

## Why are Background Telephone Conversations Distracting?

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### ABSTRACT

Telephone conversation is ubiquitous within the office setting. Overhearing a telephone conversation—whereby only one of the two speakers is heard—is subjectively more annoying and objectively more distracting than overhearing a full conversation. However, it is unknown whether this "halfalogue" effect is attributable to unexpected offsets and onsets within the background speech (acoustic unexpectedness), or is due to the tendency to predict the unheard part of the conversation (semantic [un]predictability). Using a realistic office-related task as the context, we attempted to tease apart the acoustic unexpectedness and semantic (un)predictability accounts of the halfalogue effect. In this study, we compared halfalogue and dialogue background speech against a quiet control. Half of the participants were presented with conversational speech in the participant's first language—meaningful speech—whereas the remainder were presented with spectrally-rotated speech—a match to the meaningful speech in terms of acoustic and temporal complexity. The halfalogue effect was only present for the meaningful speech condition. The halfalogue effect is thus attributable to the semantic (un)predictability, not the acoustic unexpectedness, of background telephone conversation.