16

Bridging the Gap in Common Ground When Talking about Voices

Felicity Deamer, Institute of Forensic Linguistics, Aston University

Despite the negative impact of voice-hearing often being bound up in what is said, there has been a distinct lack of attention paid to exploring the linguistic content of voices and/or the language voice-hearers use to describe their experiences. In this chapter, I will take a close look at how voice-hearers in the Voices in Psychosis (VIP) transcripts use language non-literally in order to convey their complex experiences, and what that might tell us about the nature of voice-hearing experiences, as well as about the function of different forms of figurative language.

The topic of figurative language is a vast area of debate and theorizing, with many different accounts of what is involved. For my purposes here, it suffices to say that figurative language is a way of talking about something (the primary subject/topic or tenor) by using words or phrases that do not typically, conventionally, or literally refer to that thing (the secondary subject or vehicle).

Although they are often treated as synonyms, I take 'figurative language' to be a slightly narrower category than 'non-literal language'. In other words, all instances of figurative language are instances of non-literal language, but not vice versa. Metaphors and similes are both instances of figurative language, and hence also of non-literal language. However, hyperbole (exaggeration) and approximation are non-literal, but they are not fully figurative in my sense (they could be described as 'loose use', or 'less than literal'). An understanding of figurative language requires a more complicated and lateral inference than simply understanding that someone is overstating for effect (hyperbole) or drawing a close approximation. That is, in part, why figurative language is so widely used in literature: it is a more adventurous use of language. It is more open to communicative failure, or to being interpreted differently by different people, but the pay-off can be great, with metaphors having the potential to yield rich and open-ended interpretations.

Figurative Language and Experiences

In recent decades, a great deal of attention has been given to exploring the role that figurative language plays in our understanding of experiences. For example, Lakoff (1987)

Felicity Deamer, *Bridging the Gap in Common Ground When Talking about Voices* In: *Voices in Psychosis*. Edited by: Angela Woods, Ben Alderson-Day, and Charles Fernyhough, Oxford University Press. DOI: 10.1093/oso/9780192898388.003.0016

argues that metaphors should not be thought of as literary or communicative devices, but as a reflection of the way in which we think about the world and experience it. Levin (1988) argues that metaphors tend to be produced while speakers are experiencing extraordinary events and emotions because 'ordinary' language is not an adequate tool for the description of complex experiences and the expression of one's emotional response to such experiences. He suggests that one can at best 'approximate to such expression by means of deviant sentences' (Levin, 1988, p. xiii). Levin argues that just as the scientist uses metaphorical language to conceive of states of affairs previously unthought of, so must an individual who attempts to conceive of a reality or an emotion that is unlike any that they have encountered before or heard described before.

Metaphor and Mental Health

Figurative language is often used to explore emotion in psychotherapy, and advocates of these methods argue that a 'figurative mode of expression' is essential in understanding emotional distress. In fact, the overt and intentional use of non-literal language in the therapeutic context largely came about due to the 'rich and disturbingly imaginative metaphoric articulations' generated spontaneously by service users (Pollio et al., 1977, p. 104).

Charteris-Black (2012) argues that metaphors not only play an important role in communicating emotional intensity, but also expose the concepts underlying people's experiences. The prevalence of uses of containment metaphors by people reflecting on their experiences of depression (e.g. being trapped, coming out, pouring out, escaping, releasing) suggests that such metaphors are not just tools for expression, but are also fundamental to the lived experience of depression.

Attention has also been given to the use of metaphor by people experiencing psychosis. For example, Rhodes and Jakes (2004) examined first-person accounts of how participants with delusions remember the formation of their beliefs. They concluded that during the onset of early psychotic episodes, the attempts of individuals to make sense of their experiences lead them to think in 'figurative terms' which amplified the process of the formation of their delusions. They do not claim that delusional statements *are* metaphors. Instead, their point is that 'a delusional statement is a literal statement about aspects of the world or the self which [gets] transformed by metaphor' (Rhodes and Jakes, 2004, p. 15). Likewise, Parnas et al. (2005) argue that metaphors are commonplace in the language of people with psychosis, particularly when describing perceptual experiences and mental states which are hard to articulate in other terms.

Distribution of Tropes in the Transcripts

A recent study found that 'metaphorical' language is routinely used by voice-hearers with schizophrenia diagnoses, enabling them to frame their unusual experiences in

different ways, and determining the power dynamic between the hearer and their voice (Demjen et al., 2019). Given this, it is at first striking to find (as a result of a specific analysis for the purposes of this chapter) that there are very few instances of metaphor in the VIP transcripts.

Below is a breakdown of the non-literal language use within a representative subset of ten of the transcripts (which were randomly selected) (see Table 16.1). The transcripts were manually scanned for instances of metaphor (any metaphorical use that was not deemed highly conventionalized/idiomatic), simile, approximation, and highly conventionalized metaphor (e.g. 'I was imagining all these dark situations' (Gail)).

What can this distribution of non-literal language use tell us about these voice-hearers' experiences, as well as the process they undergo in trying to express them? How can an analysis of the function, as well as the production and comprehension, of metaphor and simile shed light on the relative absence of non-conventionalized metaphor in these transcripts?

Metaphor versus Simile

First it is worth unpacking what we mean by metaphor. The Demjen et al. (2019) study worked with a very broad notion of metaphoricity, and as such, they included any use of a term in a less-than-literal way (including similes) in their analysis. Their coarse-grained approach, though valid for some purposes, does not differentiate between tropes, and hence does not allow you to reflect on how different tropes have different conditions of appropriateness. A number of studies have attempted to shed light on the contexts and/or conditions in which different kinds of metaphor and simile might be more or less appropriate, such as when highlighting variability between two things under comparison, creating a particular effect, referring to an abstract rather than a concrete idea, or expressing a novel or conventional idea (Bowdle and Gentner, 2005).

Josie O'Donoghue argues that metaphors are less likely to be used in a context in which the vehicle term is not familiar to the interlocutor as 'the hearer expects [a metaphor] to be easily interpretable in a fixed conventional sense' (O'Donoghue, 2009); an obvious point of comparison is made emphatically. However, it is because of the simile's focus on aspects of likeness between the topic and vehicle that a relevant reading is facilitated. If there is no well-understood vehicle concept to appeal

Table 16.1 Use of non-literal language in the transcripts

Approximations	Similes	Metaphors	Highly conventionalized metaphors/idioms
76	30	3	53

to (as in 'How is your new housemate?' 'He is a bluebottle'), the use of the metaphor form suggests that there is a particular understood, specific meaning (a sort of slang) of which the hearer is just not aware. If, on the other hand, the simile form (e.g. 'He is like a bluebottle') is used, the hearer would be much more likely to think (in the moment) of specific ways in which someone might be likened to the vehicle (a bluebottle) and would then have no problem coming up with possible intended meanings (e.g. 'He buzzes around the house making lots of noise and irritating me'). O'Donoghue (2009, p. 129) argues that the fact that simile invites comparison as an explicit, quite conscious process, and 'that the form encourages contemplation of the precise terms of comparison' means that simile can, in the right context (particularly where novel descriptions are necessary or desired), lead to the arrival at a more precise and sophisticated meaning than metaphor, which might merely reinforce emphatically an already clear point. This line of reasoning is relevant to the VIP transcripts but requires some elaboration below.

Grounding and Communication

It has long been appreciated that when two individuals communicate, they need to have a large suite of common beliefs and common assumptions, which is sometimes collectively referred to as *common ground*. Grounding is vital for all aspects of communication, whether referring to things that are currently perceived or being discussed *in absentia*, or when talking about different kinds of things. The central point is that in order to talk about something, the person you are talking to needs to know what you are talking about. This is underpinned by a plethora of conditions, including (but not exhausted by) linguistic competence, conceptual understanding, shared knowledge, and beliefs and assumptions. This is known as conversational grounding. Different failures in conversational grounding result in different failures of communication.

Conversational Grounding for Voices

How is common ground established for voices? Voices are clearly private experiences, rather than public objects, and so one might think initially that grounding is bound to be difficult. However, we do often talk about subjective experiences such as pains, emotions, perceptions, and so on. So, conversational grounding is achievable for experiences, and it pays to reflect on how it is achieved in the best case. Two related features of these commonly talked-about experiences highlight how this grounding is achieved, and how it is harder to achieve in the case of voices.

The first is an assumption of phenomenological similarity. We can talk about our experiences with others because we know (or perhaps assume) that they have had similar experiences to a greater or lesser extent. The second, which plays a role in

generating the knowledge (or assumption) that constitutes the first, is that we know what sorts of experiences are undergone in certain contexts. Experience of colour is a canonical case in point. I do not know what it is like to see red through your eyes, but I do know that the experience we call 'red' is the experience we both get when we look at ripe tomatoes or London buses. Similarly, I do not know if your fear feels exactly the same as mine, but I do know the sorts of contexts in which it occurs and the sorts of reactions it elicits.

Do voices allow for: (1) an assumption of phenomenological similarity; and (2) generalization with regard to the contexts in which they tend to occur? In relation to the second question, I would argue that regardless of the phenomenology of a particular voice-hearing experience, the context in which it occurs is one that a third party (e.g. interviewer) may or may not be able to fully track or understand, given that they themselves will likely have never experienced such a contextual trigger. So, what about the assumption of phenomenological similarity?

Contrary to what the term auditory verbal hallucination (AVH) might suggest, voice-hearing is often not exactly like hearing a voice in the everyday sense. Phenomenological surveys suggest that voice-hearing experiences vary widely from person to person, and some lack explicitly auditory properties altogether (Woods et al., 2015). So, our voice-hearers find themselves in a challenging communicative predicament, since there is something complicated to be explained: an experience that is hard to pin down, and that the interlocutor has never experienced, in terms of both phenomenology and context of occurrence.

Explaining the Trope Distribution in the Transcripts

The main thing to explain is the relative lack of metaphor in these transcripts. This divides into two very distinct dimensions. One involves the lack of metaphor relative to simile and approximation. The other involves the lack of metaphor for voices relative to the abundant use of metaphor for talking about other mental health experiences such as depression (Charteris-Black, 2012).

Metaphor versus Simile and Approximation

Our interviewees are not typically trying to explain an extreme version of an experience their interviewer will be familiar with. Rather, they find themselves attempting to describe something that they know is likely to be qualitatively unfamiliar to the interviewer. They are attempting to invite the interviewer to look to another concept or experience to provide a likeness, or to provide something with striking similarities, which will tell them something about the experience. The distribution of trope in these transcripts seems to reflect precisely this.

As O'Donoghue suggests, metaphor requires a significant degree of common ground. I want to go further, though, and argue that this is not just with respect to the vehicle being introduced as a point of comparison. Metaphor lends itself to contexts in which the topic being described is one which the speaker knows to be familiar to their interlocutor—even if only vaguely. Metaphor functions as an embellishment of existing common ground, on existing experience and awareness of the topic under discussion. It allows the speaker to emphatically express an analogy that is obvious to both interlocutors. This may be as a way of communicating just how salient or striking the point of comparison is (e.g. 'This life *is* a prison') or in order to put a valance on the analogy (e.g. 'My sadness is suffocating'). When there is not enough common ground to embellish, simile is preferred; it allows the speaker to establish a point of comparison with something familiar, to point their interlocutor explicitly in the direction of something they know well, endorsing the conscious search for salient features that the experience might share with the familiar concept or experience. In other words, similes are more likely to be used than metaphors in these interviews, in which voice-hearers are drawing comparisons as a means to inform their interlocutor of the nature of something unusual and unfamiliar.

This hypothesis fits with the abundance of approximations we see in the transcripts. In this context, similes are on a spectrum with approximations; both are attempts to pin down and describe features of voice-hearing experiences literally and accurately by drawing their interlocutor's attention to familiar ideas and experiences.

One important point of clarification is in order at this point. We do see in these transcripts some significant examples of highly conventionalized/idiomatic metaphors (e.g. 'My mind is playing tricks on us' (Fred); 'You're battling your own sanity' (Bill); 'these things are revolving around in my head' (Gail); 'I'll just kinda zone out' (Grace)). Such conventionalized metaphors are typically used to emphatically express an obvious comparison, and as such have been incorporated into our everyday lexicon (e.g. 'memory fading'; 'something being drowned out'; 'mind wandering'). That is why these conventionalized metaphors are sometimes called 'lexicalized' metaphors. It is important to see that, in the most important respects, these metaphors are not truly metaphors, except in an etymological sense. When used, the intention is not to express one thing in terms of another: it is simply, as one does with straightforward literal language use, to use the word with a meaning that the interlocutor will recognize (e.g. 'Thanks so much—you're an angel!'). Likewise, when understood, there is no process of inference from the literal to the intended meaning. The interlocutor does not first understand the word literally, and then work out from the context that it is intended non-literally: the colloquial meaning is understood directly. We could say that the interlocutor is just presented with a word that has two (or more) meanings, one of which has its history in the metaphorical but has now become literal (like 'chair leg'). It is because we are in the business of examining the context that elicits the metaphorical mode of use on the part of the speaker that words used in this way appear *not* to be 'metaphorical'. Indeed, many people use

lexicalized metaphors without realizing, or needing to realize, that they are, historically speaking, metaphors.

Metaphor Use for Voices Compared with Depression

Metaphors are often used to describe and to help process extreme instances of common experiences and emotions, such as anxiety and depression (Charteris-Black, 2012; Lakoff, 1987). In these instances, metaphors are particularly well suited since there is plenty of relevant common ground, but there is a degree of 'extremeness' that the speaker is at pains to convey to the interlocutor (often conveyed through 'hyperbolic metaphors').

In contrast, voice-hearers are not just trying to describe something to their interlocutor that falls along a familiar dimension, but is simply an extreme example of it: they are, for the most part, trying to describe something that is qualitatively unfamiliar. Interviewees are attempting to bridge this gap in common ground (with respect to their voice-hearing experiences) by using simile (e.g. 'Like a banging on the wall' (Carl); 'More like a whisper' (Ulrik); 'Like when someone runs their hand up a curtain' (Kate)) and approximation instead (e.g. 'I'd say it's similar to a dog bark but it's not entirely a dog bark' (Bill); 'I'd hear mainly like sexual noises, like moaning' (Fred); 'I've been hearing like a child or a baby crying, like screeching crying' (Orla)).

There has been a general tendency to assume that metaphors are commonly used to express extreme or unusual experiences, and, by extension, a wide spectrum of experiences in the context of mental health conditions. This tendency seems to be misguided, since different kinds of unusual experiences are conducive to being expressed through the medium of different tropes. An awareness of this more nuanced picture could be of benefit during clinical encounters.

References

Bowdle, B., and Gentner, D. (2005). The career of metaphor. *Psychological Review*, 112(1), 193–216.

Charteris-Black, J. (2012). Shattering the bell jar: metaphor, gender and depression. *Metaphor and Symbol*, 27(3), 199–216.

Demjén, Z., Marszalek, A., Semino, E., and Varese, F. (2019). Metaphor framing and distress in lived-experience accounts of voice-hearing. *Psychosis*, 11(1), 16–27.

Lakoff, G. (1987). A cognitive theory of metaphor. *Philosophical Review*, 96(4), 589–94.

Levin, S. (1988). *Metaphoric Worlds: Conceptions of a Romantic Nature*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.

O'Donoghue, J. (2009). Is a metaphor (like) a simile? Differences in meaning, effect and processing. *UCL Working Papers in Linguistics*, 21, 281–91.

Parnas, J., Møller, P., Kircher, T., Thalbitzer, J., Jannson, L., Handest, P., and Zahavi, D. (2005). EASE: Examination of Anomalous Self-Experience. *Psychopathology*, 38(5), 236–58.

Pollio, H. R., Barlow, J. M., Fine, H. J., and Pollio, M. R. (1977). *Psychology and the Poetics of Growth: Figurative Language in Psychology, Psychotherapy and Education*. Hillsdale, NJ: Lawrence Erlbaum.

Rhodes, J., and Jakes, S. (2004). The contribution of metaphor and metonymy to delusions. *Psychology and Psychotherapy: Theory, Research and Practice*, 77(1), 1–17.
Woods, A., Jones, N., Alderson-Day, B., Callard, F., and Fernyhough, C. (2015). Experiences of hearing voices: analysis of a novel phenomenological survey. *The Lancet Psychiatry*, 2(4), 323–31.

About the Author

Felicity Deamer is a Lecturer in Forensic Linguistics at Aston University where she is working at the intersection of Linguistics, Forensics, and Mental Health. Between 2013 and 2019, she was based at Durham University as a Research Fellow on the Language and Mental Health and Hearing the Voice projects, using insights from linguistics to inform our understanding of voice-hearing and therapeutic interventions.