Sentence-Level Stress is Life and Death

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Introduction
Francis Ford Coppola’s The Conversation (1974), starring Gene Hackman, provides a haunting but insightful example by which we can reexamine certain tasks confronting second language (L2) students of listening comprehension. The film reminds us that motive and meaning are encoded in suprasegmental stress patterns of English, and that listeners’ interpretations of these stress patterns can be greatly influenced by their previous knowledge and experiences. The film’s character, a professional eavesdropper, serves as a parallel to our students. He obsesses over the recording of a conversation, and the plot revolves around his understanding of the major stress in a short sentence. Indeed, someone’s life depends on it! With segments of Coppola’s film to guide us, we can analyze what is involved in our students’ listening comprehension process in three parts: the conversation (i.e. the listening material), the interpretation (i.e. the mind of the listener), and the comprehension (i.e. joining the mind of the listener to the material listened to).

The insights from the film are not groundbreaking, but rather unique and helpful reminders that aid us as teachers in better understanding our students. Facing the listener is the listening material (the film’s “conversation”), and the numerous elements (linguistic, cultural, or other) embedded within. Our element of interest here is limited to the suprasegmental stress patterns of spoken English, which, of course, all students of English as a second language (ESL) speaking and listening must gain familiarity with (McNerney & Mendelsohn, 1992). It has long been obvious that this rhythmic structure of English can greatly affect meaning in a sentence, but is it possible for a listener to actually hear that rhythm differently than the speaker says it because of prior knowledge and expectations? The film’s story makes us consider this question as we watch the listener’s interpretation unfold.

In this act of interpreting, listeners must use what is already in their minds to make sense of new input. Teachers can benefit from recalling this fundamental notion of students’ using prior knowledge to obtain new knowledge, an insight emphasized by influential philosophers and educators such as Immanuel Kant in the 18th century (as cited in Carrell & Eisterhold, 1983) and John Milton Gregory in the 19th (1886/2004). Over the last few decades, applied linguists have built on terminology introduced by Frederic Bartlett in 1932 and referred to this importance of background knowledge in their discussions of “script and schema theory” (as cited in Semino, 2001; for listening, see Sadighi & Zare, 2006; Long, 1989, 1990; Richards, 1983; for reading, see Carrel & Eisterhold, 1983). It is by way of this previously acquired knowledge that the listener interprets any spoken data, and while it is typically an essential asset
that teachers should tap into (Sadighi & Zare), the film demonstrates how its influence is also such that it can cause the listener major failure.

The Conversation (The Listening Material)

The title of Coppola’s film refers to an obscure conversation between a man and woman walking circles on a square in San Francisco. This conversation (climaxing in one key sentence) is the listening material that we will continually refer to, and the listener of it is a professional eavesdropper. In the opening scene, the camera slowly zooms in on the square, carrying sounds of bustling crowds and street musicians. As the viewers, we slowly begin to make out broken bits of this particular couple’s conversation, but only as it is heard through the recording devices of our hidden listener. In appropriate fashion for our realm of language learning, we first hear the conversation as mechanical noises and meaningless babble, reminiscent of how a foreign language first sounds. Slowly, familiar words emerge from the robotic voices, accompanied by images of the man and woman. The couple appears to be making small talk as they pace, but they also appear nervous and concerned, and apparently don’t want anyone to know that they are together. We hear the conversation and piece it together from the perspective of professional eavesdropper, Harry Caul (Gene Hackman).

Harry could be called the ideal listener, and he makes for an interesting parallel to our students. His aim in life is to hear what people are saying, even if in whispers. Despite his paranoid, reclusive lifestyle and obsession for privacy, Harry is “pre-eminent” in the field of audio surveillance, known as “the best bugger on the West Coast.” Like our L2 students of listening comprehension, Harry must gather data in the form of spoken words from distant places. For our students, the words are “distant” because they are in another language, and for Harry, they are physically distant and spoken in secret. Either way, the task requires a good listener.

Like a dedicated student, Harry will stop at nothing to get the job done. The couple’s voices are nothing in the multitude of louder noises on the busy square, but Harry has undercover operatives sneaking around everywhere, aiming small microphones from shopping bags and big microphones like guns down from surrounding rooftops. He’s using every possible resource to hone in on and capture these two people’s words. Gathering the scattered dialogue with our listener, we can make out the couple’s vague, but repeated references to a mysterious third party (the woman’s husband), who it seems they are hiding from, and who we later find is paying Harry for the surveillance. Amid the small talk, we hear them ask each other, “Does it bother you… walking around in circles?” and “Do you think we can do this?” They stop pacing and talk lowly, “…Sunday, Jack Tar Hotel… 3 o’clock, room 773,” and the conversation culminates with the man’s solemn words, “He’d kill us if he got the chance.”

This conversation, climaxing in the final statement, is the listening material that Harry eventually puts together into a coherent recording. With his specialized equipment and expertise, our listener gathers the words spoken from afar and brings them near for analysis. In their eavesdropping station (a van on the street), one of his colleagues
refers to what the man and woman might be talking about, but Harry won’t be
deterred: “I don’t care what they’re talking about. All I want is a nice, fat recording.”
Like any L2 listener, Harry wants the spoken data wrapped up in a nice little package,
and maybe like a weary student taking exams, Harry is more concerned with the
payoff than he is with the content of the material. However, the irony in Harry’s
wishes is that even when he later becomes obsessed with the content, the “nice, fat
recording” proves to be inadequate for his successful interpretation of the
conversation.

The Interpretation (The Mind of the Listener)

With the listening material packaged up and ready for analysis,
the mind of the listener begins to determine what it all means.
The speaker’s words must be brought from a great distance to
the listener, starting on the other side of a gulf and then drawn
across the vast space between in the process of interpretation.
It is at this point that the background knowledge of the
listener meets head on to grapple with the listening material,
and where we are reminded of the “active and creative
dimensions of listening” (Richards, p. 222). As Richards’
landmark article notes, the role of inferencing and interpretation within the hearer is
crucial.

Something dark in the realms of Harry’s schema is stirred up not long after the
recording is made. The situation reminds him of a past assignment, one in which
people were murdered because of his work. We see Harry’s troubled conscience in
his confession to a priest, and he appears sincere in his regret. Even without wanting
to think about the conversation or know anything about the people involved, Harry
begins to interpret in light of his past experiences and guilt. In his troubled state, he
ever hesitates in giving up the tapes and taking the money ($15,000) when he has the
chance. He doesn’t like that he is not allowed to see the man who hired him (a rich
business executive played by Robert Duvall), as was promised, but instead has to
make the deal with the suspicious office assistant (Harrison Ford). Something about it
all strikes Harry wrong, and he decides to hold on to the tapes.

Back at headquarters (a back-alley abandoned building), Harry lays out the recording
again with his colleague. In fear of what could happen to these people, Harry is
dabbling in interpretation, but quietly and reluctantly. The colleague, for fun, persists
in trying to figure out what this forbidden conversation is all about, and Harry reacts
angrily and hypocritically, “We’d have a much better track if you’d pay more
attention to the recording and less attention to what they’re talking about.” In this
statement that would make communicative language teachers cringe, Harry
emphasizes the technical aspects of the utterance while completely dismissing the
content. In his attempts to eavesdrop on people while somehow keeping out of their
business, Harry would like to think of them as clanging cymbals that make
meaningless sounds. He’s comfortable if he can see the conversation as mechanical
noises, such as those in the film’s opening scene, with no meaning yet attached to the
signs. However, he fails in these efforts to be detached, and he is not such a poor
listener as his comment suggests, for even as he scolds his colleague (who eventually
leaves in frustration), Harry himself is drawn into the meaning of the words.
Harry’s reluctant interest focuses on the key sentence that the man quietly says to the woman: “He’d kill us if he got the chance.” Harry’s interpretation of this statement is what the entire plot hinges upon. Surrounded by surveillance photos of the man and woman, he hunches over his equipment and relives the words and images in his head. He plays the sentence on the recording, makes adjustments, and plays them again. Who will kill them if he gets the chance? What chance does this person need? Harry is afraid he knows the answers. He is now drawn into their world, far beyond the mere “track,” and he has brought along his own world and its baggage. Plagued by his past experiences, Harry is now more seriously questioning his deeds, and he wonders if the would-be killer is the one paying him to spy.

The question we consider at this point in the story is whether Harry’s eagerness for content and meaning will be enough for him to successfully interpret this string of words. It seems a simple enough sentence, but if we consider it closely, we are reminded that the precise meaning depends on where we place the major sentence stress. The most expected way to say it is “He’d KILL us if he got the chance,” as this would place the major stress on the main content word (McNerney & Mendelsohn, p. 75). However, we should recognize that this presumes against other possibilities, such as these:

HE’d kill us if he got the chance. (i.e. some other guy wouldn’t kill us)
He’d kill us if he got the CHANCE. (i.e. he won’t get the chance)

As Harry contemplates, we see the images of the people and hear the sentence as Harry hears it: “He’d KILL us if he got the chance.” As might be predicted, the major sentence stress is on “kill.” Our listener has the nice, fat recording along with concern for meaning, and it seems that comprehension has arrived. The tapes, having detailed information about where and when the man and woman are meeting next, might provide just the “chance” needed for the jealous husband to kill. An up-close shot on Harry’s face shows him nod in grim understanding.

But this is where it gets tricky, because although at this point we have no reason to suspect it, something in Harry’s complex web of schemata is messing with his interpretation of the statement. He is constantly reminded of what happened in his past when people were killed because of his work, and he is in constant fear of it happening again. In a dream that shows a bit further into Harry’s mind, he chases the woman from the conversation, trying to warn her about “murder.” She remains unreachable, with her face hidden in a thick fog. The dream reveals Harry’s state of desperation, but we don’t see until later how, in that state of being, he could be pushing outside meaning onto this key sentence.

Harry had withheld the tapes in fear of what would happen, but the very night he realizes that he must destroy them, the night of his dream, his secret life is invaded (brought on by his own flaws) and the tapes are stolen. This happens in the days leading up to the couple’s next rendezvous, which, as Harry remembers from the tapes, is in a certain hotel room, Sunday at 3:00pm. Of course, Harry can’t stay away, as this is likely the time and place where it will all go down. Though fearful and irresolute, Harry is driven to at least go to the room next door, and to consider how he might intervene. Once there, however, our listener does nothing more than listen (with his eavesdropping equipment), and what he hears appears to be his fears coming
to fruition. In a nightmarish scene involving muffled voices, screams, and a bloody hand on the balcony window, Harry interprets that it has all happened again, and that the man and woman were murdered because of his work.

Throughout the film, we have seen much of what is occurring in Harry’s mind, and in fact, most of what we experience as viewers is via Harry’s interpretations. What he understands to have happened at the hotel flows directly from his understanding of the sentence, “He’d kill us if he got the chance,” and we have no choice but to interpret as Harry does. The story’s conclusion shows, however, that while we have had a clear look into the mind of our listener, we have not had a clear look at the utterance as it was actually stated by the speaker.

The Comprehension
(The Mind of the Listener is Joined with the Material Listened To)

Listeners’ ultimate comprehension can happen in a number of ways, pleasant, as in normal conversation, or unpleasant, as in Harry Caul’s case. Harry gets blindsided with the true meaning of “He’d kill us if he got the chance” in an eerie scene where he sees the woman alive who was supposedly murdered in the hotel. In this encounter not a day later, he sees her sitting comfortably in a limo, and unlike the dream, there is no fog and he can see her calm face clearly. Shortly after, Harry sees the man from the conversation as well. Looking at them now, we know that the bloody hand on the hotel window was neither of theirs.

In his mind, Harry revisits the conversation, which the viewer again is allowed to witness. This mental revisiting is significant as yet another instance demonstrating where it all happens in listening comprehension. The meaning is in the words (although some enthusiasts of schema theory might dispute this; e.g. see Carrell & Eisterhold, p.556), but the comprehension of it, of course, is in the listener’s head. The spoken utterance itself may be quite clear to the speaker and other onlookers, but yet not be the same utterance that is in the head of the listener (Avery & Ehrlich, p. xv). Harry hears it all again, but now reinterpreting according to different external evidence that will overbear all other factors of influence that molded his earlier interpretation. Whereas he was seeing through a lens of previous experience before (i.e. interpreting based on what had happened in a similar situation in the past), he now sees evidence that forces him to consider the same words with new ears:

“He’d kill US if he got the chance.”

Listening closely and seeing the conversation played out yet again in Harry’s mind, the viewer can hear the change in the major sentence stress, a subtle change of sound indicating a vast change of meaning. The new stress pattern indicates that the roles of murderer(s) and victim(s) have been assigned to the wrong characters. We now see that the would-be victims were planning a murder.
What Harry had first heard (“He’d KILL us if he got the chance.”) made him conclude that the speakers would be victims; or rather, what he had presumed about the speakers being potential victims caused him to actually hear what he’d first heard. L2 learners often go a strikingly similar route. Avery and Ehrlich (1992) make an important observation for ESL teachers along these lines:

> The native language not only affects the ability to produce English sounds but also the ability to hear English sounds. Experienced teachers certainly know the frustration involved in having students continually repeat a mispronounced word in the same way. Students may seem impervious to correction but, in fact, the problem often arises because the word is heard through the sound system of the native language. Thus, sounds which occur in the native language will be heard rather than the actual sounds of English which are being produced by the teacher…It is as if learners hear the second language through a ‘filter’… (p. xv)

Although the role of the native language is usually a different discussion than that of schema theory, we can see how they are both found within the same general realm of prior or “world” knowledge, and how L2 listeners and native-speaking eavesdroppers alike can encounter new material and actually hear it differently than the speaker says it. Harry’s interpretation is informed by and “filtered” through this overall body of world knowledge, which, as Long (1989) describes, “is experientially-based and enables individuals to make inferences and form expectations,” and which we can assume includes both linguistic knowledge and knowledge formed from particular past experiences.

Harry’s nice, fat recording had been relative to what already existed in his mind, prior knowledge with scripts ready for whatever relevant situations should come. As in all learners, Harry’s previously existing mental framework did not sit idly by, but jumped up with hands raised to tell him what it knew. In this case, it was a script largely informed by a guilty conscience seeking above all else to avoid certain catastrophes from his past.

Emerging in this conclusion is the tragic irony that Harry helped the murderers, and that he did it through his skill as a professional listener. While it seemed that the man who had hired Harry was acting alone to obtain information about his wife, apparently a traitor (the office assistant played by Ford) working close to the husband had conspired with the man and woman from the “conversation,” staging at least some of it (with its reference to the next rendezvous) to lure the husband in his jealousy to a place where they could carry out the crime. Harry’s comprehension is confirmed in the final scenes where he has brief encounters with the murderers and finds that they have covered up the death as a “car crash.” The final stage of Harry’s descent is in the last scene of the film, when, alone in his apartment playing his saxophone, he gets a call in which his own music is played back to him on a recording. The voice then warns him not to get involved, and that they will “be listening.” In yet another reversal of roles, the eavesdropper has become the eavesdropped, and after ripping his apartment to shreds looking for the bug, Harry can do nothing but play some more blues.
Conclusion

While the film may leave some unanswered questions (as critics have noted), it remains intriguing for its account of our listener’s downfall. Harry does not hear the sounds of the sentence correctly until after he is shown its correct meaning, which by then is too late. Once the meaning of the statement becomes clear because of what Harry sees with his own eyes, the major stress of the sentence also becomes clear in his mind, and viewers of the film are able to hear the clear difference between how Harry first hears it and how he later hears it correctly, as it was actually said by the speaker.

The circumstances of Harry’s failure as a listener are surely nothing like anything our students could encounter, but the drama of it is memorable. Coppola’s film provokes teachers to take another look at familiar issues involved in listening comprehension. Regarding suprasegmentals, the main events of the plot carried out in the plans of the plotters were embedded within the stress pattern of one sentence. In approaching this sentence or any other spoken data, listeners will inescapably use their background knowledge, and as the film shows, even a stress pattern can be heard wrongly as they do so.

Along more familiar lines, Avery and Ehrlich point out that “Pompeii” initially sounds like “Bombay” to a native Arabic speaker (p. 111), because the /p/ sound is not included in what they already know (their native language). Likewise, native English speakers will not hear certain sounds spoken in Arabic, but rather will hear whatever sound from English that most closely corresponds to it. In both cases, and in all other areas of listening comprehension, the learner grapples with the new knowledge by using his previous knowledge, which teachers should be aware of in order to consider how to assist students in doing it most productively.

The film reminds us of an initial gulf that exists between what is produced by the speaker and what is taken in by the listener. Whether narrow or wide, this gulf is inevitable, due to how the sign always take some fraction of time to first be perceived and then be understood by the interpreter. The speaker’s utterance starts out on the other side of this gulf, and the listener must bring it across in the process of successful interpretation, thereby closing the gap and comprehending. We are reminded that the complex factors brought to this picture by both the language and listener are such that even native speakers may not easily close this gap. Reconsidering these issues in listening comprehension as portrayed in the film’s events can enable us to better understand our role as teachers in aiding students’ success.
References


