

# Voices are what they say: A study of language in the experience of hearing voices

Volume 1

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## **Abstract**

Studies of people's experiences of hearing voices (auditory verbal hallucinations) have traditionally focused on such areas as number, type, frequency, severity and auditory features. In the last two decades, cognitive-behavioural therapy research has emphasised the role of what hearers believe about their voices. More recent qualitative studies recognise the importance of their relationship to their voices, and the meaning of these experiences in their lives. However, the verbatim verbal behaviour of voices has received minimal attention. On the whole, descriptions of voices are included as illustrative 'soundbites' and rarely form the main content of discussion. Moreover, these studies do not focus on the detail of individual hearer's experiences of their voices.

The present study addresses the current gap in the literature by describing how hearers represent what their voices say. The design of the study drew on qualitative methods. Seven people with a clinical history of hearing voices participated in a series of open-ended interviews, with the addition in three cases of parents or partners, and two treating psychiatrists. Transcripts of recorded interviews were coded for how hearers referred to their experiences, and voice content analysed in terms of their pragmatic function to demonstrate how voices interacted with hearers. In addition, the tools of systemic functional linguistics were applied to map how voices use language to represent and evaluate the hearer's world.

Four main findings provide evidence for the individual nature of hearers' representations of their voices. The first finding is that hearers use a wide variety of terms to designate their experiences, including metaphors and descriptive phrases that often refer to their voices as acts of communication. Second, voices draw on a range of common communicative functions beyond 'commands' and 'commentary', which distinctively characterise their verbal behaviour as both positive and negative forms of social interaction. Third, the content of voices features a number of grammatical patterns in which voices are represented as both compelling agents in a material world and interpreters of its underlying meaning. Fourth, the evaluative language that voices use concentrates on appraisals relating to hearers' competency, value and moral integrity.

Together these findings provide the first systematic account of how different hearers use language in representing the verbal behaviour of voices. The main recommendation of the study is to include a linguistic perspective in future phenomenological research, with the ultimate aim that such an approach could lead to a contribution to therapeutic approaches which aim to improve hearers' relationships with their voices.

## Declaration

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no material previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text. In addition, I certify that no part of this work will, in the future, be used in a submission for any other degree or diploma in any university or other tertiary institution without the prior approval of the University of Adelaide and where applicable, any partner institution responsible for the joint-award of this degree.

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Keith Smith

May 2016

Date

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*In memory of*

*my father*

*Leslie Smith*

*(1921–2012)*



We are listeners as well as speakers  
of this mystery, both of us,  
but who else will join  
this strange companionship?

Rumi (Barks, 2004, p. 96)