

# Critical Issues in the Recording and Interpretation of Electronic Voice Phenomena (EVP): A Commentary

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How far is the gap between the living and the dead? Is it possible that the voices of those who have gone before us can somehow bridge this gap and be heard again? Surely this question would have important implications for the issue of whether there is life after death, as an effort to meaningfully communicate with the living would lend favorable consideration to the idea that some part of human personality and/or conscious awareness is able to survive beyond the grave in a spirit-like existence. Among the most widely-utilized methods to explore this possibility among the paranormal enthusiast community is the collection of electronic voice phenomena (EVP). Could the sounds heard on these recordings really represent the voices of the dead, or are they merely a “dead end?” To begin addressing that question, I offer here a brief commentary on some issues relevant to the recording and interpretation of EVP that I think paranormal investigators should be aware of in collecting and evaluating their own EVP samples. But first, in order to provide a little context for this commentary, a little background on some early efforts in the study of EVP could be useful.

## Some Notable Efforts in Early EVP Research

Interest in exploring EVP seems to go back to at least the early part of the 20th century. When asked his opinion about the possibility of communicating with the dead through a technological device, Thomas Edison reportedly said in a 1920 interview that such a device would allow supposed spirits “...a better opportunity to express themselves than the tilting tables and raps and Ouija boards and mediums and the other crude methods now purported to be the only means of [spirit] communication.”<sup>1,p.116</sup> But despite his implied openness to

exploring communication by these means, there is little evidence that Edison actually developed a device with which to do it.

Quite often, the first serious attempts to explore EVP are attributed to the pioneering efforts of two men: the Swedish painter Friedrich Jürgenson, and the Latvian researcher Konstantin Raudive. But there is earlier effort which often gets overlooked, and which precedes the work of Jürgenson and Raudive by at least three years.

In the effort they began in 1956, psychical researcher Raymond Bayless and psychic Attila von Szalay attempted to capture EVP by placing a tape recorder with a microphone into the wide open end of a metal trumpet (so that any supposed voices could be amplified as they flowed through the long neck of the trumpet). They placed this trumpet-recorder apparatus into a soundproofed closet, secured it shut, and then merely sat quietly while the microphone collected the sounds echoing through the trumpet. They would play back the tape every 15 minutes to check for anomalous sounds, and for a long time, they got nothing. However, something notable was captured on December 5th, when they got a distinct voice that reportedly said, "This is G." This was later followed in other sessions by the apparent sound of whistles, whispers, and short phrases, one of which supposedly named the city in which Bayless' brother lived, when Bayless had asked aloud for this information.

Bayless and von Szalay were later joined by the late D. Scott Rogo in the late 1960s, when another attempt at recording voices with the trumpet-recorder apparatus was done in the photographic dark room of von Szalay's studio. Although the alleged voices were reportedly much weaker than those collected in the 1950s, they did manage to pick up what sounded like short greetings.<sup>2</sup> Although the conditions were only semi-controlled, these early results by Bayless, von Szalay, and Rogo seemed to indicate that there was something worthy of study.<sup>2-3</sup>

It seems that Jürgenson had inadvertently stumbled onto EVP in 1959 when he would occasionally hear voices in the distance while listening to his radio, and when he would find them on the recordings he'd made of bird calls in his backyard. He continued to receive and record these alleged voices into the 1960s, and attempts to examine them under close scrutiny were made by certain parapsychologists such as Hans Bender and the late William Roll. During several semi-controlled recording sessions that Roll conducted with Jürgenson, voices would intrude into conversations they were having, including one voice that reportedly said "*berätta*" (Swedish for "tell"). Other alleged voices and odd sounds were captured, but due to technical problems and the faintness of the recordings, these sessions were mostly inconclusive.<sup>4, pp.246-248</sup>

Jürgenson's efforts later inspired Raudive to begin his own explorations into EVP, which culminated in the publication of his well-known 1971 book *Breakthrough*.<sup>5</sup> Efforts to collect EVP in field settings (such as sites which are reputed to be haunted) were later pioneered in part by the late Sarah Estep, who documented many of the alleged voices she recorded in her book *Voices of Eternity*.<sup>6</sup> The organization she founded, the American Association of Electronic Voice Phenomena (now known as the Association TransCommunication) largely remains to be the most well-recognized group of individuals interested in studying EVP.

The early efforts of these individuals have undoubtedly helped influence the methods that are widely in use today by members of the paranormal community, with the most common perhaps being the recording of EVP samples at reputedly haunted sites using a noise source based on carrier waves, such as radio or TV static. It's here that we start to come across some of the issues relating to the recording of EVP.

## Recording Issues

Of course, in order to be certain that the sounds recorded in EVP samples are voices of the dead, we have rule out ordinary factors as much as possible. Unfortunately, that becomes very problematic when noise sources based on carrier waves are used, because it's not possible to completely rule out carrier wave signal interference with those sources.<sup>7-10</sup> As sound technician Joseph Banks has pointed out:

...signals from across the radio spectrum have a tendency to drift away from their original broadcast frequencies and spontaneously demodulate onto amplifying circuits, because all audio amplifiers and gain stages in radio circuits can function as broadband Very Low Frequency (VLF) receivers. Microphone cables often function as VLF antennas, especially when unshielded and used outdoors, with the amplifiers they are attached to functioning as VLF radios. Taxi transmissions, emergency services, airband, maritime, military, short-, medium-, and long-wave commercial broadcasts, TV voice channels, ham radio experiments, CB radio, bugging devices, conferencing systems, baby intercoms/alarms, and analog mobile phones share a tendency to emerge in the same VLF waveband, frequently producing stray signals.<sup>9,p.80</sup>

This is why when you look at the side or bottom panel of a TV, radio, phone, or voice recorder (or in its packaging or owner's manual) you often find a label from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) that reads as follows:

This device complies with Part 15 of the FCC rules. Operation is subject to the following two conditions: (1) This device may not cause harmful interference, and (2) *This device must accept any interference received, including interference that may cause undesirable operation* [emphasis added].

In other words, it's important to recognize that electronic devices like these can be susceptible to receiving faint and stray broadcast transmissions from ordinary sources which can potentially be misinterpreted as EVP.

The potentially misleading influence of this was once exemplified in an EVP recording session conducted by Raudive. As part of his effort to evaluate EVP, researcher Jurgen Keil had eight native German speakers listen to a tape recording of the EVP sample made during Raudive's session. All of the listeners agreed that there was a voice on the tape speaking a continuous German passage, and that it was speaking in a manner akin to a religious sermon. Later it was discovered that the tape had been made on Easter Sunday, and that there was a very likely possibility that Raudive had picked up (and subsequently misinterpreted as EVP) an Easter sermon that was being broadcast on German radio.<sup>10</sup>

Even if one doesn't use a noise source based on carrier waves, it can be difficult to have much confidence that EVP samples collected at allegedly haunted sites are free from ordinary interference because it's often not possible to control the surrounding environmental conditions of the site. Spontaneously-occurring sounds from distant traffic, wind, animals, object or bodily movement, and human speech can be quite difficult to minimize in these settings. In addition, any magnetic fields of fairly high intensity present at the site could also potentially influence the recording device and create unwanted EMF interference that could be mistaken for EVP. This could make it difficult to reliably correlate EMF with the occurrence of EVP.

## Psychological Issues with EVP Interpretation

Perhaps even more important than recording issues are the issues concerning the interpretation of any EVP samples that one collects. Above all, it is crucial to recognize that this is a highly subjective process, which can potentially be influenced (consciously or unconsciously) by one's own personal beliefs, expectations, and desires. In addition, it's also important to be aware that human sensory perception is not infallible, and can potentially lead you astray at times – this is why optical illusions can work so well on us, for instance.

One of the ways in which human perception can be fallible is its susceptibility to the effects of *pareidolia* – the act of perceiving or imagining what appear to be meaningful patterns (such as faces) in purely random and ambiguous forms. Pareidolia is what leads us to see shapes in the clouds, the face of Jesus on a piece of toast, or a “man in the moon.” The picture shown in Figure 1 offers a good illustrative example.



**Figure 1.** A good illustrative example of how our perceptions can be influenced by the effects of pareidolia: See the face?

Although pareidolia is typically represented as a visual effect, there's also an auditory analogue of it as well, and it usually comes into play whenever we try to hear sensible words in the static noise that regularly permeates EVP recordings.<sup>9</sup> This can confound interpretation and often makes it difficult to distinguish any genuine voices from pure noise.

For instance, in discussing the alleged voices recorded by Raudive, British biochemist E. Lester Smith pointed out that there tends to be much room for allowing the imagination to enter the interpretation process, such that with repeated hearings, one could shape almost any sound present in the background noise into a word from any language (and indeed, Raudive often claimed that the voices he recorded spoke to him in various languages).<sup>7</sup> This is quite similar to the “verbal transformation effect” in psychology, where repeated listening to a word can lead to changes in the way it is heard, such that it seems to start sounding like a new word.<sup>11</sup> For instance, when a volunteer listened to the word “tress” being played over and over for three minutes, the volunteer gradually started to hear these new words: “stress, dress, Jewish, Joyce, floris, florist...”<sup>11,p.262</sup>

British psychical researcher David Ellis actively demonstrated how this auditory form of pareidolia may affect EVP interpretation in two tests in which he asked a number of volunteers to listen to samples of Raudive's recorded voices and give their impression of what the voices said. Their impressions were then compared to Raudive's interpretation of what had been said, in order to see how closely they matched.

Here's one example: Raudive had interpreted the voice in one of his EVP samples as saying the phrase, "...*may dream, my dear yes!*" When asked what they thought the voice said (without being prompted beforehand on what they should hear), the volunteers gave the following impressions of the very same sample:

make beans my lovely  
 late sleep I'm serviette ong  
 lately mikye bien  
 late leave Mike shairries  
 let's leave Michael here Kevin  
 nimst die Michael as yet  
 make me quite clear gemmell  
 methylene Mike is here<sup>8,pp.36-37</sup>

Clearly there is a range of phrases that people heard, with few of them even coming close to matching Raudive's original interpretation.

More recently, a second study by Michael Nees and Charlotte Phillips at Lafayette College in Pennsylvania had found a similar outcome in how various volunteers interpreted an EVP sample.<sup>12</sup> In this instance, the recorded voice on the sample was originally interpreted as saying "talk." Here's what the volunteers reported hearing (again without being prompted):

don't  
 dot  
 go  
 golf  
 gone  
 john  
 yawn  
 yeah<sup>12,p.133</sup>

Once again, there is a variety of words that people heard, which don't really match up very well with the original interpretation.

These findings indicate that, as auditory psychologist Diana Deutsch has observed,

[t]he sounds we perceive do not always correspond to those that are presented. When such a mismatch occurs, we are experiencing an auditory illusion. These illusions show that the auditory system does not faithfully transmit the sound information as it arrives at our ears, but alters and reorganizes this information in various ways.<sup>13,p.160</sup>

To further illustrate this, Deutsch developed her own recordings of auditory illusions.<sup>14</sup> In one of these, the words "high" and "low" were recorded and alternately played in the left and right ears at such a rapid pace that even though the words weren't individually recognizable, the resulting auditory pattern still sounded like a language pattern. When Shawn Carlson (columnist for "The Amateur Scientist" in *Scientific American* magazine) experienced this pattern for himself, he described it in the following manner:

Within a few seconds of listening to this strange cacophony, my brain started imposing a shifting order over the chaos as I began hearing distinct words and phrases. First came, “blank, blank, blank.” Then “time, time, time.” Then “no time,” “long pine” and “any time.” I was then astonished to hear a man’s voice spilling out of the right speaker only. In a distinct Australian accent, it said, “take me, take me, take me!”<sup>15,p.115</sup>

Interestingly, this pattern somewhat resembles the kind of rapid sequence of sounds that one hears when using a so-called “spirit box,” where a range of radio frequencies is quickly scanned so as to create a noise source of random sound bits through which EVP is claimed to manifest. This implies that auditory illusions may provide an alternate confounding factor in trying to interpret any sounds heard through a spirit box as being voices of the dead. In this case, the sound bits may be random sequences that, to our ears, just sound like speech through this kind of auditory illusion.

Another confounding factor in interpreting supposed spirit voices is the contextual background knowledge that investigators already have of the haunt case that they’re investigating, which can create and shape expectations about the sounds they hope to hear.<sup>16-17</sup> Perhaps this can most clearly be illustrated through an example scenario:

Let’s say there’s a team of investigators trying to collect EVP at an allegedly haunted house where it’s been said that a murder took place in the past. Now, the claim that the house is haunted may immediately prime them towards the inclination that any strange sounds their recorders pick up are more likely due to EVP than to other ordinary factors. In addition, the knowledge that a murder was said to have taken place in the house may further prime them toward a greater likelihood of hearing certain words (such as “kill,” “shot,” “scream,” etc.) that would be consistent with the concept of “murder.” In other words, the concept of “murder” may help shape their minds toward forming hopes and expectations of hearing certain words that fit into this concept, which would alter their perceptions of the sounds being picked up by their recorders. This too would lead to a form of auditory illusion.

The recent study by Nees and Phillips seems to offer preliminary evidence favoring this possibility.<sup>12</sup> In that study, volunteers who were told beforehand that the study was about EVP and the paranormal had shown a significantly higher tendency to hear a voice in noisy sound recordings than volunteers who were not told this. This higher tendency suggests that the mere thought that this study was about EVP and paranormal had greatly influenced these participants’ expectations, such that they were more inclined towards interpreting these noisy sounds as voices. In other words, the planted suggestion of “paranormal” seems to have directly altered their expectations about what they were going to hear and subsequently influenced their perceptions of the sounds.

The implication of this is that when people are told a certain sound clip is an EVP sample, they may run the risk of misperceiving (and subsequently misinterpreting) the clip as being EVP, even though it may actually be just purely random noise. This would be a case of interpreting a sound as EVP, when it really isn’t. The same thing can happen when someone is told beforehand what the supposed voice on the EVP sample is saying.

## Issues of Verification

Perhaps the most important issue associated with EVP is verification. Arguably, one of the most convincing forms of evidence for genuine EVP would be if the voices in the EVP samples were to relay detailed information which could be independently verified through documentation. However, although many EVP samples do sound intriguing on the surface, practically none of them ever seem to relay information of this kind.

A closer examination at the verification issue was partly the aim of a study conducted by psychologist Imants Barušs of King's College at the University of Western Ontario.<sup>18</sup> Following a carefully outlined procedure, Barušs had two assistants record the static noise being emitted by two radios set at right angles to each other. To minimize the intrusion of external noise, the recordings were done in a laboratory room with the doors and windows shut. Although a handful of interesting sounds were recorded (including faint voice-like sounds, whistles, and what sounded like the smack of a kiss), none of them had provided any specific information that was verifiable. A general lack of verifiable information was also noted in the sound files recorded during a broader study that Barušs conducted several years afterward.<sup>19</sup>

In addition, preliminary attempts to better verify that the voices heard in EVP samples are really voices through the use of speech pattern recognition software have been inconclusive.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

To some readers, the issues raised in this commentary may seem overly critical. However, while my purpose in raising these issues is not necessarily to argue against EVP (I'm currently of neutral mind on the matter and still remain open to its examination and possible existence), I do think it's important for investigators to be aware of them in examining their own EVP samples. Making a strong evidential case for EVP is not an easy thing to accomplish, and these issues illustrate the reasons why. In order to be more certain that EVP samples do reflect the voices of the dead, we have to take as many ordinary factors into account as possible. In many cases, the issues addressed here seem to be too often overlooked.

But there are some steps being taken to address them in certain research circles. For instance, Portuguese researcher Anabela Cardoso and her associates have been making efforts to better minimize extraneous noises by conducting EVP sessions in professional recording studios, which tend to have a high level of soundproofing.<sup>21</sup> And while the conditions have not been truly ideal in controlling for other factors during these sessions, they do constitute a step in the right direction. Whether the outcomes of the sessions conducted under these better-controlled conditions will provide good evidence for EVP remains to be an open question.

For now, in attempting to interpret their samples, it's recommended that investigators not rush to judgment about their EVP samples and keep in mind the limitations of collecting EVP at reputedly haunted sites – not only in the way of not being able to fully control the surrounding conditions at the site, but also the way in which the investigators' own knowledge, thoughts, expectations, and desires may (unknowingly) impinge upon their approach to the haunt case and the EVP samples they collect in relation to it. It's better to err on the side of caution than to be misled into accepting something which may not necessarily exist. We still have yet to see which side of coin (exist vs. doesn't exist) EVP may be on.

## References & Notes

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