



Uncharted features and dynamics of reading: Voices, characters, and crossing of experiences



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ABSTRACT

Readers often describe vivid experiences of voices and characters in a manner that has been likened to hallucination. Little is known, however, of how common such experiences are, nor the individual differences they may reflect. Here we present the results of a 2014 survey conducted in collaboration with a national UK newspaper and an international book festival. Participants ($n = 1566$) completed measures of reading imagery, inner speech, and hallucination-proneness, including 413 participants who provided detailed free-text descriptions of their reading experiences. Hierarchical regression analysis indicated that reading imagery was related to phenomenological characteristics of inner speech and proneness to hallucination-like experiences. However, qualitative analysis of reader's accounts suggested that vivid reading experiences were marked not just by auditory phenomenology, but also their tendency to cross over into non-reading contexts. This supports social-cognitive accounts of reading while highlighting a role for involuntary and uncontrolled personality models in the experience of fictional characters.

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1. Introduction

Vivid or immersive experiences are often described in relation to reading fictional narratives (Caracciolo & Hurlburt, 2016; Green, 2004; Ryan, 1999, 2015). In particular, it seems common for readers (and writers) to report “hearing” the voices of fictional characters, in a way that suggests they have a life of their own (Vilhauer, 2016; Waugh, 2015). What, though, does this mean for the psychological processes that may underpin such experiences? Psychological studies on the phenomenological experience of reading have tended to focus on two strands: first, the perceptual and sensory qualities of reading – primarily via notions of ‘voice’ and inner speech (Alexander & Nygaard, 2008; Perrone-Bertolotti, Rapin, Lachaux, Baciú, & Løevenbruck, 2014); and second, how the reader represents the characters and agents of a text (Kidd & Castano, 2013; Mar & Oatley, 2008).

To a certain extent, it is intuitive to understand why a text – even if not read out loud – would need to be voiced in some way to be read. This is sometimes conceptualized either as inner speech – namely, the various ways in which people talk to themselves (Alderson-Day & Fernyhough, 2015) – or more broadly in terms of auditory imagery, i.e. purposefully imagining the qualities of characters’ or narrators’ voices (Hubbard, 2010; Kuzmičová, 2013). Evidence of inner speech involvement comes from psycholinguistic studies on reading: when we read, phonologically longer stimuli take longer to read than

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shorter stimuli of the same orthographic length (Abramson & Goldinger, 1997; Smith, Reisberg, & Wilson, 1992), while acoustic properties of one's own voice, such as accent, can affect our expectation of rhyme and prosody (e.g., Filik & Barber, 2011). This suggests that at least some properties of text are sounded out in inner speech during reading (Ehrich, 2006).

Readers' expectations of character and narrator voices can also affect how a text is processed. For instance, readers adjust their reading times for texts written by authors with a slow or fast-paced voice. People reading difficult texts, and those who report more vivid mental imagery, show greater evidence of such "author voice" effects on reading speed (Alexander & Nygaard, 2008). When characters' words are referred to in direct speech, voice-selective regions of auditory cortex are more active than during indirect reference (e.g., 'He said, "I hate that cat"' vs. 'He said that he hates that cat'), suggesting auditory simulation of character's voices (Yao, Belin, & Scheepers, 2011). Evidence of inner speech and auditory imagery being involved in reading is consistent with broader theories of reading that place perceptual simulation and embodiment at the heart of textual comprehension (Zwaan, 2004; Zwaan, Madden, Yaxley, & Aveyard, 2004), i.e. the idea that sensorimotor imagery processes are automatically engaged when we read text, as part of understanding the meaning of what is being described.

A second strand of research has emphasized the role of social cognition in the reading experience, largely in response to literary fictional texts. Many readers strongly personify characters and narrators by making inferences about their described thoughts and behaviors (Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003) and assigning them intentionality (Herman, 2008). Studies on empathy in literary experiences have focused on how empathetic engagement with characters is triggered by specific discourse strategies (e.g., first-person vs. third-person narratives; Keen, 2006) or on how empathy in the act of reading relies on readers' previous personal experiences (Kuiken, Miall, & Sikora, 2004; Miall, 2011). Other psychological approaches to reading have investigated the "projection" of knowledge that readers perform – the process by which they assign to each character an individual epistemic view of the narrative world (Gerrig, Brennan, & Ohaeri, 2001), which allows for narrative dynamics such as "suspense" (Gerrig, 1989). Based on such processes, it has been argued that the ways in which readers attribute consciousness, mental states, intentions, and beliefs to characters recruits (Zunshine, 2006, 2012) or even enhances (Kidd & Castano, 2013) readers' theory-of-mind, i.e. the ability to represent the mental states of others. Indeed, it has been claimed that the "function" of reading fiction may be to simulate social experiences involving other people (Mar & Oatley, 2008).

Taken together, the above studies highlight some of the separate perceptual and social-cognitive processes that could explain accounts of 'hearing' the voices of characters. But, although the experiences they are based on are intuitively familiar, phenomenological data on the reading experience in the words of readers themselves is surprisingly lacking. Indeed, almost all of the above work has involved either experimental manipulation of texts, or analysis of responses to specific literary texts. Systematic surveys of readers' experiences of characters in general – that is, as part of their day-to-day experience of reading for pleasure – are largely absent.

We know of only one recent exception: Vilhauer (2016) conducted a qualitative analysis of 160 posts that resulted from a search of 'hearing voices' and 'reading' from a popular message-board website (*Yahoo! Answers*). Of these, over 80% reported vivid experiences when reading, the majority describing specific auditory properties including volume, pitch, and tone. Qualities that are perhaps more indicative of social representation – such as identity and control – were also reported in some cases, but were often hard to classify or lacking in detail. However, the open-ended structure of the source material used by Vilhauer (2016), the fact that it was gathered based on the specific keywords 'hearing voices', and the lack of demographic data from the study participants limit any strong generalizations about the reading experience.

As such, it is unclear whether vivid examples of characters' voices – or indeed other kinds of character representation – are actually a common part of the reading experience. It could be that the act of reading about characters simply involves combining such features in an additive and largely automatic way: if so, phenomenological reports may be expected to consist of vivid perceptual imagery plus some kind of mental state representation – a clear experience of a character's voice and their emotional state, for example. But such skills also vary considerably in the general population (Isaac & Marks, 1994; Palmer, Manocha, Gignac, & Stough, 2003) and may not be integral for most people, most of the time: for some, experiences of voices, characters, or other features of a text could combine to create something very different entirely, or even nothing at all (a character's voice without any impression of intentionality, for example).

To investigate this question, we collaborated with the Edinburgh International Book Festival and a national UK newspaper (the *Guardian*), to survey a large sample of readers about their inner experiences. Instead of focusing on the experience of a particular text (e.g., Miall & Kuiken, 1999), or experimentally varying textual properties (Dixon & Bortolussi, 1996), we opted for a general questionnaire about readers' encounters with voices and characters. This encompassed all kinds of reading (prose vs poetry; crime fiction vs historical novels; or fictional vs non-fictional narratives), although the large majority of eventual responses related to engaging with fiction (82%).

The first aim of the survey was to gather quantitative information on the vividness of readers' experiences, and examine how that related to other individual differences in potentially similar processes. Based on the putative involvement of inner speech in reading, we included a measure of everyday inner speech experiences: the Varieties of Inner Speech Questionnaire (VISQ; McCarthy-Jones & Fernyhough, 2011). Derived from developmental theories of self-talk (Vygotsky, 1987), the VISQ measures a range of phenomenal properties of inner speech, including the extent to which it includes dialogue, if it is experienced in full sentences, whether it is evaluative or motivating, and whether it includes other people's voices. If readers were more likely to report vivid experiences of voice and character during reading, they might also be expected to have a more vivid experience of their own inner speech in general. In addition, vivid experiences of voices and characters during

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