

How to speak like a spirit medium:**Voice and evidence in Australian Spiritualism**

Matt Tomlinson

University of Oslo

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Abstract

In the movement known as Spiritualism, successful performances of “mental mediumship” are rarely smooth. At services held by the Canberra Spiritualist Association, mediums attempt to provide evidence of life after death by describing a deceased person’s character in ways recognizable to audience members. A medium’s verbal performance de-emphasizes heteroglossia while developing vivid spirit characters. Audience members sometimes do not understand or accept what the medium says, but small “failures” in performance help build a larger sense that mediums and audiences are working to gather evidence. As they work, mediums foreground and background their agency at the same time, displaying their fluency in spirit communication while identifying spirits as ultimately responsible for being

present, and offering messages to the living. [*ritual, dialogue, Spiritualism, mediumship, voice, evidence, Australia*]

When humans speak with gods, ghosts, demons, and other spirit beings, their talk often has the “coefficient of weirdness” that Bronislaw Malinowski (1966, 218) attributed to magical speech (see also Mauss 1972, 57–58). As they communicate with figures who generally cannot be seen and may be considered unpredictable, many people speak in ways that signal that something unusual is happening, their words prone to more than the usual slippages of interaction (Keane 1997a, 1997b, 2007, 2008). There are significant counterexamples of this tendency, however, in which people speak with and for extrahuman beings in relatively plain, everyday ways. In doing so, speakers reveal particular understandings of life and death as well as their commitments to specific kinds of relationship with their existential Others.

When a speaker mediates between spirit figures and human audiences, several voices come into play, namely those of spirits, mediums, petitioners, other audience members, and so forth. As Mikhail Bakhtin and his interlocutors point out, any single “voice” is already the product of multiple relationships between different people responding to and anticipating others’ expressions (Bakhtin 1981, 1984; Bauman 2004; Hill 1995; Holquist 1990; Keane 1999). The speech of a spirit medium might be

shaped by past speech from mentors, expected responses from audience members, and styles associated with individual spirits. Yet distinct voices are not always foregrounded in mediumship, even when participants evoke the presence of distinct spirits. Indeed, as I will show from my research with the Canberra Spiritualist Association in Australia, mediums' performance styles can de-emphasize heteroglossia. In doing so, they help shape understandings of the ritual event as an occasion for establishing proof for a specific claim: evidence of life after death. Australian Spiritualists reveal the limits of heteroglossia in understanding human interaction, demonstrating how people may seek ritual efficacy in the flattening of dialogism.

Failure is a key feature of many Spiritualist mediums' readings: mediums get a lot wrong, and this is treated as a necessary part of gathering and presenting evidence. As in other ritual practices of articulating meaning, failure is an essential part of the process (Engelke and Tomlinson 2006).¹ "Failure," I must emphasized, is a metapragmatic evaluation. Not all participants in ritual action will agree on what counts as failure (or success), and analysts must be cautious about applying the term in cases in which it might not be relevant (Schieffelin 2007). Spiritualists do not explicitly refer to negative responses during a medium's performance as "failures," as I am doing here. But Spiritualist mediums do convey signs from the spirit world that are not recognized, or are even rejected, by audience members, and in some cases no audience member recognizes the spirit being described. Much

more common, however, are ostensibly successful readings that include misfires, hesitations, doubt, and denial as features of the dialogue.

Spiritualist mediums animate words authored by people in the spirit world (Goffman 1981). They communicate in a kind of hinged dialogue, “speaking” mentally with spirits in one direction and verbally with living humans in the other. As Richard Bauman (2004, 130) says of “spoken mediation” in general, two dialogues are brought together in a “synthetic conjunction . . . in such a way that the routine cannot be dissolved into two independent dyads.” In other words, two dialogues take place as one conversation. The mediator’s job is to make sure the “source dialogue” and “target dialogue” articulate with each other, because the true target of the spirit’s message is the audience member, not the medium. This kind of routinized communication across an existential gap is similar in some ways to shamanic and other mediumistic performances in which audience members can miss or reject what the mediator is saying on behalf of the spirits (Schieffelin 1996; Wolf 1990). Spiritualist mediums also share qualities with evangelical Christians who train themselves to communicate in a casual, conversational style as they pray to God and expect God to reply (Bialecki 2017; Luhrmann 2012).

The interplay between a casual, conversational speech style and the active possibility and frequent occurrence of failure in performance makes mediumship compelling for Spiritualist audiences. By “compelling,” I mean

that mediums foreground their own agency—they are responsible for their performances, “owning” their words and succeeding (or not) in front of an audience. At the same time, they background their agency by positioning both spirit figures and audience members as independent and responsible speakers. Responsibility is distributed, as mediums speak for others in ways that are not entirely under their control. In delivering compelling performances, Spiritualist mediums both step forward to assume the role of medium before an audience and metaphorically step backward, making themselves tools for spirit communicators and interlocutors with audience members who might be resistant, confused, forgetful, or hard of hearing. In doing so, mediums speak plainly, fail often, and—most of the time—leave audience members happy and impressed that they have received evidence of life after death.

From knocking to speaking

The movement known as modern Spiritualism originated in 1848 when two young sisters, Catherine (Kate) and Margaretta (Maggie) Fox, began working with mysterious percussive sounds at their home in Hydesville, New York. A previous tenant had occasionally heard “loud knockings and other noises, for which he could find no apparent cause” (Podmore 1902a, 179), but when the Fox family moved in, the common haunted house became something more dynamic and extravagant. On the night of March 31, the girls and their

mother began challenging the invisible source to respond to their commands and questions by, for example, knocking as many times as Kate snapped her fingers and rapping out their correct ages. Mrs. Fox called her neighbors, among them William Duesler, who reported that when he got to the Fox house, "there were some twelve or fourteen persons there. . . . Some were so frightened that they did not want to go into the room" (Podmore 1902a, 180). Duesler entered, heard Mrs. Fox pose questions, heard knocks, and felt the bed shake from their force. He posed a series of questions designed to elicit a character and story from whatever was making the sounds, with yes indicated by knocks and no by silence. Was it "an injured spirit"? (Yes.) Had Duesler or his father, who had lived in the house previously, hurt this person? (No.) Had Mr. Bell, who had also lived there, hurt them? (Yes.) Was this person "murdered for money?" (Yes.) Duesler wanted to know how much money the murderer had taken: was it \$100, \$200, \$300? "And when I came to five hundred the rapping was heard" (Podmore 1902a, 180–81).² Details piled up: the murdered man was a peddler whose throat had been slit and whose body was buried 10 feet deep in the cellar (Weisberg 2004, 20).

What began as a simple haunted-house story quickly became a sensational event: direct communication with the dead, a dialogue in code, a way for people to generate new knowledge while enjoying thrilling parlor entertainment. Since its beginning, Spiritualism has had a complicated

relationship to Christianity; some individuals and groups have tried to tie the two together, while others insist on their separation. As it developed, Spiritualism drew ideas from other movements, including mesmerism, Swedenborgianism, and transcendentalism (Jenkins, n.d.; Owen 1989; Podmore 1902a, 1902b; Weisberg 2004). Spiritualism's popular growth was tied to progressive social movements, including women's rights advocacy; to technological developments in telegraphy and photography, which created excitement about the possibilities of long-distance communication and new forms of visual revelation; and to mass mourning for wartime deaths.³

Today, organizations such as the Spiritualists' National Union in the United Kingdom, the National Spiritualist Association of Churches in the United States, and Victorian Spiritualists' Union (VSU) in Australia continue to organize and promote the practice of mediumship. Styles of Spiritualist mediumship vary within and among these different associations, but they are historically related and their principles and practices overlap. Although Spiritualist organizations do not attract the large number of followers they once did, the practice of mediumship has become a popular form of therapeutic entertainment, and many mediums perform in public venues (including social clubs, psychic fairs, and the like) unaffiliated with any particular Spiritualist group. The Canberra Spiritualist Association (CSA), with which I did my research, is an affiliate of the VSU. CSA leaders

emphatically do not align Spiritualism with Christianity, although members disagree on whether Spiritualism is a “religion.”

One major change in Spiritualist practice from its early days to the present has been the declining prominence of physical mediumship. In physical mediumship, mediums produced tangible things—such as the Fox sisters’ invisible knocks, or, more ambitiously, things like ectoplasm and “apports” (objects believed to have been transported by spiritual force). Most ambitiously, some mediums were believed to take the physical form of spirit beings in “full materialization’ . . . who walked about the room, socialized and sometimes even flirted with the members of the séance” (Connor 1999, 203). Psychical investigator Frank Podmore seems to suggest this practice began in the United States in October 1860, and historian Molly McGarry identifies the summer of 1874 as the moment when there began an American “craze of materialization séances” (McGarry 2008, 101; Podmore 1902b, 95). Physical mediumship still takes place in the 21st century, but it does not have the outsized presence it did in the 19th century, and it is not practiced during the CSA’s services.⁴

Another practice is trance mediumship, in which the medium channels a spirit and in doing so might alter her voice qualities.⁵ E. B. Tylor, vexed by Alfred Russel Wallace’s claim that Spiritualism is scientific, went to London in 1872 to observe private séances. He noted mediums speaking in the voices of various spirit characters—for example, “The medium was next possessed

by 'Irish Ann' and talked rubbish about Fenians in brogue" (Stocking 1971, 93–94). A related practice was trance lecturing, in which spirits gave lectures on topics often chosen by the audience (Moore 1977, 107–29; Podmore 1902b, 126–39). Trance lectures were a test of a medium's authenticity: Could she speak knowledgeably on a subject of which she had no knowledge?⁶

In contrast to physical and trance mediumship, mediums who give public readings at CSA services today largely practice mental mediumship. In mental mediumship, the medium can see visions, hear words and sounds (like music), feel physical sensations (often in relation to the cause of a person's death), experience smells and tastes, and receive unexpected mental impulses. (Spiritualists distinguish between the work of mediumship and psychic communication. Mediums receive impulses from the spirit world, while people who use their psychic abilities receive impulses from living humans.) Mental mediumship, according to the CSA's mediumship course book, "is done in a light, barely noticeable, trance condition" (Ivory and Ivory 2017, 15). This very light trance might not look like a "trance" at all. The medium's task is to tell the audience what she or he is sensing. In dialogue with audience members, mediums and "recipients" usually arrive at an understanding of who is sending these signals to the medium. It is nearly always the recipient's deceased friend or family member.⁷

I have attended meetings of the CSA since mid-2015, and I formally began a research project on Australian Spiritualism in March 2017. I have made comparative observations at Spiritualist events in the United Kingdom (at the Arthur Findlay College) and the United States (at Lily Dale in New York and Camp Chesterfield in Indiana, sites of long-standing Spiritualist “summer camps” open to the public). All the data in this article comes from the Australian fieldwork. The dominant question of my research has been how Spiritualists generate dialogues between spirits (“people in Spirit”) and living humans. Focusing on mediums’ performances, I have learned that to be a successful medium, one does not use weird words. One speaks, instead, like any effective public speaker in mainstream Australia or the United States: directly but tactfully, clearly and confidently. Like a shaman, a Spiritualist medium develops dialogues between dead and living. Like an evangelical prayer giver, a medium works hard to make the conversation casual. Unlike either, a medium typically “brings through” a parade of entirely new spiritual characters, yet without altering her voice qualities.

Making contact with the spirit world: “I’m going to a party”

To learn how Spiritualist mediums gain expertise, I have observed their performances during the CSA Sunday meetings. I have also taken mediumship-training classes.⁸ The British medium Lynn Probert offered two workshops on the weekend of March 18–19, 2017, when she came to

Canberra on a brief Australian tour.⁹ At both workshops, attendance was in the low 20s. All participants were women except for myself and Norman Ivory, the president of the CSA. (The Saturday class was held over eight hours, with a lunch break; the Sunday session was held over four hours and was followed by a service.) Then, from April 6 to August 24, 2017, the leaders of the CSA—Lynette Ivory, the association's treasurer, and her husband, Norman—ran a mediumship course from 7:30 to 9:30 on Thursday nights. There were three students, all of them women, in addition to myself. I was not an especially diligent student—of the 20 sessions, I attended 15. But Probert and the Ivorys were effective teachers, and their advice harmonized and resonated with the ways mediums practice during CSA services.

To contact the spirit world, one begins by doing what some Spiritualists call an "attunement," which means, in part, sitting quietly, closing one's eyes, quieting one's conscious thoughts, and mentally declaring one's intention to be in touch with the spirit world. One's own power and energy, Probert said, is subtle; when one "blends" with the spirit world, making contact, one will have a baseline understanding of one's own energetic nature. In other words, when one recognizes how one's own spiritual vibrations feel, one will have a basis for comparison and know that when one feels a new sensation, it is coming from outside oneself. Similarly, during the second week of Lynette Ivory's mediumship course, she told us,

“Reduce the noise of the mind, and be open to receiving telepathic” signs through various senses. Once one is ready, signs will present themselves: One might see, hear, taste, smell, feel, or intuit impressions which are taken to be signals from the spirit world.

Probert gave students in her Saturday workshop a series of exercises. In the first one, members of the audience paired off with each other and were given no instructions other than to just try mediumship. (Everyone else paired off voluntarily, but Probert paired me up with an 82-year-old woman who was a beginner like me.) In the second exercise, we were to request whom we wanted to hear from in the spirit world—in other words, to seek contact with a specific deceased person, not whichever spirit showed up. My new partner said she wanted to hear from her “nana,” or grandmother. After lunch, we had a third exercise, in which we were supposed to begin not by identifying the spirit’s basic traits (e.g., whether it was a man, woman, boy, or girl), but by trying to feel and describe their character. Probert said this might make a stronger overall impression: It would be a comfortable approach, more freeing for the medium, with a “softer feeling.” (My field notes here bluntly record the fact that the sensations I received did not make sense to my new practice partner: “My mention to [her] of cats, gardening, trees, and then the woman associated with them, was a complete strikeout.”) The fourth and final exercise came with a twist: we were to get

in touch with a spirit and compare their philosophy of life when they were alive (e.g., if they were an optimist or pessimist) with how they see life now.

Probert's varied exercises were challenging, and my notes record scattered impressions—the ones I could remember after the fact, that is, because the effort involved in not thinking was intense, and I found it difficult to recall specifics later on. In the Ivorys' weekly classes, in comparison, the training was straightforward. As part of each class, a student (usually two per week) would stand in front of the class, attempt to make contact with a spirit, and then give a reading. In earlier sessions of the course, Norman or Lynette would ask questions to coach the trainee through the performance: What were the spirit's physical traits? How were they related to the living recipient? How old were they? Where were they from? How had they died? Lynette would write the trainee medium's answers on the room's whiteboard. The last question was usually about what message the person in Spirit wanted to convey to the living recipient.

There are two rules of Spiritualist mediumship that are slightly at odds with each other. The first is that when a medium receives an impression from the spirit world—whether vision, sound, or something else—she should express it directly to the audience. A medium should not doubt what she senses. "Don't question yourself," Lynette Ivory said in the first week of her course. "Just give what you get. It doesn't matter how stupid it seems." She told how she was once giving a reading and a male spirit was coming

through, but the recipient had trouble identifying him. Lynette mentally saw a yellow daffodil, mentioned this, and immediately the recipient knew who the spirit was. The second rule, however, is that spirits communicate with mediums in ways that resonate with the mediums' experiences. Thus not all mediums will receive the same kinds of signals, and they might develop a personal interpretive code through trial and error. For example, when I interviewed a leading Canberra medium, Sarah Jeffery, in December 2018, she explained that she had learned through practice that when she saw a silver bracelet, it signified an inherited object that was personally meaningful for the recipient, but not necessarily an actual bracelet.

Because I was a novice, my attempts at mediumship usually felt like I was receiving random mental images—or not so random, when I suspected my mind was calling up something I had recently seen so that I could describe it to a waiting audience. Experienced mediums, however, practice mental techniques to obtain information from the spirit world. During her Sunday workshop, Probert asked each audience member to identify something we wished we could develop in our mediumship, then recommended an approach we could take. To a woman who said she wanted to work on knowing the relationship between the spirit and the living recipient, Probert recommended mentally picturing a family tree. To a woman who wanted to work on knowing the time a person had died, she mentioned visualizing a watch. To a woman who wanted to work on

identifying places, she recommended picturing a map. Similarly, in the Ivorys' course, we learned we could imagine a filmstrip marked off as decades representing a period associated with the spirit, visualize a body to see which part failed at death (the relevant area of the body might light up), or visualize a whiteboard, chalkboard, or television where the information we wanted to receive would appear.

Novice mediums begin with a simple monologue of mental impression. For example, one sees in the mind's eye a man with a mustache, so one announces, "I'm with a man who has a mustache." Skilled mediums shift from this monologue to a complex mental dialogue in which questions can be posed to spirit figures and answers received, sometimes directly and sometimes symbolically. The tricky part is that this spiritual-mental dialogue must be translated into a dialogue with living human recipients, as I describe in the next section. Here, I will mention two final lessons Probert offered on communicating with people in the spirit world.

The first was that people in the spirit world are just like living people. Indeed, they are essentially still alive, just located on a different plane of existence from ours. Interactions with them should be enjoyable. Probert began her public "demonstration" (that is, her mediumship readings, also called being "on platform") by thanking the audience for coming, asking who had not been to a demonstration before, and explaining how she would work:

So, people think that mediums see the spirit world in full form and hear every word they say. And that's what we want. But that's not the fact of how it happens. Very much we move our mind—which is the hardest thing to do—out of the way, and try not to be too nosy, and they will provide us with information, and the way that we get that is in different ways. So it may come as a feeling, it may come as an emotion, it may come with an image, a symbol, a picture, a memory. And we as mediums then have to try and interpret it, and hopefully put it across in a way that you will understand.

So, it very much is a thing where we work together, so I will need you to respond to me. . . .

And you know, people think they've got to be so *serious* when you come to things like this. Just 'cause someone's died in a physical sense, they haven't lost their humor and their ability to have fun with you. And to me, that's what it's all about. And when I go to do a demonstration, I look at it that I'm going to a party; I just don't know who I'm going to meet. 'Cause when we go to a party, we chat to someone for 10 minutes, we get to know a bit about them, we talk, and then we go, "Lovely to talk to you," and we go off and talk to someone else. So, that's what we do as mediums when we demonstrate. We get to know people.

So, I'm going to have a party with your relatives and friends, and thank you for that.¹⁰

Probert is telling her audience that spirit talk is like party chatter: friendly, low-key, enjoyable. Although even party chatter can involve complex expectations, Probert is letting listeners know to expect speech that is not stylistically weird, because the spirits of loved ones have not fundamentally changed their characters after their physical deaths.

Her second lesson was that it is simple to disengage from performance of mediumship. At the Saturday workshop, one student asked her how she transitions out of mediumship at the end of a session. It is like turning a switch, Probert replied, or, after driving, locking your car and walking away. Finishing was not a complicated matter but simply one of deciding to stop.

The methods of training for communicative fluency in mediumship recall the practices of evangelical Christians as they learn to speak with God in prayer (Bialecki 2017; Luhrmann 2012). Like Spiritualist mediums, members of the Vineyard movement train themselves to hear voices, sometimes audibly but often mentally. They treat experience and emotions as evidence. In addition, both groups practice a casual speaking style: American evangelical women who speak of having a "date night" with God are not far from Probert when she says that mediumship is like going to a

party (Luhrmann 2012, 80; Vineyard members also practice glossolalia, a classic example of “weird words”).

T. M. Luhrmann (2012, 201) argues that the specific “capacity of mind” cultivated by people who practice speaking with God is “absorption,” “the mental capacity common to trance, hypnosis, dissociation, and to most imaginative experiences in which the individual becomes caught up in ideas or images or fascinations.” In her earlier work on British pagans, Luhrmann analyzes the psychological techniques in ritual practice that keep open a “sense of the possibility of falsification” (Luhrmann 1989, 123). Just as British pagans learn to verify (to their own satisfaction, if not to that of laboratory scientists) that magic really works, so do evangelical Christians learn to hear God, know God’s truth, and act accordingly. And so too do Spiritualists learn to receive impressions from the spirit world and learn what counts as evidence. Yet to understand Spiritualism, one should not be distracted by questions about the techniques used to contact the spirit world; more important are the conversational dynamics between mediums and their audiences. Spirits speak to mediums, but mediums speak onward, as it were, interacting with audience members to construct recognizable spirit characters. This is a “conventionalized performance . . . programmed to include mediational routines” (Bauman 2004, 130–31), routines that require audience members to both respond to and validate the medium’s spoken words.

Speaking with the living: "Who am I with?"

A medium contacts the spirit world for two main reasons.¹¹ The first is to provide evidence for life after death. Spiritualists call this "proof of survival," and it is perhaps the most pressing job a medium has in Australian Spiritualism. What constitutes proof is the revelation of character: the medium describes a deceased person, providing details that she could not have guessed, including what their personalities were like and, sometimes, how they died. (In some cases, mediums "bring through" spirits of people they knew in life or spirits of people they have brought through before. The gold standard of mediumship, however, is bringing through a spirit one does not know for a person one does not know.) Providing evidence is the thrilling part of a good demonstration of mediumship. A skilled medium produces a frisson of excitement when she gets a string of yeses from an audience member, popping firecrackers of affirmation. When a person in the spirit world has been identified through dialogue between medium and recipient, the medium's second task is to relay a message from this "person in Spirit" to the person in the audience. Messages can have emotional gravity for recipients, but as speech they tend to be formulaic and stereotyped (the spirits are always sending love and encouragement, never criticism or dire warnings), and they are not open to failure as is the provision of evidence.

Probert and the Ivorys gave students the same advice: Mediums need to speak with confidence, and when the details of a spirit's death are

distressing, speak with discretion. Confidence was so important to the Ivorys that part of each mediumship class was devoted to practicing public speaking. A student would be told to stand in front of the room and speak on a topic of their choice, then critiqued on their delivery. In her Saturday workshop, Probert told students that after describing the characteristics of a person in Spirit, the medium should not ask the audience "Who understands?" but, rather, "Who am I with?" This is more definite, she explained, and does not imply that one needs to keep adding verifying material. In her Sunday workshop, she repeated this advice and added that a medium should not say, "Let me get you a little bit more information." Don't explain how you are working, Probert said. Be in control. Norman Ivory elaborated this theme in the first session of the CSA course, saying that when you are confident, you will not imagine things. You will get real messages from the spirit world. Lynette Ivory reinforced this lesson, instructing us, "Don't allow a no to put you off." She meant that if an audience member does not recognize the spirit communicator's identity, the medium should not worry. It will make her work harder, and a consistent message from Probert, Ivory, and others is that mediums need to keep practicing their skills.

The rule to speak with discretion moderates the rule to speak directly. At the Saturday workshop, I asked Probert if she ever had a message from a person in Spirit she felt she should not pass on. She said no, but that

sometimes mediums receive information that is meant only to give contextual understanding. She said that if, for example, a medium were in front of a large audience communicating with parents whose three-year-old daughter had been raped and murdered, the medium's realization of this would be information from Spirit telling the medium what a horrific thing the parents had been through, and to proceed with sensitivity. The medium should not say that the daughter had been murdered. Rather, she should say she knew the daughter's life had been taken from her by another's hands. The daughter's spirit would not want her parents to be reminded of the brutal facts, Probert explained; the parents would not want to be reminded of the details in front of an audience, either, and the audience did not need to know. Providing evidence does not mean purveying scandal. In a lighter vein, in the third CSA mediumship class, Lynette Ivory advised us not to use the words "husband" or "wife" when communicating a spiritual message, but rather to say "partner," because the person in Spirit communicating with their loved one might not have been their spouse.

Mediums sometimes instruct audience members how to respond. The evening before Lynn Probert's workshops, she gave a public demonstration in which she told the audience, "I will need you to talk back to me, and not just nod your head or shake your head. Because there's something in your voice that is like a recognition to the spirit world, and that helps me perceive information easier, and hopefully stronger, and more, and to provide as

much as I can for you.” Similarly, a leading Canberra medium, Jane Hall, announced as she began her demonstration at the CSA service of May 21, 2017, “So if I come to you today, nice loud yes, nice loud no. I’m OK with noes, because that will also help the energy within the room. It will help the people at the front not have to turn around, ‘cause they’re super curious about what’s going on if I come to the people in the back. But it also helps the spirit world as well.” When audience members speak up clearly, everyone can hear how well or poorly the medium is doing, and it boosts the energy in the room.

Other lessons that some audience members ignore are not to give mediums information and not to ask questions during a performance. Lynette Ivory explained that if audience members ask questions, they engage the medium’s intellectual mind and break the link with Spirit. The textbook for the CSA mediumship course is explicit: “Don’t allow the recipient to feed you any information, stop them immediately if they start to tell you who they think it is, what they are like etc. This does not allow validation of the information you have given them” (Ivory and Ivory 2017, 21). Whereas the emphasis on providing evidence in demonstrations can make mediums seem like scientists, mediums’ instructions to audience members can make them seem more like lawyers: just yes or no, please.

A medium feels spiritual vibrations, receives impressions she recognizes as coming from the spirit world, and communicates these

impressions to an audience. The audience responds, validating, correcting, or rejecting the information. This is the kind of mediumship that dominates at CSA services. In services, the style of mediums' speech, the participant structure, and Spiritualist philosophy work together to create the sense that this is an event organized to establish proof and express love.

Voice and evidence: "You've got it twisted, but . . . you're absolutely right"

The CSA holds its services on the first, third, and fifth Sunday of each month, with a summer break from mid-December to mid-January. The meeting site is a community hall in the suburb of Pearce. Sometimes the medium is a member of the CSA, but not always. Of the 10 mediums I have seen perform, nine have been women. The average attendance, including the medium, is between 17 and 18 people, and the ratio of women to men in the room is about two to one. (Figures come from my notes on 45 services from January 17, 2016, to December 2, 2018; counting proportions of women to men at 30 of them.) Most attendees believe spirit communication is possible, and I have never heard any audience member challenge a medium's authenticity. In other words, audience members are predisposed to work with the medium. The question many audience members implicitly face at the beginning of a service, then, is not whether there is life after death, but whether any of *their* people will come through that day.

Services are chaired by a member of the CSA. I have chaired six services. More often, I have run the laptop-driven audiovisual system. The chair announces each part of the service, introduces the medium, and often delivers a short talk on one of Spiritualism's Seven Principles, a list of precepts credited to the 19th-century medium Emma Hardinge Britten, who is said to have received them from the spirit of utopian social activist Robert Owen. (Whereas Australian and UK Spiritualists affirm the Seven Principles, the US-based National Spiritualist Association of Churches offers nine, although the substance of both overlaps.) Services include a short meditative healing, a speech from the medium, and a sing-along with four recorded songs, since singing is thought to raise spiritual energy. The highlight is the demonstration, in which the medium offers "proof of survival," or evidence of life after death. In a typical demonstration at CSA services, a medium offers several readings. The fewest I have seen was three (and that was a notably short service, because it was the day of the annual general meeting), and one medium, whom I saw only once, was known for giving everyone in the audience a quick reading when she worked. I estimate five or six is typical.

In mental mediumship, Spiritualists do not change their tone of voice to mimic the voice of a spirit; for example, they do not sound "creaky" to represent grandparents. They occasionally quote spirit figures and speak in the first person from the spirit's perspective, but their voice and vocabulary

generally remain the same.¹² They are quoting, not surrendering their voice box. Mediums do sometimes sound like they are lost in thought as they gather evidence, pausing as they receive impressions unavailable to the audience. Overall, their speaking style contrasts with the varieties of physical and trance mediumship popular in early Spiritualism and other types of spiritual mediation, such as varieties of shamanism that feature repertoires of spirit characters with distinct vocal qualities (e.g., Atkinson 1989; Schieffelin 1985; Howell 1994; Wolf 1990). It also contrasts with forms of divination in which the intention and responsibility of the ritual speaker are treated as irrelevant (Du Bois 1992). Spiritualist mediums establish a connection with the spirit world partly by mentally declaring their intention to do so, and although they are not personally responsible for the messages spirit figures send through them, they are obligated to practice enough so they can perform well.

But Spiritualist mediums do speak in a distinct voice. Here, "voice" should be understood in Bakhtinian terms as "the linguistic construction of social personae" (Keane 1999, 271). The voice in which they speak is not the voice of the dead, but rather what I can only call "the voice of the medium": conversational in tone, generally referring to the deceased person with third-person singular pronouns, and describing what he or she was like, followed by questions (do you recognize him or her?), and including a few insider terms such as "person in Spirit" (rather than "ghost").

The voice of a Spiritualist mental medium de-emphasizes heteroglossia. This demands explanation because, following Bakhtin, anthropologists have come to see all language as inherently multivoiced, and analyses of artful performance attend closely to the precise techniques by which a single speaker can represent multiple characters, their emotions, and their moral values (e.g., Hill 1995). But the art of speaking as an effective mental medium does not require the construction of many voices. To be clear, I am not arguing that Spiritualist mediums speak monologically. Their voices weave past and future in the vocabulary and accents of their teachers and audiences, in fine Bakhtinian dialogic style. But in public demonstrations at the CSA, a medium speaks in a notably plain and conversational way that does not vary much during the performance. Her style of expression does not change from one spirit figure to the next. The unremarkable tone of the medium's voice reflects the understanding that this is an unremarkable event, in its own way. It is a demonstration—a revelation of fact, not an affirmation of faith. It is a conversation with living people who happen to be on the astral plane, as well as with living people sitting here in the community center in Pearce. In short, a medium's voice is defined by its conversational tone, extraordinary content, and generation of new characters within a stable speech style. It has a family resemblance to classic shamanism, evangelical Christian prayer, and some forms of divination, yet it is its own distinct practice.

A good example of mental mediumship comes from the CSA service of November 5, 2017. Seventeen people attended, including seven men. It was the second time during the service that the medium, Jane Hall, developed a dialogue with Patty, a stalwart elderly member of the CSA. (The first reading brought through the spirit of Patty's cat. Not all Spiritualist mediums channel animals, but Hall does.) I have chosen this reading partly because it is unremarkable. Its features were typical of many demonstrations: the medium spent time identifying the proper recipient; asked questions to which the answer was no, and others to which the answer was yes; stated her understanding of the deceased person's identity; and conveyed a message from the deceased to the living recipient.

JANE. OK, I have a gentleman that's drawing close to me now. And I have to say, I feel with this gentleman there must have been a time where—OK, he has very good attention to detail, with this gentleman, but I also know his attention . . . towards the end of his life wasn't as detailed as it was. So I know he had great attention for detail in his life, but I know when he starts to come to the end of his life, things aren't as clear in his mind. His thoughts aren't clear with him. And I need to say, I feel this man, though, I got to a great age. Because I can feel on my face, I can feel . . . that I'm aged. And I also know there must have been, there'll be a memory of him when older people

miss little bits in their beard. Like, he's clean shaven, but he's missed little bits on his . . . neck or face. I know that that is something that he wouldn't have done in his younger years, but it's almost like he was persisting. And I also have to say I feel like he's living by himself, as well. Is this starting to ring a bell with anyone? A . . . gentleman, he has great attention to detail, and I have to say he would have liked his shed. He would have liked his shed. Which man doesn't like his shed? [*Jane laughs.*] Is any of this fitting . . . with someone?

Having completed her initial description, Jane checks with the audience to see if anyone will take up these details and link them to a person they knew. A woman in the audience answers, "Possibly," and Jane says, "OK." She continues,

JANE. And I do feel like, possibly could be military connections, too. Am I not here with this lady? Am I not with you? [*She indicates a woman sitting in the second row, not the woman who said "possibly."*] Do you understand a gentleman in the spirit world to be of, in their day, a great attention to detail, but then as they age, they start to get a little bit forgetful? You can say no, because I might be [*inaudible*]. That doesn't make sense to you? [*The woman's response is inaudible, but is evidently negative.*] OK. All right. So, I'll want to know we're in the area around here, then. [*She indicates the audience members sitting*

near the woman.] So, you'll just keep listening. So, I know, do you remember this gentleman . . . with the b—missing bits of what he's cleared? Like, being clean shaved, but just missing a little bit? And I know the gray hair, I know it's gray hair on his, on his face.

WOMAN. I can picture that, him doing that. I can't remember
[*inaudible*]—

JANE. OK, but I have . . . and you would have to know that he was great, there was great attention to detail. Like, so he could do very fine work. Very fine work. So he'd put, like, things that are very small together. And it's almost like I'm putting—I want to say clocks. But I'm putting small, like engineering-type things together. I'm working in small detail. [*Five-second pause.*] No.

WOMAN. Not to my knowledge.

Jane, like all confident mediums, knows what she sees. She sees an old man who probably spent time in the military and paid attention to details, although in his later years he had trouble shaving his face evenly. Two women who had seemed like possible respondents have not recognized the description, so Jane presses on. Eventually, one audience member, Patty, answers positively.

JANE. Let me see where he's going. OK, let me just get more information from him. I know I have great detail—and I also have to say he would, there would have been a period of his time where he would have been in the country. So this gentleman hasn't been always in the city, but I know he has time in the city. I'm coming back here, am I?

PATTY. Um, I think you are, but I wasn't picking up on it before then.

JANE. That, that's OK. So you would understand that he would have had great attention to detail? And . . . you would understand, towards the end of his life he starts to . . . forget a few things?

PATTY. Yes.

JANE. Yes. OK. . . . I feel like there was a period of time he was by himself, that he was by himself, that he was living by himself, or he was in a home by, or, like, he was by himself. There was a period of time.

PATTY. I have trouble with that.

JANE. OK. So, if I say to you—in which case I feel like he, with his shaving, he was doing it himself. That he wasn't getting help. I know that he's not getting help.

PATTY. I wasn't there. That's possibly true, and for the circumstances, I believe that.

JANE. That's—right, OK. And would you understand that this is not brother, this is Dad? Your dad in spirit world?

PATTY. Yeah.

JANE. And is it, do you, is this, does this fit for your father? [*Jane repeats her question because Patty is hard of hearing.*] Does this fit for your father?

PATTY. The person you're describing is my father.

JANE. Right, OK. That's what I felt. I was, felt like I was with Dad. I wanted to say Dad. OK.

In this remarkable stretch of dialogue, Patty moves from suspecting the reading might be for her—"I think you are, but I wasn't picking up on it

before”—to positively identifying the person in Spirit who is communicating through Jane: “The person you’re describing is my father.” (It is possible that Patty had sensed her father’s presence; I did not ask her about this.) Note that on her way to this affirmation, Patty does not quite agree with two details: she has “trouble with” the statement that her father lived alone, and cannot verify if he had help shaving.

Jane asks if Patty wants her to use a microphone, and Patty says no. Jane says she will stay close to Patty. She now works to confirm the identification of the person in Spirit:

JANE. So, you would understand father to be in the spirit world, and father to—

PATTY. Yes.

JANE. OK. And you understand that he was great with attention to detail and fine work, like putting things together.

PATTY. Yes.

JANE. OK. ‘Cause I just know he can put, like, little bits and pieces and put, build things—

PATTY. Right, I, I understand.

Having confirmed that Jane is in touch with Patty's father, Jane and Patty then discuss details of his character and experiences. A portrait emerges. Patty's father lived a long life but has now passed away. He paid attention to fine details in his work. He served in the Air Force, and was awarded a service medal. Jane checks with Patty that her father spent some time in the countryside ("Yes, deployment during the war.") At one point, the conversation takes an amusing detour. Jane mentions boys and girls, and Patty responds that in her family there are only girls "that we know of." Like many talented mediums, Hall is an adept spontaneous performer, and here she and Patty both show comic flair as they discuss the possibility that Patty's father had children with a girlfriend. Jane says, "I didn't want to say that," and Patty responds with a statement of pure Spiritualist evidence-based affirmation: "We're being accurate." Jane credits the spirit world with providing this unexpected bit of evidence: "It's funny what they can come through" with.

Jane goes on to say that Patty's father has "a certain amount of . . . apology coming through," presumably in reference to the extramarital affair. She poses a new question to Patty, asking if he was a pilot in the Air Force. Patty says no. Jane, as a confident medium, insists on details she feels are correct even though the recipient is not verifying them: "I have to say there

must have been times when he did fly, though"; "I just know that I have to talk about aircraft"; "I keep seeing birds everywhere"; "I just know I have to talk about birds, and I have to talk about aircraft."

In the final part of their exchange, Jane and Patty discuss Patty's family relations, and Jane delivers two messages from the spirit world.

JANE. There must be one of your sisters that you're quite close with?

PATTY. Yeah.

JANE. OK. But one sister . . . in the spirit world?

PATTY. No, one . . . sister is, is, a—away sideways. . . .

JANE. Right. OK. 'Cause I just felt like . . . one's, like, here, and then you're close with one here. OK. So . . . out of the two of you that are . . . close, you are probably more . . . close with the one that's distant than your sister. It's like one of you's written off, and I feel like you're more—

PATTY. You've got it twisted, but yeah, I've got the whole idea. You're absolutely right.

JANE. OK. You understand. . . . I just knew I had to talk about the three of you and one being—it felt like in Spirit to me, like she was that sort of far away. Now, you would also know mum to be in Spirit?

PATTY. Yes.

JANE. OK. 'Cause I just feel like mum's also just here as well. But I'm just gonna wrap up. . . . She doesn't want to miss out. She just wants to come through and say hello as well. We've got the cat, we've got the whole family here today! [*Jane laughs.*] So, just know that mum's wanting to . . . say hello, and . . . to be remembered. Now, you must—I just have to say, is there a connection with your mum and the full moon?

PATTY. No [*inaudible*].

Jane. OK. OK. Because I just want you to, I, I just feel like on the next full moon, be aware, 'cause your mum will be around.

PATTY. Thank you very much.

Jane returns to the topic of Patty's sisters and learns they are both alive, but one of them is estranged. She mentions Patty's mother, who has

passed away, and delivers the first message: Her mother wants to say hello and be remembered. All the family in the spirit world are gathered around, even the cat whose spirit Jane brought through earlier in the service. The second message is a personal symbol for Patty: the full moon will represent her mother's presence. Patty then takes the initiative of closing the exchange by saying thank you, and slightly more than 12 minutes after it began, the reading is over. Jane moves on to her next spiritual engagement, a young man who was killed in an accident.

The most intriguing moment of this final section is not the messages but Patty's response to Jane's description of the sisters' relationship: "You've got it twisted, but yeah, I've got the whole idea. You're absolutely right." Even though she is talking about living people, Patty's words are an evocative response to Spiritualist mediums' speech practices in general. Mediums' speech is conversational, but speaking with the dead is never entirely straightforward because of their existential otherness. Patty characterizes Jane's description of her sisters as both "twisted" and "absolutely right"—like seeing the situation through a refracted lens, not quite in balance with normal human understanding and yet somehow ultimately correct.

The reading is a success, then, but one reason it is successful is that Jane's conversational questions, Patty's responsiveness, and her noes have helped generate a sense that what is finally being provided is evidence.

Patty's father might not have lived alone or had trouble shaving, but he did pay attention to details and win a military service medal. Patty's sister might not have passed away, but she is not really with us, either—she is estranged, "away sideways." As Bauman (2004, 152) argues for performances of spoken mediation, "Not only does the mediator bear responsibility for replicating the author's text [in this case, signs from the spirit world] correctly, but performance also renders him accountable for reproducing it well.". Reproducing it well means passing on one's impressions and receiving verification or rejection from the audience in a conjunction of dialogues (in Bauman's terms) until a recognizable character is developed and message conveyed. The medium's plainness of speech reflects the demonstration's purpose of providing "proof of survival" and contributes to the medium's authoritative position as a speaker who has developed the necessary skills for providing evidence of life after death.

In writing of negative responses in terms of failure, I am using my own category. Spiritualists, however, do recognize that some mediums work more effectively than others. (Hall has a very good reputation.) And the awkwardness in a room is palpable when there are many noes and long silences, something both mediums and audiences sense keenly. Yet speaking too much of failure would be frowned on because of the principle that mediums need to be confident even when things are not going well. (In the 15th week of the Ivorys' mediumship course, I made self-deprecating

comments about how I had done in the public-speaking exercise that night. Lynette instructed me, "You must never put yourself down".) Hall's demonstration was a success by Spiritualist criteria. She received impressions and recognizably described a deceased person to a responsive recipient, then passed on messages. This success, however, was not automatic. Generating what counted as evidence included negative responses ultimately leading to an interactive, general agreement.¹³

Let the dead speak

When humans speak with existential Others, communication always crosses a gap of some sort. In attempting to cross this gap, many ritual practitioners have developed speaking styles in which they, the spirits, or both parties speak in markedly abnormal ways. But some do the opposite. Mental mediums in Spiritualism are a group whose stylistic distinction is to be undistinctive. To be sure, they use some insider terms, and their demonstrations follow patterns. First a spirit's presence is sensed. Next an audience member is identified. Questions are asked and evidence is presented, verified, or dismissed. Finally, the medium passes along a message. But the tone of the medium's voice does not vary with the introduction of each new person from the spirit world, and philosophically remarkable claims are made in a moderate, conversational tone.

Spiritualist mediums' speech highlights the limits of a focus on heteroglossia in understanding human interaction. Although all discourse is dialogic, speakers work to de-emphasize dialogism for many reasons: for example, to make claims of universal truth and incontestable authority (Tomlinson and Millie 2017). In Australian Spiritualism, mental mediums represent multiple distinct characters in a single voice, framing the ritual event as a conversation (albeit one taking place across planes of existence). The content of this conversation is meant to be evidential. Mediums recognize, however, that audience members, like all conversation partners, might be confused, distracted, or shy, and mediums learn that speaking confidently means that the signs they describe are more likely to be taken up by the audience as evidence. Key lessons mediums provide anthropologists, then, are that mediation should not be conflated with heteroglossia, and that heteroglossia should not be conflated with aesthetically and practically powerful performance. One can speak in an everyday way to deliver a ritually effective, emotionally engrossing, and aesthetically fine-tuned performance.

The ordinariness of mediums' speech reflects Spiritualist philosophy. Life in the spirit world is not so different from life here, and you can talk with your late loved ones in the relaxed way you did when they were physically alive. The point of a medium's demonstration is ultimately to provide proof of life after death by communicating details of a deceased person's life that

could only come from that person. Mediums, recipients, and spirit figures participate in a conjoined dialogue in which failure is not just an ever-present possibility but an ingredient in success. Mediums' speech is casual, then, but successful performances are rarely smooth.

Spiritualist mediums' performances are compelling because they command attention, and they can do notably well or poorly, even though Spiritualist philosophy holds that it is ultimately up to the people in Spirit to decide to show up and communicate. Most often, the medium receives both negative and positive responses from audience members, and persists with questions until a recognizable character is generated interactively. The understanding that undergirds the medium's demonstration is that people in the spirit world want to communicate, so the medium's agency is backgrounded to the extent that people in the spirit world need to give her signs that she can relay to audience members: a yellow daffodil, a military medal, a badly shaved beard. Audience members pick up these signs—usually—and, working with the medium, turn them into recognizable characters. Successful readings contribute to mediums' reputations and, in words spoken simply, foster the sense that life goes on forever.

Notes

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Matt Tomlinson

Department of Social Anthropology

University of Oslo

Eiler Sundts Hus

Moltke Moes vei 31

0851 Oslo

Norway

matthew.tomlinson@sai.uio.no

¹ Anthropological insights are sparked from moments in ritual performance when things do not go smoothly; indeed, “the very potential for failure is one measure of the consequentiality of a social action” (Keane 2018, 70). Classic examples of ritual failure include E. E. Evans-Pritchard (1976, 103) on a Zande healer who cannot produce evidence of healing (because Evans-Pritchard stole the “object of witchcraft”), and Clifford Geertz (1957) on an officiant who refuses to officiate at a Javanese funeral.

² The idea that knocks signify yes or no responses from spirits was not first developed in Hydesville. Andrew Lang (1901, 165), describing this practice in Britain’s “Cock Lane” ghost investigation of the early 1760s, refers to two previous examples, apparently European, in the first half of the 16th century.

³ On these issues, see the work of Laurence Moore (1977, chap. 4), Ann Braude (1989), Alex Owen (1989), John Durham Peters (1999, esp. chap. 2), and Drew Gilpin Faust (2008). Jeffrey Sconce (2000, 47) connects two of these strands in his description of 19th-century Spiritualism, which he says linked “electromagnetism and femininity in a divine alliance.”

⁴ I have not witnessed but have heard of a flickering, on-the-edge kind of materialization that takes place when mediums begin to adopt mannerisms of the person in the spirit world with whom they are communicating. For example, when I interviewed the medium Sarah Jeffery in December 2018, she mentioned “bringing through an older gentleman, and feeling . . . the whole body sort of slumping forward, and the eyes not being quite open. And then realizing that the recipient is looking at me going, ‘Oh my God, I can see my dad,’ or . . . ‘You’ve just done that movement.’”

⁵ From this point on, I write about mediums with feminine pronouns because women dominate Spiritualist practice, and I want to avoid awkward “she or he” phrasings.

⁶ Only once have I heard a medium during a CSA service speak in a different tone of voice indicating that she was speaking as a spirit. My notes from that service, which took place in February 2017, are brief: “The day’s medium . . . spoke in the voice of Spirit during her opening speech, which was a kind of prayer. When Spirit spoke, it was in a slightly higher, more nasal voice than her own. The message was a generic one about unity and love.” (“Spirit” is the Spiritualist divine principle, a holistic and all-encompassing energy rather than an individual. It can also be shorthand for the spiritual world, as when deceased people are described as being “in Spirit.”) Another kind of speech is called direct voice mediumship, in which “a voice . . . speaks independently of the medium’s vocal organs” (Connor 1999, 212–13), sometimes amplified by a trumpet-shaped megaphone. I have not seen direct voice practiced at the CSA.

⁷ Many mediums say they work with guides, or spirit figures who help and protect them. During demonstrations at CSA services, however, mediums do not usually refer explicitly to their guides. In Australian Spiritualism, guides do not have the outsized public presence of New Age figures like Ramtha, a spirit famously channeled by the American author J. Z. Knight (Brown 1997; see also Manning 2018).

⁸ The scholarship on Spiritualist history is immense, but the ethnography is not as well developed. Two scholars who have conducted participant observation are Vieda Skultans (1974), who focuses on illness and healing among South Wales (UK)

Spiritualists, and David Gordon Wilson (2013), a practicing medium and religious studies scholar who worked with Spiritualists in Edinburgh and argues that Spiritualist mediumship is a variety of shamanism, both practices being forms of spiritual apprenticeship.

⁹ I identify mediums by their real names. "Patty," the audience member in Jane Hall's demonstration, has been given a pseudonym.

¹⁰ In this transcription and those that follow, I aim for simplicity of presentation. Ellipses indicate brief snippets of deleted speech. I have deleted most placeholders like "um" and "ah" and some minor repetitions. Some unintelligible speech is marked by "[*inaudible*]," although I have not indicated all instances. Recording conditions are not optimal in the Pearce community center.

¹¹ "To make money," some readers might respond. Here, I do not address the economic dimensions of Spiritualist mediumship, but can mention that even top mediums in Canberra have day jobs, so I suspect they do not earn enough from private mediumship for a full-time living wage. Sunday services of the CSA are free and open to the public. Small donations are accepted but not required, and mediums are usually not paid for public demonstrations.

¹² A minor exception is when a medium feels she has received a specific word that will remind the living of someone deceased. For example, in a service in March 2018, the medium Jane Hall explained that she sensed the word "fiddlesticks" in connection with a woman in the spirit world: "I know with this lady. It's a really funny thing to say, but I have to say, 'Fiddlesticks.' So, I don't know if this lady used the word [*she laughs*] 'fiddlesticks' . . . it's a funny thing to do. It's almost like I have to say, 'My body deteriorates, fiddlesticks.'"

¹³ What Jon Bialecki (2017, 171) points out for members of the Vineyard movement is also apt for Spiritualists: There is a “purposeful culturing of doubt that creates an effect much like the crumple zone of a car,” letting smaller failures preserve larger truths—a point made in a slightly different way by Evans-Pritchard (1976, 107) when he notes that “skepticism explains failures of [Zande] witch-doctors, and being directed toward particular witch-doctors even tends to support faith in others” (see also Hüsken 2007, 350; Pelkmans 2013).