

The Japanese Art of Listening :An ethnographic investigation into the role of the listener

聴くということ：現代日本社会における聴き手の役割に関する民族誌的研究

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This thesis investigates the art of listening in Japan through an analysis of self-help literature on listening and ethnographic observation of hostesses (escorts) and listening volunteers.

Self-help guides teach that a good listener is one who is attentive, expressive and empathetic. This literature, however, implicitly instructs emotional labour, and tacitly suggests dealing with power relations by introducing therapeutic listening for superiors and ‘zealous listening’ (my term) for subordinates. The guides also disclose the conventional image of listening: femininity and inferiority. Although the authors attempt to promote powerful and functional listening, the conventional image remains due to the continuation of praising women as being proficient listeners.

GINZA hostesses are often introduced as ideal listeners in these books. I worked as a hostess and observed them using listening as a streetwise skill, through such tactics as: *aizuchi*, strategic questioning, reading the atmosphere, becoming masters of *tsukkomi/boke* and ‘reaction kings’, teamwork listening and *nagara* listening. This enables them to stay in subordinate and supportive positions, and to help customers dominate a conversation. The customers can gain a sense of recognition, enhance intimate relationships with the hostesses or rebuild their masculinity. Hostesses’ listening is ‘an interactional weapon of the weak’, gaining money, business connections and prestige, but this, in turn, intensifies the gendered division of labour in interactions. By contrast, listening volunteers – who converse with local elderly people using listening as a tool for reaching out – sometimes fall short in conversation, not realising that their listening functions as a gift. This forces clients to stay in helpee positions and makes them feel obliged to reciprocate. Listening here can be ‘a mask for silent authority’. Superficially hostesses and listening volunteers do not resemble each other; however, both deal with power dynamics.

Their other common aspect is performing emotional labour. These listeners suppress or discard their feelings – such as disgust or boredom – and generate socially required emotions like respect or compassion, whilst displaying situationally expected listening

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behaviour. They hope to generate a certain state of mind in others to a greater or lesser extent, and so must perform emotional labour. Listening is therefore emotional labour.

As my analysis shows, listening is not simply a skill of hearing or understanding others, but also a way of associating with them. Therefore, listening is an 'art', which requires both fundamental skills, *and* a listener's personal way of relating to others.