

COMMENTARY

Listening at different scales: Sociolinguistic perception and the listening subject

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Abstract

This commentary argues that sociophonetic perception studies and linguistic anthropological analyses of the listening subject examine the same underlying process—ideologically structured listening—though at different observational scales. Drawing on Inoue's foundational work and subsequent research on enregisterment, mediatization, and indexical inversion, I show how experimental and ethnographic approaches each illuminate complementary dimensions of listening as both cognitive and sociohistorical. I advocate for a multiscalar model of listening that brings these traditions into closer dialogue, emphasizing how collaboration across methods can reveal the ideological conditions under which voices become audible, meaningful, and contested.

KEYWORDS

listening subject, media, sociolinguistic perception

SAME PROCESS, DIFFERENT SCALES?

Studies of sociolinguistic perception and the listening subject are typically housed in different academic traditions—variationist or experimental sociolinguistics on the one hand, and linguistic anthropology on the other—and tend to rely on distinct methodological paradigms. Research on sociolinguistic perception often draws on psychometric tools such as matched-guise experiments, cloze tasks, or other forms of perceptual testing designed to probe listeners' cognitive representations of social meaning. In contrast, work on the

This commentary is part of a *Cross-Journal Symposium on Listening Practices and Linguistic Perception* in which early career scholars engage with Inoue (2003) and six additional articles published in the *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* and the *Journal of Sociolinguistics*. All papers are assembled in a virtual issue, available at [https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/toc/10.1002/\(ISSN\)9999-0009.Listening-Practices-and-Linguistic-Perception](https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/toc/10.1002/(ISSN)9999-0009.Listening-Practices-and-Linguistic-Perception).

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listening subject is more likely to emerge from long-term ethnographic fieldwork, drawing on interviews, participant observation, naturalistic interaction, and metalinguistic commentary. These differences in method produce different types of data: Sociolinguistic perception studies often focus on measurable outputs like lexical recall, speaker ratings, or reaction times, capturing how perception can be shaped by visual or auditory cues. Listening subject studies, by contrast, typically explore how listeners are socially and historically positioned, emphasizing language ideologies, media circulation, and broader semiotic regimes that shape what becomes audible and interpretable in the first place. While these contrasts are real, they can obscure important commonalities. Returning to Inoue's seminal work on Japanese women's language, we can begin to see how both traditions account for the same underlying processes, albeit at different scales. In other words, although studies of sociolinguistic perception and listening subjects differ in discipline, method, and data type, they are ultimately investigating the same phenomenon: How listening is structured by ideology. What distinguishes them, I argue, is not their object of study but their observational stance—focused more or less on the temporal, cognitive, or sociohistorical conditions under which listening becomes meaningful.

A closer reading of Inoue's (2003) article illustrates how both linguistic anthropology and perceptual sociophonetics account for different aspects of the phenomenon she describes. Her analysis traces the historically contingent enregisterment (Agha, 2005) of Japanese women's language during the Meiji era, a moment of modernization and social upheaval in which gender roles were being renegotiated. On one level, Inoue shows how young women became newly audible as a social category—not through any radical shift in their speech, but because shifting ideologies of gender and modernity positioned men to listen differently. This is the part of the story that linguistic anthropology is especially well equipped to analyze: How a social category is placed in the position of listening subject, and how ideologies construct certain voices as newly legible, salient, or problematic. In this account, listening is not just an individual act of attention but a historically produced stance made possible by broader social transformations. Inoue's work has since become foundational for scholars examining how listening is structured by ideology. Reyes (2017), for example, extends this framework to the production of postcolonial elite subjectivities in the Philippines, while Rosa and Flores (2017) draw on it to theorize raciolinguistic ideologies in the US context. These studies demonstrate how listening subjects are formed through ideologies that produce certain voices as excessive, deficient, or exemplary—and they do so by attending closely to the discursive and social processes of enregisterment as they unfold ethnographically.

But Inoue's analysis also anticipates the kinds of questions pursued in sociophonetic perception studies. When male anxieties about gender roles are projected onto female speakers, they become “materialized” as linguistic features—forms that are attributed to women's speech, whether or not they are actually present. This is the process of indexical inversion: Listeners hear particular features as iconic of a social category, even when those features are exaggerated, imagined, or ideologically overdetermined. Linguistic anthropologists have conceptualized this as a semiotic process, but sociophonetic work offers tools for testing how it happens in real time. Experimental studies can manipulate variables—such as speaker persona (D'Onofrio, 2015, 2019), ethnicity (Wong & Babel, 2017), or attractiveness (Campbell-Kibler, 2021)—to show how listeners draw inferences from speech, and how ideologies shape those inferences. In this sense, sociolinguistic perception makes it clear that indexical inversion is not merely a metaphor: It is a cognitive process that unfolds at the level of listener judgment. The ideological labor that Inoue tracks over decades can be observed, in partial and compressed form, through perception experiments that measure which cues listeners attend to, and what meanings they assign to them. What linguistic anthropology theorizes as enregisterment processes, sociophonetics operationalizes, and tests—albeit at a different scale, and often without the same attention to subject formation. Taken together,

these approaches offer a multiscalar view of how ideologies become perceptible, and how listening is structured both socially and cognitively.

TOWARD A MULTISCALAR MODEL OF LISTENING

The divergent methodological and theoretical emphases of sociophonetic perception and linguistic anthropology offer not only distinct insights but also opportunities for generative collaboration. Rather than treating these fields as parallel but separate, we might consider how they can inform one another in more sustained ways—particularly around questions of mediation, enregisterment, and the mutual constitution of speakers and listeners. One particularly promising site for convergence is the role of mediatization in shaping listener ideologies and expectations. Linguistic anthropologists have long emphasized that figures of personhood do not arise organically; they are circulated, stabilized, and made recognizable through media. Agha's work on enregisterment (2005) and mediatization (2011) foregrounds the ways in which styles, registers, and speaker types gain semiotic coherence through patterned uptake across interactional and mediated contexts. Nakassis (2016) similarly emphasizes mass media as a primary terrain through which ideological models of personhood are reproduced and contested. Yet while this analytic of mediatization has become central to linguistic anthropology, it is often peripheral or implicit in sociophonetic perception studies. Even in studies that involve face-voice pairings or personae—such as D'Onofrio (2019), which manipulates racialized personae or character types—media consumption and representation are rarely treated as variables in their own right. If perception is shaped by ideologically available speaker figures, and those figures are often drawn from media, then media analysis is not ancillary to perceptual work—it is constitutive of it.

This opens the door to more deliberate attention to *enregisterment as a process* within sociophonetic research. Much of the perception literature implicitly treats enregistered meanings as already crystallized: Sociolinguistic features are presented as linked to social categories, and experiments are designed to test the strength or consistency of these associations. But linguistic anthropology takes the stance that enregisterment is not static—it is an unfolding, contested process. Ethnographic studies offer tools for tracing how linguistic forms come to be associated with particular figures, styles, or ideologies over time. My own work (Sprengrer, 2024) approaches this from the opposite direction: Rather than using perception experiments to test listener judgments, I analyze how mediatized parody recirculates and re-iconizes a Romanian politician's speech, rendering certain phonetic features salient as ideological signs. The features in question may not have been perceptually marked *prior* to their mediatized uptake—but they become enregistered through repetition, stylization, and public metacommentary. This suggests that listening is not simply a matter of decoding existing associations, but participating in their formation.

In addition to enregistering personae or sociolinguistic categories, listening subjects also participate in the enregisterment of genres—recognizable types of speech events that carry particular ideological weight. Smalls (2018) shows that white listening subjects often interpret Black youth speech not just as socially marked, but reduce the intricacies of observed conflict to indexing a genre of “Black-on-Black violence.” That is, they hear not only racialized speakers, but an entire narrative event—a prefigured frame of interpersonal aggression that renders students' language criminal, excessive, or threatening. This genre recognition is not neutral; it is structured by antiblackness, institutional authority, and broader discourses of surveillance. Smalls's analysis shows that listening is not only about identifying who is speaking but also about locating speech within socially legible genres that carry moral and political stakes. For sociophonetic perception research, this raises the question of whether

perceptual studies might be extended to test not only judgments about who is speaking but also assumptions about what kind of communicative event is unfolding.

Pairing ethnographic research with experimental methods could allow us to observe how ideologies move from circulating discourse into perceptual response. Ethnographers are often attuned to the kinds of indexical inversion that Inoue describes—where listeners hear signs that may not be there because their social positioning primes them to do so. Experiments can test how widespread or automatic these perceptual biases are. But to understand *why* a given indexical link has taken hold and what broader ideological conditions sustain it, we need ethnographic insight. This is not to say that every ethnographer must become a perception researcher or vice versa, but that collaborations across methodological lines can offer a fuller picture. We already see gestures in this direction: Wong and Babel (2017), for instance, ask participants which ethnic groups they spend the most time with as a proxy for social network engagement, à la Gal (1978). But such a variable could be enriched. Ethnographic observation of social networks, patterns of media engagement, and language ideologies could offer more textured accounts of the contexts shaping listener perceptions.

Such collaborations would also make space for a more relational approach to listening—one that accounts for both the *experience of listening* and the *experience of being listened to*. This is especially relevant in contexts of linguistic marginalization or racialized surveillance, where the stakes of audibility are high. Edwards' (2018) work on DeafBlind communities offers a model here: She demonstrates how infrastructure, embodiment, and institutional norms co-structure both expression and uptake. Applying this lens to sociophonetic research would mean not only testing how listeners categorize speakers, but also examining how speakers navigate being *read* in particular ways—how they anticipate, resist, or reframe being listened to. This kind of mutual framing shifts the focus from discrete acts of perception to the broader sociosemiotic processes that make certain voices legible in the first place.

At the same time, it is important to note that questions of media and listening have already been central to linguistic anthropology and sociolinguistics in important ways. Weidman's (2014, 2021) work on playback singing, for example, shows how media technologies not only circulate voices but actively configure listening practices, producing particular auditory subjects. Spitulnik (1996) demonstrates how mass media environments recalibrate what kinds of voices are heard as authoritative, exemplary, or threatening. Parallel developments in research on computer-mediated communication (e.g., Androutsopoulos, 2006, 2015) point to how digital platforms shape listening and uptake in ways that are increasingly central to sociolinguistic practice. Bringing these strands together with sociophonetic perception offers a sharper lens on how ideologies of listening are mediated across old and new technologies, and why attending to media is a particularly generative site for joint approaches moving forward.

Ultimately, both sociophonetics and linguistic anthropology are well-positioned to interrogate listening as a site of ideological reproduction and contestation. By bringing their tools and insights into closer conversation—through shared attention to mediatization, enregisterment, and the social production of listening subjects—we can move toward a more integrated understanding of how social meaning is heard, misheard, and made.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

There are no known conflicts of interest.

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