretive.

Because the focus of the symposium in which these views were initially presented was on *classroom* listening, I want to start with some familiar situations of classroom listening against which any analysis of classroom listening will be tested. We may thus consider such cases as (1) a student listening to a lecture, (2) students and teachers engaged in the give-and-take of a discussion, (3) informal exchanges between students from different class or cultural backgrounds, (4) students listening to a story read aloud by a teacher, and (5) students reading a story silently to themselves and listening to the “voice” of the storyteller in their heads. I will return to a few of these cases at the end of the paper. But first, I will turn to the concept of interpretation.

Interpretation and Explanation

To interpret in the primary sense is to explain (or related terms such as to elucidate, explicate, or construe). All dictionaries I have checked list this sense as primary. This sense accounts for the most familiar uses of the term “interpretation.” A visitor to a foreign country might hire an *interpreter*: a person who can translate between the visitor’s native language and the language of the foreign country. A psychoanalyst may *interpret* dreams by explicating the hidden language of dream symbols. An art critic may *interpret* a cubist painting by explaining the aesthetic strategies of cubism.

Michael Krausz, an analytical philosopher whose works on interpretation are widely cited, distinguishes two kinds of critical activities in the arts that fall under this primary sense, which he calls “elucidation” and “edification” (see, for example, Krausz, 2007). Roughly, what Krausz has in mind is that in the primary sense, *elucidative* interpretations are intended to *clear up* something that is obscure in order to bring about rational or cognitive *understanding*, while associated edifying activities *indicate* features of art objects that might otherwise be ignored, in order to induce an appreciative aesthetic *experience*. Torsten Pettersson (2003) has indicated *three* types of interpretations in the arts: two that correspond closely to Krausz’s elucidation and edification, and a third which *situates* a work biographically or historically, thereby better *positioning* perceivers to *locate* relevant features for understanding or appreciation on their own. Pettersson warns, however, against insisting on sharp distinctions between these *types* of interpretations because the boundaries can be vague and the types of interpretation can all be brought together in a single interpretive text.

Margaretha Lagerlof (2003) goes further, rejecting these distinctions entirely, because in typical critical texts the three activities – situating, elucidating, and edifying – are mutually supportive. In her view, typical interpretations are composite wholes of which such activities are mere parts. She adds that the distinction between elucidating and edifying is wrongheaded because, she insists, to understand a work of art simply *is* to experience it in the relevant way.

There clearly is such a sense of “to understand” as applied to works of art. A listener might say, “I never understood jazz until I heard Duke Ellington,” meaning they had previously never had a relevant *jazz experience*. The Duke himself trades on this overlap between “understanding a meaning” and “having a relevant experience” in the title to his song “It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got That Swing.”

Despite Lagerlof’s doubts, I find Pettersson’s distinctions suggestive, regardless of this sense of “to understand” as “to appreciate.” Surely a useful difference exists between, for example, interpreting a futurist painting by explaining strategies of futurism, on the one hand, and indicating features that when attended to enable the having of a pleasant, interesting, or perceptually enlarging experience, on the other. The fact that oxygen and hydrogen are mutually supportive of and implicated in water, moreover, hardly implies that there is no distinction between oxygen and hydrogen.

The Need for Interpretation

One thing to note in all of these cases of and types of interpretation is that they presuppose that something is *in need* of some kind of explanation. Pettersson makes this explicit by defining “interpretation” in this manner:

an interpretation of an activity or product ... a coherent conceptual representation which focuses on elements which the interpreter takes to be poorly understood by the addressee, and attempts to clarify their meaning or function. (Pettersson, 2003, p. 32)

This brings out two important features of interpretation in this primary sense: (1) that it presupposes that something is poorly understood, and (2) that this is relative to an addressee. Thus, if for example, a speaker’s utterance is already well-understood by an addressee, there is no logical space for an interpretation of that utterance. The definition fits our earlier cases well because it focuses on the aspects that are poorly understood and hence give rise to the need for interpretation: a foreign language, opaque dream symbols, aesthetic strategies. And this brings us to my first assertion:

(1) Many utterances are already well-understood by specific listeners and stand in no need of interpretation to or by them.

Many utterances are in no need of explanation. In such cases nothing is obscure so there is no space for clarification or elucidation; nothing blocks the experience so there is no space for edification; nothing remains implicit so there is no space for explication.

Indeed, the idea that listening implies interpretation is also subject to a refutation by infinite regress. If every text and utterance requires interpretation to be understood, then nothing could ever be understood because the interpretation is simply another utterance or text that in turn would be in need of interpretation, *ad infinitum*. For there to be understanding, interpretation must come to an end, and in many everyday cases it does not even begin, because speakers’ utterances are understood directly by listeners and there is no space for interpretation.

Hermeneutics and Interpretation

Because this first assertion seems quite obvious when “interpretation” is used in the primary sense, we might search for a *different sense* of “interpretation” at play in the idea that meaning is constructed and thus that to understand is to interpret. This idea is tied to philosophical hermeneutics, the alleged science of interpretation or meaning making.

Historically, hermeneutics had its origins in handling concrete problems, decoding texts where it was a *given* that much was not well understood. The paradigm has been scriptural or literary texts in ancient or dead languages. In such cases the problems arose from something *distant* in time and culture, and hence not transparent to contemporary scholars or their audiences. Hermeneutics from Aristotle

through the early modern period, both in Europe and in the East, was primarily a practical science aimed at working out concrete methods for making difficult, obscure, alien works speak to audiences removed from them in time and place. Theories of interpretation explored in depth the question of when interpretation was needed, emphasizing such factors as temporal and geographic distance, linguistic change over time, shifts in the native tongues of the original authors and the later preservers of texts, inevitable corruptions in the course of oral and written transmission, etc. (see Deshpande, 1998).³

This practical field of study was transformed into a theoretical one in the late 19th and early 20th centuries by scholars echoing such as Dilthey and Marx, echoing Vico's earlier *verum-factum* principle – that truth is made, and we can only understand what we ourselves make (Vico, 1744/1948), and, contra Kant, asserting that the categories of experience are not universal but rather built up in the minds of people as they participate in the cultures of their times.

This tendency has come to fruition in the contemporary philosophy of constructivism, according to which people actively build up or construct their own individual knowledge of the world (see von Glasersfeld, 1984, who cites Vico thirty times in this brief essay and calls him the first constructivist). Constructivists deny that any perceptual experiences are direct and immediate, insisting, on the contrary, that perceptions of situations and events, persons and their statements, are all products of interpretation.

Without going too far afield, I want to trace the main events in the movement from practical to theoretical or philosophical hermeneutics to locate the specific sense of “interpretation” at work in the latter case. The practical emphasis remained dominant until Lessing (1883), Schleiermacher (1998), and Dilthey (1989). For Lessing the “interpretation” of distant texts is a way of “de-mythologizing” them and bringing their spirit into conformity with modern rational terms. This move by Lessing involved a shift in attention from *specific interpretations* of *specific texts* where something was not well understood to the *act of interpretation*: the question for hermeneutics shifted from what a particular poorly understood text *means* to what people are *doing* in interpreting texts. In Schleiermacher this evolved into hermeneutics as a *general theory of understanding*, in which interpretations of texts and other objects in the primary sense required supplementation by a perceiver's psychological “projection into the creative process” of the speaker, author, or other creator. Dilthey then insisted that understanding human experience required a special *method* distinct from any methods of the natural sciences. In this he claimed to render Schleiermacher's notion of projecting understanding into the creative process of the other, methodical and “scientific.” By the end of the 19th century hermeneutics was no longer a set of practical approaches to understanding distant texts but a putative general method for understanding human experience (Rajan, 1994; Smith, 1967). “Interpretation” acquired a new sense as “a method for understanding human experience.” Extended to listening, this hermeneutical approach suggests that listening implies interpretation, in the sense that listeners need a method for projecting their minds into those of speakers.

Gadamer (2004) turned attention to the idea of *truth in the human sciences*. Against Dilthey, he argued that *no method* could yield truth in these sciences; truth had to be approached indirectly through processes of conversation and questioning that took account of the force of prejudice of traditions in the framing of experiences and understandings. Truth does not result from applying finite scientific methods but from judgment and interpretation. This view lies explicitly behind Haroutunian-Gordon's approach to listening: Gadamer supplies the template for her account.

Let me state briefly what I take to be the upshot of this story. Even if we accept Gadamer's assertion that truth in the human sciences must be sought through modes of conversation, questioning, and self-questioning, and thus that listening to others in the search for scientific truth requires a special, but not a methodical, kind of questioning, it does not follow that everyday listening in classrooms or elsewhere implies any need for questioning or interpretation. Much everyday communication among those in the same language community is aimed primarily at some mixture of information exchange, mutual coordination of action and mutual enjoyment rather than the search for “truth.” These everyday cases do not require interpretive projection of the mind of listeners into those of speakers; indeed,

³ Interestingly this encyclopedia has no entry on “interpretation” itself.

because their forms of language are the same; they share common ways or forms of life. There are in general no gaps to be filled by such projections. Listening can be direct and immediate.

Concepts, Understanding, and Associated Living

I now return to the initial question whether listening requires interpretation. I have already asserted that:

(1) Many utterances are already well-understood by specific listeners and stand in no need of interpretation to or by them.

I now want to add that:

(2) Everyday understanding in listening does not arise from interpretation but from habit bred through mutual participation in associated forms of living.

The problem with philosophical views that see people as building up categories of understanding in their own minds, and then constructing knowledge by interpreting the given in experience by means of those categories, is that they situate concepts, and concept development, in individual minds rather than anchor them in communities of practice.

Humans acquire concrete understandings by participating in common life forms with their associated language uses or “language games” structured by rules. Language use is implicated in life activities.⁴ The umpire’s call of “strike,” the bride’s statement “I do,” the mechanic’s shout of “wrench” or the surgeon’s of “scalpel” are implicit in forms of living: baseball, marriage, auto repair, or medicine. People begin life with strong biological conditioning for language acquisition but without innate concepts. The latter are built up not by or in people but by and in their groups in the process of working out their associated forms of living. Concepts are adaptive tools, means of making meaningful discriminations, in which what is meaningful depends on usefulness in these forms of living. People learn concepts from others, use them in communicative exchanges with others, and stand corrected by others. They share the concepts in common and their meanings are clear on their face to members of the group, no matter how obscure and in need of interpretation to us. When one member of the community of practice using a concept is speaking to another, there does not exist two poles between which something in the way of an interpretation can enter.

To repeat for emphasis: it is not that each person merely has the *same* concept in his or her head; concepts are not in the head at all – they are rather located in words anchored in communities of practice in which speakers and listeners participate. These communities, with their inherent language uses and shared understandings, are constructed over time by progressive invention, exchange, incorporation, and use, but each person’s concepts are not built up in this way; they are acquired whole in learning to participate in common forms of living and are generally applied directly and immediately, without mediation by interpretations or other cognitive processes (see note 7).

Concepts, Conceptions, and Constructions

There is a sense in which a person’s ideas can be said to be individual or personal, but this sense is not relevant to the question of whether listening implies interpretation. People who have experienced nasty marriages, for example, may form such sour views of marriage that the very word fills them with dread. In this case the term “marriage” has come to have individual semantic associations, but these will only rarely affect their application of the concept “marriage” to cases, that is, their *use* of the concept as a tool of meaningful discrimination, or the understanding by others in their language community of that use.

⁴ Of course the formulations here come directly from Wittgenstein. See Huemer (2004, p. 7): “language is a public practice ... to understand what a person means by an utterance ... we do not have to read his mind to grasp the meanings he attaches to the utterance, but rather to listen to what he says. Meanings are not in the head; they are in words anchored in social practices.”

They are likely to agree about who is and who is not married, even though they disagree with various propositions about marriage – for example, that it is generally a good thing. They might for example claim that marriage is bondage.

We might say that they now have a different *conception* of marriage, meaning by “conception” a complex of attitudes and beliefs. We can even say that people construct their conceptions and their knowledge from experience. But possessing different *conceptions* does not, generally speaking, imply having different *concepts*, nor does it create barriers to understanding. Those with the bondage *conception* readily understand the utterances of more sanguine speakers about marriage, even though they strongly disagree with them.⁵

Of course, those with the bondage *conception* *might* move towards the construction of new and different *concepts*. All of our common practices of living are perpetually under strain, are pressured to evolve to fit new circumstances; as they evolve their inherent vocabularies do as well. A person might move from first insisting that marriage (in the ordinary sense) is bondage to refusing even to apply the term “marriage” to unions in which the partners do not suffer under constraint. They might even join with others in experiments with polyamorous “free-riage” unions, celebrated with distinct rituals and free from implied constraints. This vocabulary innovation may or may not take hold, depending in part on whether such free-riage practices can be sustained and spread. Or to take a familiar example, as homosexuals became more widely accepted in society they evolved forms of union that eventually came to be recognized as marriages – first informally and eventually with equal legal status.

The point is: people can pressure for conceptual change by using old vocabularies in new ways or inventing new practices with new vocabularies. Nonetheless there are no “private languages.” For those within the imagined new polyamorous community of practice the assertion that John and Mary are now “free-ried” is clear on its face and understood directly without interpretation, just as there is no room for interpretation when a speaker says to a listener in our community of practice, for example, that Joe and Mary are married.⁶ The terms are transparent, clear on their face. The speaker and listener share them. There is no space to insert anything between speaker and listener to elucidate or explicate the speaker’s utterance, to make it clear or explicit to the listener.

Interpretation and Listening in Classrooms

Now I want to return to the paradigms of classroom listening notated at the beginning of this essay. I will consider two cases: listening to lectures and listening to stories.

⁵ A memorable example of what seems to me to be a combination of suggestive ideas about meaning as used in culturally specific practices and confusion between concept and conception is given in Christopher Isherwood’s *Christopher and His Kind* (1979, p. 20–21). The suggestive phase begins where Isherwood says that in giving English lessons to German students he would tell them, “A table doesn’t mean *ein tisch*. . . you must never say to yourself *it means*. That’s altogether the wrong approach. What you must say to yourself is: Over there in England, they have a thing called a table. We may go to England and look at it and say ‘That’s our *tisch*.’ But it isn’t. The two things are essentially different because they’ve been thought about differently by two nations with different cultures. Of course if you were in England and brought one back here, it would become *ein tisch*. But not immediately.” The confused phase begins when he says that he had learned German solely to be able to talk to his sexual partners, so that the entire German language for him was “irradiated by sex.” Thus “the difference between a table and *ein tisch* was that table was the dining table in his mother’s house and *ein tisch* was *ein tisch* in the Cozy Corner, the bar where he hooked up for sex. Here he has shifted from saying that the English and Germans have different *concepts* to saying that he had a unique, individually constructed *conception*.”

⁶ I admit that this may be a poor example, because the institution of marriage has been under such strain, leading to the spread of “open marriages” and informal companionate unions that eventually become common-law marriages. I grant that today a person told that Joe and Mary are married might intelligibly ask, “in what sense?” It is still more likely, however, to detect the need for interpretation only in cases of deviation from familiar marriage norms.

Listening to Lectures: First I take up students listening to a lecture. Lectures generally involve the use of technical terms specific to the academic disciplines or fields being taught. English teachers use the vocabulary of criticism, biology teachers the vocabularies of anatomy and physiology and chemistry, etc. When they are first heard by students these terms will be obscure. Students will not in general understand them, in part because the concepts are imported into the lecture hall from distant and unfamiliar practices of humanities or science scholarship. In some cases the words are already familiar to students, but have been taken up by the disciplines as technical terms with quite different meanings. Familiar examples include “energy” and “work” in physics, and “criticism” in English. As a result, some students form misconceptions that block their understanding of school subject matters.

In such cases, however, it is the *speaker* who needs to interpret these terms, that is, to explain their specific uses in the disciplines, not the *listener*, the student. And the lecturer’s interpretations presuppose that students already have background understandings that ready them for these interpretations. Good lecturers will provide many background examples and connect them to situations familiar to students. Herbart’s (1908) well-known theory of the lesson focuses narrowly on this problem.

Of course, students will sometimes find that lecturers’ interpretations of concepts and methods are no clearer than the notions they are intended to explain. In these cases their subsequent efforts at listening will fail, and they will have to turn to textbooks, CliffsNotes, Khan Academy videos, or other resources to assist them in interpreting the lectures. The point is: the need for interpretation in listening is accounted for by poor understanding of *specific* materials in the lectures. While the speakers often must interpret their concepts and claims, there is no *general* need for listeners to interpret lectures presented to them. Good lecturers provide necessary interpretations themselves.

Listening to Stories: Almost all school children have been initiated into storytelling practices in their homes, churches, or neighbourhood communities. Phrases such as “once upon a time...” or “long, long ago...” clue the child to the fact that the storytelling “game” has begun. Children know this game and assume the appropriate attitude for story listening.

Stories can, of course, be heard and enjoyed at several levels. Children may be entranced, fascinated at one level, with eyes aglow and bodies tensed in anticipation. Simple observation will confirm that they have listened, understood, and “got” the story experience. The story may possess further layers of meaning, of which the child may get no more than vague intimations... or miss altogether. These deep meanings may or may not be within the child’s grasp at that time.

Consider, for example, the analogy of sexual awakening in “Sleeping Beauty.” Few educated adults reading this story in *Grimms’ Fairy Tales* will miss this analogy if they go looking for deeper meanings. Here we would hardly expect young children to interpret the story as a sexual analogy, or necessarily consider it a good thing if they did. Still less would we feel compelled to serve up this sort of interpretation, much less to teach the young child how to construct such interpretations.

As children enter adolescence it remains a matter of judgment how and when, or even whether, to enter such pedagogical minefields in the classroom. In general, it is a matter of judgment when to introduce interpretations into the classroom, to teach methods of interpretation, and to expect students to make their own interpretations and enter into interpretive discussions. The point here, as above, is that the need for interpretation is specific to situation and addressees. There is no necessary role for interpretation in listening to classroom stories.

Conclusion

I close by noting that in classroom situations interpretation can sometimes add to and intensify, but also sometimes instead block or frustrate, the listening experience. This is a topic a dual process theory of

listening can illuminate,⁷ but that would require another paper. For now a restatement of my theses will have to suffice:

(1) Many utterances are already well-understood by specific listeners and stand in no need of interpretation to or by them.

(2) Everyday understanding in listening does not arise from interpretation but from habit bred through mutual participation in associated forms of living.

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⁷ My paper “Listening from Silence: Inner Composure and Engagement” (Waks, 2008) draws on a dual process analysis to indicate how and why interpretation can block experiences relevant to making and confirming valid judgments.

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