

Correspondence

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‘Audible thoughts’ and ‘speech defect’

SIR: Szasz (1996) equates auditory hallucinations with “thoughts becoming loud” (*Gedankenlautwerden*), which, he suggests, is much the same as talking to oneself, which in turn is what thinking really is. Ergo: auditory hallucinations are in fact part of normal cognition. Put this way, his conclusion sounds absurd – which it is. (Szasz’s arguments have, by the way, nothing to do with so-called output theories of auditory hallucinations, according to which patients talk to themselves, but perceive the voices as coming from somewhere or someone else – a phenomenon which is clearly pathological.)

Let us examine more closely what at first sight appears to be the least tenuous link in the exceedingly rusty chain of Szaszian arguments. Szasz quotes Plato’s view in the ‘Theaetetus’ that thinking is an inward dialogue carried on by the mind with itself and Kant’s statement that “thinking is talking to oneself”. Although Szasz asserts that this idea is “self-evident”, after a moment’s reflection it becomes self-evident that thinking is *not* always talking to oneself. Many of us are familiar with the experience of having a thought and not knowing how to put it into words or even knowing that it cannot be put into words at all. Thinking is clearly possible without words. If I am thinking of my next move in a game of chess, I am not usually talking to myself (after all, my opponent might overhear me), or thinking in words, but imagining how the position will change if I attack my opponent’s knight with my bishop and what the most likely responses are. Similarly, if I am thinking about how to arrange some pictures on my living-room wall, words are not

required. The verb “to think” can even be used in contexts in which there is no conscious thought, e.g. in a chess tournament I may fail to complete my first 40 moves within the time allocated and then say to the referee “I thought I had more time”, although at no time during the game was I aware of having this thought. While thought and language are obviously connected in complex and varied ways, and talking to oneself can be one criterion of thought, the two are not at all the same thing.

Szasz misconstrues two of the key German terms in his paper. *Sprachfehler* is any linguistic error, not merely one of speech or articulation (*Sprache* = language, as well as speech). In the context of schizophrenia, the wider sense is more appropriate than Szasz’s translation (“faulty speech” or “faulty speaking”). Secondly, he interprets *Gedankenlautwerden* (“thoughts becoming loud”) to be something very like “talking to oneself aloud”. Here he turns what in German is an experience (“thoughts becoming loud”) into an action. Unfortunately, the Italian motto which Szasz installs at the beginning of his piece, “Traduttori traditori – Translators are traitors”, can be applied to Szasz himself.

SZASZ, T. (1996) “Audible thoughts” and “speech defect” in schizophrenia. A note on reading and translating Bleuler. *British Journal of Psychiatry*, 168, 533–535.

P. CRICHTON

*Guy’s Hospital
London SE1*

SIR: I am sure that many people will agree with Szasz (1996) that elucidating the meaning of psychotic experiences is an important although complex task. Rather than suggesting that these experiences are not abnormal, I think the value of this approach lies in its emphasis on the possibility of gaining insight into psychosis in terms of ordinary experience.

However, in contrast to Kerr & Howarth (1996), I think that the attribution of meaning to the activities and expressions of psychotic conditions does present problems for the concept of mental