



# Listening genres: The emergence of relevance structures through the reception of sound

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## Abstract

This article proposes the concept of *listening genres* and analyzes the constitution of a particular case, “psychoanalytic listening.” The aim is to conceptualize listening practices by focusing on how they create contextual frameworks of interaction, which hold the capacity to direct behavior. The argument is that through listening, sound images produce different contexts depending on the particular way in which an individual *listens*. Social actors, thus, listen both pragmatically and intentionally. Hearers listen with a purpose, they look for (directed) meanings, and the outcome of their interpretation transforms various social dimensions. To exemplify how listening genres are produced and reproduced, this article explores psychoanalytic listening as a genre in a multi-family psychoanalytic setting in Buenos Aires, Argentina. © 2014 Elsevier B.V. All rights reserved.

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## 1. Introduction

This article examines the idea that listening can be categorized into genres. It argues that just as there are many ways of speaking, there are many possible ways of listening. For example, compassionate listening is not the same as when a mechanic is listening to the sound of a broken car, and listening to Wagner’s *The Ring of the Nibelung* opera is different from a doctor listening to a patient’s heart through the stethoscope. A music expert, for instance, may be listening *for* the musical form of a particular music piece, focusing on structure, syntax, style, and history, through either architectonic or synoptic listening, which requires a certain knowledge of musical structure (Kivy, 2001), while a neophyte who listens *to* the same musical piece may experience, instead, a physical and emotional change (goose bumps, tears), without having any notion of musical structure.

Each particular way of listening in the examples provided, I contend, is a listening genre. A listening genre is a framework of relevance that surfaces at the moment of reception and orients the apprehension of sound. Sound reception is not neutral, it always involves a particular type of ideological and practice intervention, and it is never automatic. The listener, by focusing through a particular frame, creates a *context*, or more precisely a *contextual configuration of reception* that provides a unique interpretative lens. Listening genres—as speech genres—are types that are produced at the moment of reception (Hanks, 1992; Bauman and Briggs, 1990; Bauman, 1992) and they are social in that they present a “cultural horizon” (Hanks, 1996) by helping to elucidate how the listener “tunes” the ear into a particular frequency and thus, as much as ways of speaking (Hymes, 1974) create structures of relevance that provide directionality.

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In order to understand listening genres we have to understand listening more broadly. There are forms of listening that involve time and practice, and others that are more spontaneous. As suggested by the Wagner example, I am establishing a basic analytic distinction between what I call listening *for*, which entails attending to particular aspects of sound and is, thus, intentional; and listening *to*, an ephemeral and spontaneous reception of sound that is not intentional and does not require conscious interpretation. I find this distinction more exact than the listening/hearing distinction, since the words listening and hearing in Spanish (*escuchar* and *oír*) are interchangeable, having to a large extent the same semantic meaning. In English, hearing and listening have clearer boundaries and are used to mean different positions vis-à-vis sounds (although sometimes the boundaries cross). Hence, listening *to* is equivalent to simply hearing (something that just happens), whereas listening *for* is closer to listening in the English language since it entails attention.

To exemplify how listening genres are constituted, I focus on psychoanalytic listening as a particular listening genre in Buenos Aires, Argentina, where I have conducted over twenty months of fieldwork. I chose this case because in Argentina psychoanalysis has surpassed the clinical setting and permeated different spheres of social interaction to the point of becoming a social *way of listening*.<sup>1</sup> Argentina has by far the highest concentration of psychotherapists per capita in the world. In 2005 the World Health Organization estimated that there were 154 psychologists—including psychoanalysts<sup>2</sup>—for every 100,000 inhabitants. In comparison, Denmark, the second-ranked country, had 85 psychologists, and the United States 31.<sup>3</sup> A more recent study estimated an astonishing rate of 789 psychotherapists every 100,000 inhabitants in the capital city of Buenos Aires (Alonso et al., 2008). Argentina has one of Latin America's most extended public welfare systems, which grants free access to mental health services to the population as a whole. This explains in part those high numbers. Shaped since the 1940s by a French influence that drove it closer to the humanities and away from the rather "scientific" Anglo-Saxon model, psychology became a very important discipline within Argentine society for a variety of reasons, among them the fact that it incorporated women very early, while medicine was still a dominantly male arena; it provided a language to modernization and Marxist discourses; and above all, became prominent at the public university precisely when it expanded dramatically in the 1960s, along with the public health system. The synergy between the university (also public) and the health system allowed psychoanalysts to extend their practice beyond the private clinic, reaching vast sectors of the population through the public hospital (Balán, 1991). Psychoanalysis became hence not just a private practice for the educated upper classes—as in other modern cities like New York—but a therapeutic form, and a language, generalized across society. Psychoanalysis has been seen as the main reason why the Argentine mental health market resists the globalization of the pharmaceutical industry. Since the 1970s, political and economic crises further strengthened the role of psychoanalysis as an interpretive and therapeutic tool (see Damousi and Plotkin, 2009; García, 2005; Lakoff, 2005; Plotkin, 2002).

As I will show in this paper, a key part of the formation and spread of psychoanalytic listening is its reflexivity. Psychoanalysts are acutely aware of their own ways of listening and speaking, and they attend to analysands through a specific interpretative lens. Typically, this means they go far beyond what a patient says to infer which is meant but unsaid. Spoken words are placed in a relation of relevance to unspoken (perhaps unrecognized) motives and feelings. A signature statement of the genre is: "when you say x, I hear y." It is the regularities of the genre that allow the analyst to get from what is said to what is inferentially heard.<sup>4</sup> In this paper I am relying in speech about listening: how social actors talk about listening, in order to understand how listening practices affects and constitutes social life. To do so, I use examples recorded at the Multi-Family Structured Psychoanalytic Therapeutic (MFSPT) a particular form of group psychoanalysis in Buenos Aires, to demonstrate how listening practices function during interaction.

## 2. Why genre?

There is a substantial literature on the formation and propagation of textual, verbal, and musical genres, ranging from the study of poetic structure, to music composition, practice theory, and literary theory, to name just a few areas of investigation.<sup>5</sup> The abundance of studies that focus on genres is motivated by the fact that genres have the capacity to create context and social relations bringing an array of ideologies, orders of knowledge, or horizons together in practice (Hanks, 1987). Each genre has structural and compositional dimensions that organize the thematic content and style of

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion on psychoanalysis in Argentina outside the clinic, see Balán (1991), Plotkin (2002), Visacovsky (2008) and Dagfal (2009).

<sup>2</sup> In Argentina there is a semantic overlap between the words psychoanalysis and psychology.

<sup>3</sup> The American Psychological Association (APA) estimated a smaller number for the United States: 27 per 100,000 inhabitants (Romero, 2012).

<sup>4</sup> It is important to mention that the process of inference is co-constituted between the analyst and the analysand. The analysand brings to the encounter a particular frame, product of individual experience, and the analyst makes sense of it through a dialectic process between what it says, and what it infers.

<sup>5</sup> For poetic structure, see Jakobson (1960), Bauman (1975), Bauman and Babcock (1984), Bauman and Briggs (1990), Briggs (1993), Banti and Giannattasio (2004), Banti and Giannattasio (2006). For literary theory, Bakhtin and Holquist (1981), Bakhtin et al. (1986), Jauss (1974), Jauss and Bahti (1982), Barthes (1975), and Todorov (1975). For music genres, Kivy (2001), Rentfrow and McDonald (2010). And for practice theory, see Hanks (1987).

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