

## Point of listening in a radio fiction: the eternal problem

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### Abstract

One of the fundamental elements to construct a radio fiction product from the point of view of the sound is the denominated point of listening or 'point icí' of Souriau. The point of listening represents the space relation existing between the listener and the rest of the sound objects of the scene. Its importance is then in which it determines the place from which the sound perspective settles, forming the space and expressive meaning. For all these reasons, it is decisive in the perception process that the listener makes of a radio product.

In spite of this, years of experience in the realization of fiction products on radio demonstrate that the suitable location of the point of listening is one of the most complicated aspects: the eternal problem. Therefore, the preoccupation by this aspect has taken to us to analyze 30 fiction stories on radio with the objective of finding the main problems of location of the point of listening and establishing a catalogue of errors that helps in the education of the radio production. The results indicate that 25 of 30 stories contain some error in the positioning of the point of listening.

### Overview

Teaching radio as a medium has traditionally focused on areas such how to write text for the medium and, to a lesser extent, on production. This is a fact that according to Forrester "is rather surprising and may in part be due to what Beloff (1994) has called psychology's overemphasis on written language" (Forrester, 2002:39).

However, it is less usual that the learning focuses on the particularities of sound editing and on an advanced audio design relevant in a complex production. In general, this is because the Spanish radio stations production is mainly informative and does not require elaborate production. As a consequence, it is difficult to achieve a good production quality, particularly in radio dramas, with people lacking experience in handling audio on radio committing relevance errors in making the sound design. Factors that require attention when producing radio dramas have been assessed during a training program for future radio professionals working on these formats. One of the most common aspects identified during this analysis involves the correct placement of the point of listening in a production. It plays decisive role to shape the listener's perception of a story on the radio.

The importance of correct placement of the point of listening on a complex radio production, such as a radio drama, is derived from the main feature that defines the radio: its status as a strictly sound-based medium. "Radio is the medium of the sound, for that reason, in many occasions, it has been called the invisible medium" (Lewis, 1989). This feature deprives the listener of any visual information and has the

obligation to construct mental imagery as a substitute, thus making your mind work, that is, imagine. When faced with radio emission, the listener takes an active position, penetrating in an area called 'zone of audition' (Chion, 1999:91) or 'listening zone' (Beck, 1998). "The listening zone extends from a personal geographical space through to the 'stage' or 'movie' or 'second play' in the imagination, and further spaces are opened out for the listener in the narrative by direct address, the voice-over and music" (Beck, 1998). Therefore Gray (Lewis, 1981), defines it as "the imagination, the creativity of the mind". Thus this listening zone serves two important functions to the listener. It represents the space reference from which the listener imagines scenarios and relationships between the characters, and it sets the subjective representation that the listener generates from his own experience. These are the two definitions that Chion provides (1999:90):

A spatial sense: from where do I hear, from what point in the space represented on the screen or on the soundtrack?

A subjective sense: which character, at a given moment of the story, is (apparently) hearing what I hear?

Firstly, the role of listening zone concerning space is very important on the radio. In the presence of an image, the references of space can occupy a second order, but for a blind listener, they are especially relevant, "since only through them you can get a sense of reality. They also occupy an important place in the listener's attention" (Arnheim, 1980:48). Therefore, they directly affect the credibility of the story. If the space is not built correctly, the listener loses the reference of the situation of the characters, their relevance, and the relations that are established as the main actions.

Secondly, space references create a subjective representation in the listener. The power of radio is that the mental images that the listener constructs in this zone are converted into unique and personal attributes. "The construction of a 'point of listening' helps articulate certain kinds of metaphors or ideas we hold regarding the nature of 'external' and 'internal' auditory experiences" (Forrester, 2000). Thus, each listener listening to a radio drama imagines the scenes, the characters and situations described in a different way, even when the sound references are the same. This means that the listener feels and lives in a unique way.

*An effectively designed audio work may facilitate a listener's integration of life-based experiences into a 'movie' created within the 'theatre of the mind'. Each individual becomes his or her own movie director with no two people having the same imaginary experience (Ferrington, 1993:45).*

The listener, in this case within the listening zone, always takes a viewpoint, provided by the sound design, which is the point of listening. The denominated point of listening or 'point ici' of René Souriau (Fuzellier, 1965:34) represents the space relation between the listener and the rest of the sound objects of the scene in the imaginary place where the main relations settle, therefore, where the attention is focused, as "the second play in the audience's head where the listener is the 'final actor' and 'director'" (Beck, 1998).

The listening zone and the point of listening within are given largely by the production, in particular by the organization of the sound objects in a certain space frame and by the position of the point of listening.

*Our spatial awareness as listeners is of radio scenes and locations (the aural 'mise en scène'), and of radio characters' movements and aural physicalisation ('embodying'). It may seem somewhat strange to focus on locations, positioning and movement of characters, and the 'sets' in radio drama, as radio plays are 'blind' (or 'invisible' as Bernard Shaw called them), and dominated by the verbal. But radio characters inhabit spaces and they move around (Beck, 1998).*

Thus, from the standpoint of production, the point of listening is materialized in the first shot (shot, as the distant with respect to the microphone on radio, applying the terminology pertaining to cinema or television to determine the position), from which the rest of the sound objects in the scene are organized. Therefore, Rodriguez Bravo (1998:248), who uses the terminology point of audition, defines it as "the reference point from which the sound perspective is constructed. It emulates the space reference point from where a listener listens to any joint of sound sources". Therefore, the point of listening represents the place which determines technically the mixing and balancing of the sound in each moment, and thus it shapes the perspective and the different levels of significance of the story.

*The spatial perspective that introduces the sound shot (auditory localization, 'point here') is crucial in the perception process of the wealth of information and expressive of a dense soundscape, where each level of loudness corresponds to a different level of meaning (Balsebre, 1994:142).*

The point of listening can be fixed, when it always stays in the same location, or mobile, when it is moving with a sound object. Rodriguez Bravo (1998:251) considers that "the mobile point of audition transmits to the listener the sensation of progressive moving through a sound space previously created". But, to this author, there is also the possibility of a change in the point of listening, that "expresses a sharp jump from one place to another in the same sound space, or a sudden jump from a sound space to another

completely different", where in the role of the protagonist ceases, in favor of another character.

In conclusion, if the sound objects are not spatially arranged in a precise manner, especially the point of listening, the listener cannot organize in a credible way the elements that are moving in their listening zone and thus set an expressive sense, activate its imagination and live events in a personal way. Therefore, "the task for the director is to transform potentially confusable hearing into active radio 'listening', which involves of course retention, interpretation and an immediate reliance on short-term memory" (Forrester, 2000).

In spite of this, years of experience in the realization of fiction products on radio demonstrate that the suitable location of the point of listening is one of the most complicated aspects and represents an eternal problem. "The challenge of creating acoustical space in an audio work is difficult ... The director may use selective focus ... Selective focus begins with prioritizing the sounds to which the listener's attention must be given" (Ferrington, 1993). Although from a theoretical point of view the concept is easy to understand, there are only a few that are able to place the point of listening in a correct manner. As a result, on several occasions this problem affects the understanding and the credibility of the story.

### **Method and Results**

For this study, 30 fiction stories on radio have been analyzed with the objective of finding the main problems in the location of the point of listening and establishing a catalogue of errors that helps in the education of the radio production.

The investigation involved 30 fiction stories on radio made by students of Media Studies with durations between 5 and 10 minutes. The methodology is sustained in a sound/perception analysis that resists the radio script with the end product to verify if in each one of the scenes the point of listening is constructed correctly. The objective of the study is to detect the occurrence of certain errors in the location of the point of listening, but not to quantify how many times they are detected. Therefore, what is recorded in this investigation is the emergence of an error identified by unit, but not the number of occasions where this error appears in each radio drama analyzed.

Toward this goal, the following variables have been analyzed: definition of the listening zone: space, and definition of the point of listening: distance and movement. In the following pages, the definition of these variables and the results for each one of them are presented together.

### **1. Definition of the listening zone: space.**

Radio space in a radio drama is defined as the physical place where the sound objects are placed at the scene. Space constitutes a first reference level that fits the listening zone. Therefore, a suitable definition of the space in which the action is developed is essential.

*The aspect more relevant of the sound is its temporary, but not the only one. The conformation of the object depends on its temporary disposition to a great extent but also on its space, this means, of its scope of influence, its action area and its context of development (Baca, 2005).*

Several sound elements serve to correctly identify the space in a radio product. First, the scene is identifiable by the echoes or reverberations or by the absence of these effects. Second, at the time of characterizing the place faithfully where the action is developed, the sound effects with environmental or descriptive function can be used.

In this case, analysis of 30 stories of fiction reveals problems in the correct design of the space in which sound objects are placed. The first conclusion is that in order to define the space, most of the productions (70 percent) uses sound effects and it is only the rest of the productions (30 percent) that use the reverberations on occasion.

It is necessary to mention that the selection of the places for these productions is conservative and most often the locations are typical and generic (such as the countryside, sea, or a restaurant). This prevents location of the scene in an exact and specific point and to use other sound resources sound as reverbs, which would enrich the production.

*The resonance is particularly suitable for this, because it allows playing with a total fidelity the space in which the scene is developed. This is achieved through the expression, and in the good radio productions and adequately represented, there is always a certain resonance to provide to the scene the proper expression (Arnheim, 1980:66).*

At the beginning, one would think that the reverberations are not necessary taking into account the spaces selected in the stories. However, listening to the production and contrasting it with the script, it has been observed that there are certain times where the reverberations should have been employed, but do not appear on the radio story. Examples of such scenes include actors are walking through a tunnel or being present inside a church. In all these cases, the characterization of space occurs by the content of

the dialogues or the environmental sound effects. Thus, reverberations have been forgotten.

It is interesting to note that 30 percent of productions in which reverberations have been used, and inconsistency in their use has been found, albeit to a low extent. Among these, 15 percent of them have placed the reverb to a one of the sound objects that are on the scene, but not to all. Consider this example of two characters inside a cathedral where an organ is playing. The voices of the two characters have a reverb but not the music of the instrument. Or, in contrast to this, the sound effect has a reverberation, but not the voices. This problem has also been detected in productions in which, according to the situation described in the script, it was necessary to apply a sound filter and in these cases, certain objects have it, but not all. For example, the voice of a radio presenter has a filter to simulate voice through the radio, but not the music that is played then that also comes from the radio. All these problems lead the listener to a poor identification of space, which reduces their ability to imagine and involve themselves in the story.

## **2. Definition of the point of listening: distance and movement**

Next to the space identification, dimension on a radio story is provided through the creation of sound perspective, that is, by how the sound objects in the radio space are arranged. This is determined by the distance and the movement that define the point of listening. Here is how proxemic and kinesic information is indicated in a radio story: "Proxemic and kinesic information is most frequently and effectively conveyed by locating the actors at varying distances from the microphone and by moving the actors in and out of its sound-gathering areas" (Crisell, 1994:147). Therefore, as McLeish (1994: 243) affirms, "an evident point that the writer does not forget is that the radio is not only blind, but also average deaf, unless the drama is in stereo, the movement and the distance have to be indicated".

At the same time, by providing a special reference distance and movement also help to create expressive effects and, therefore, to configure a subjective meaning into the listener. Thus, according to Fuzellier (1965:41) "the sound shots are more psychological than shots of material distance", and turn the situation more lively and dynamic.

The distance and the movement are materialized by the called sound shots. These sound shots contribute to locate correctly a character on a radio scene, the point of listening as the area where the main action is developed and where the attention is focused. Any object that is beside the point of listening sounds in the first shot and the rest of the sound objects are set on more distant shots.

In relation to the definition of the point of listening, analysis of the 30 stories of fiction, suggests a clear

trend to eliminate the sound shots in the production. Most of the radio dramas use the shots to distinguish the different elements of the radio language, that is, to scale the voice with regard to the music and effects and thus establish a hierarchy between them with domination of the voice. However, it has been found that only 40 percent of stories employ the distinction of the sound shot to define the distance between the different characters, and of the characters with respect to the point of listening.

In these productions, different sound shots are shown when voice and music or voice and sound effects appear at the same time but this is only applied to the voice when it is evident: for example, when a character is placed very far, screaming to another. Most of the stories put the voices in the same sound shot as the point of listening, this means, in the first shot, thus eliminating the dimension of the scene. As López Vigil (1997:191) considers, "the monotony is to the voice what the lack of shots is to the scene". It can be concluded then that these producers have not thought about the scene from the viewpoint of the listener (from the point of listening) because they are not aware of the different levels that surround our conversations everyday. In fact, most of the scripts do not include any indication about the sound shots, while it should be the opposite.

*The writing of every line entails an exact calculation about the distance of the speaker from the microphone, and about the way in which the volume of that speech will be controlled from within the studio. It is in these calculations that the real flexibility of radio as a medium emerges (Raban, 1981).*

In addition, one of the most basic and clear errors in the location of the point of listening is to replace it without any reason. For example, in the first scene, one can listen to the protagonist (point of listening) in the first shot, but in the next scene, where the point of view has not been changed, one listens to another character in the same shot, occupying the main place. This resource would be well-used when there are several main characters as in a parallel production. But when these conditions do not occur and there is continuity, the sudden change of the point of listening without justification will provoke the loss of the reference and the listener would not know with what character to follow the story. This is not a common error, perhaps because is too basic, but it has been found to occur in 20 percent of radio stories analyzed, which may represent a relatively high incidence indeed.

In this context, it can also occur that a sound object that is not the point of listening appears in the first shot even when the object is in a different location. For example, when the protagonist of the story is listening to sounds from another room, but these sounds or sound effects appear in the same shot as the point of listening. This is the difference, in terms of Beck (1998), between main frame and outer frame. The point of listening is in the main frame and, therefore, is listened to in the first shot, but the sound

object from other room is in the outer frame, so this should be listened to in a distant shot.

*Producing sound events that are 'in-frame' (rather than out-frame) involves balancing together the sounds with explanations for their occurrence within a 'sound perspective' based on what we would normally expect with our everyday acoustic environment, i.e., sounds close by us. In contrast 'out-frame' sounds are produced as if external to the immediate present (for the participants in the drama), e.g., the sound of a dog barking in the distance, seagulls and so on (Forrester, 2000).*

This error has been detected in 35 percent of the cases analyzed, a high percentage, considering that this error not only deprives the listener of spatial dimension but also prevents differentiation of two different dimensional spaces by the listener.

Another error that has been identified is to place a sound object that is not the point of listening to its same level. This means that both are placed in the first shot. For example, when the protagonist is working in an office and while he is talking, the noise of a printer sounds in the first shot beside the voice. This has been found to occur in 63 percent of the analyzed stories. It appears that the students put the sound effects in the same volume in which they have recorded them (downloaded from the Internet or from a CD) and do not modify the volume later in the sound design.

However, due to the complexity being greater when it is necessary to provoke movement with the sound objects in the scene, the errors related to the movement with respect to the point of listening are the most frequent and numerous. In this context, another problem found occurs when the point of listening is mobile. This consists of expression through dialogue that the point of listening is in motion, but absence of a corresponding change in the sound. A mobile point of listening may sometimes be used in production, in which case the protagonist is not always in the first shot. For example, the character is in a room of a house and, in a moment, he goes to other room to look for something: his voice moves away briefly and returns back to the location set as the first shot. In this case, the only way that the listener can perceive that the character moves in the space is through the change of sound shot in his voice. Therefore, if his voice remains unchanged, one fails to convey his action. This problem has been found in 24 percent of the cases examined.

Another deficiency has been found to occur in production when the point of listening is in motion according to the script, but there is no dialogue, this is, the character is not speaking. As the voice of the protagonist cannot be listened to, it is impossible to create the sensation of movement. "There is no point in making any move unless you are speaking too. Sometimes the script does not offer this opportunity and as director you need to give the actor a special line, so I can 'travel on the line'" (Beck, 1998). It is also a

basic error that it has accounted for 16 percent of the cases analyzed.

One of the most common errors has been found to arise from the same problem but in reverse when the point of listening is moving away or approaching a sound object that is sounding, and the movement is perceived in his voice but not in the sound object. Clearly, if the protagonist moves in the direction of the object or departs from it, the sound of the object has to vary. The error is even more serious than the previous one, since the listener is left without perceiving the movement. There is an obvious confusion by the loss of credibility. The percentage of radio stories that have displayed this error has been 36 percent, a high figure taking into account its importance. Again, the problem can be attributed to an inadequate planning of the production and an incomplete understanding of how to set the sound dimension.

Finally, another problem has been identified when the protagonist carries an object that is sounding at the same time as the point of listening. In this case, the point of listening is moving and modifying the sound of his voice, but not the object accompanying him. For example, the main character carries a radio playing and both are moving away, this movement is perceived in the voice of the protagonist but not on the radio that is been carried by him. About 41 percent of the productions have displayed this problem, a high percentage considering that this is a relevance error that affects the credibility.

In conclusion, the results indicate that 25 of 30 radio stories contain some error in the positioning of the point of listening. The following table shows these data.

**Table 1: in the positioning of the point of listening (%)**

| TYPE OF ERROR   |                                                                                      | PERCENTAGE |
|-----------------|--------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|------------|
| <b>Space</b>    | Absence of reverberations                                                            | 70         |
|                 | Incorrect use of reverberations                                                      | 15         |
| <b>Distance</b> | Absence of sound shots in the voices                                                 | 60         |
|                 | Replacing the point of listening without justification                               | 20         |
|                 | Putting on a sound object in the first shot when is outer frame                      | 35         |
|                 | Putting on a sound object in the first shot when is not the point of listening       | 63         |
| <b>Movement</b> | Movement of the point of listening without change in the sound                       | 24         |
|                 | Absence of voice when the point of listening is moving                               | 16         |
|                 | Movement of a sound object without change in the sound                               | 36         |
|                 | Movement of a sound object beside the point of listening without change in the sound | 41         |
| <b>TOTAL</b>    | 25 of 30 radio stories containing some error                                         | 83         |

**Source:** own data.

## Conclusion

The percentage of fiction stories analyzed containing some error in the placement of the point of listening has been 83 percent, a very high percentage that reveals significant deficiencies in the sound design of the scenes in a radio drama. These problems can be considered as particularly serious because the suitable location of the point of listening determines the visual representation and the expressive meaning that the listener makes of a radio product. Therefore, it is decisive in his perception process.

If the space, the distance and the movement are not correctly indicated, the listener is unable to imagine the space in a correct way, provoking the loss of the spatial reference and dimension; so he will have difficulties in creating a visual image of the scene, affecting the plausibility of the story. Furthermore, the analyzed elements to locate correctly the radio scenes indicate where the main action is developed, therefore, where the listener's attention is focused, turning the situation more lively and dynamic. These, then, are the consequences and effects provoked by the wrong location of the point of listening.

In spite of this, the percentage of fiction stories containing some error has been very high. In some cases, these problems can be attributed to a lack of sound knowledge, but especially seems to indicate a lack of planning in the production.

Thus, there are certain mistakes which could be attributed to a lack of knowledge about the sound characteristics and perceptive listening conditions. These could include the absence of using reverberations to characterize the space or their improper use or a lack of employment of sound shots in the voices. In these cases, students do not seem to be aware of the different levels that surround our conversations everyday or that our sound perception relegates, at least to the background, sounds that surround us and which are not significant. It also happens in many cases that these young people collect the sounds from Internet or a CD, and then they forget to edit the recording according to the sound characteristics of each scene. Therefore, these sounds are listened to at the same volume that they have been recorded and with the same characteristics (with reverb, without it, with filters or without them, etc). However, the rest of the distance and movement errors, which are several in number and revealing weaknesses in the design of the scenes, could be based on the fact that the students have not previously performed the task of planning the location and movement of the sound objects. In other words, they have not made time for planning the proper organization of the sound dimension depending on the point of listening.

Therefore, the conclusion to be drawn after the analysis of these radio stories is that a greater effort in the formative part of the radio production, traditionally relegated to other areas as writing, is required. Without doubt, it is an essential part of training professionals for the future of the radio.

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