

HARRIET RICHARDSON  
AND KIM MEARS

EXPLORING  
SEMI-SPEAKING  
AS A  
COMMUNICATION  
IDENTITY

A Reflective Practice Guide

A **Speechmark** Book



## EXPLORING SEMI-SPEAKING AS A COMMUNICATION IDENTITY

*Exploring Semi-Speaking as a Communication Identity* is a reflective practice companion which takes an expansive approach to supporting autistic and otherwise neurodivergent people who do not always have access to speech.

Written for speech and language therapists, and relevant to other interested people, the book challenges traditional ideas about communication. It offers practical insights grounded in the neurodiversity paradigm, and amplifies neurodivergent voices alongside contributions from people with lived and professional experience of semi-speaking, situational mutism and AAC.

Readers are invited on a journey of reflection through their own practice, reconsidering assumptions, deepening thinking and expanding their understanding in this area. Topics include communication identity, communication capacity, AAC, multi-modal communication and shared understanding to support collaborative discussion.

Encouraging curiosity, this comprehensive resource is essential reading for anyone interested in semi-speaking and communication identity.

**Hat/Harriet Richardson** is a white, semi-speaking, multiply neurodivergent Speech Pathologist, Neurodevelopmental Practitioner and writer. She runs the social media account @hat.talks.uk.

**Kim Mears** is a neurodivergent speech and language therapist who has multiple identities. She is a wife, a mother, daughter and friend. She also identifies as an AuDHD narrator and information sharer who loves learning, unlearning and disrupting.

“This is a pioneering book on semi speaking communication and identity. It gives an understanding of what semi-speaking identity is, guidance on how to explore this with others and support to develop perspective and practice. It has helped me as a clinician, but also as a leader, partner and parent.”

**Dr Becky Quicke**, *Clinical Psychologist and Founder, Autistic Girls*

“This work is an invitation to unlearn what we think communication should be. Both authors have a genuine commitment to transforming their practice — to listening differently, to questioning power, to embracing the unfinished — making this book not just theory, but living practice.”

**Warda Farah**, *Founder Entangle Collective, Independent Researcher*

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A Reflective Practice Guide

Harriet Richardson and Kim Mears

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This book is dedicated to the disruptors, advocates, allies and activists.



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# CONTENTS

Meet the contributors		ix
Acknowledgments		xiii
Foreword		xv
	<b>Introduction</b>	<b>1</b>
<b>SECTION 1</b>	<b>A PLACE TO START . . .</b>	<b>7</b>
<b>one</b>	<b>What is semi-speaking?</b>	<b>9</b>
<b>two</b>	<b>Understanding neurodiversity: A term, a paradigm and a social justice movement</b>	<b>15</b>
<b>three</b>	<b>An insight into the semi-speaking experience-Hat's reflections</b>	<b>25</b>
<b>SECTION 2</b>	<b>EXPLORING SEMI-SPEAKING THROUGH DISCUSSIONS</b>	<b>35</b>
	<b>Introduction to Section 2</b>	<b>37</b>
<b>four</b>	<b>Preparing to support discussions exploring semi-speaking</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>five</b>	<b>Communication identity and semi-speaking</b>	<b>53</b>
<b>six</b>	<b>Supporting communication capacity</b>	<b>69</b>
<b>seven</b>	<b>AAC and multi-modal communication</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>eight</b>	<b>Exploring semi-speaking with other people: Family, friends and education</b>	<b>97</b>
<b>nine</b>	<b>Exploring semi-speaking at work/ supporting colleagues</b>	<b>111</b>

<b>ten</b>	<b>Exploring semi-speaking in one session</b>	<b>127</b>
	<b>Conclusion</b>	<b>135</b>
<b>SECTION 3</b>	<b>RESOURCES</b>	<b>139</b>
	1 Information on semi-speaking	141
	2 Suggestions for supporting Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC)	143
	3 Creating spaces to explore AAC and multi-modal communication in your practice	145
	4 Myth busting AAC	146
	5 Ideas for supporting colleagues at work	150
	6 Ideas for supporting semi-speaking speech and language therapy students	152
	7 Tips for writing about people who identify as semi-speaking	154
	8 Frequently asked questions	156
	9 Communication cards	159
	Bibliography	163
	Index	169

# MEET THE CONTRIBUTORS

**Alyssa Hillary Zisk** (they/them) is a neurodivergent researcher with too many research interests and no real intention of narrowing it down. Nowadays, *most* (but not all) of their research is done as the AAC Research team lead at AssistiveWare. They are a mostly speaking Autistic part-time AAC user, and they are *extremely* proud of getting to do the foreword for this book.

“I am **Ben Usher-Barrass**, an Autistic ADHDer who is situationally non-speaking. I am an advocate, educator, content creator and author, using my platform, Autisticity, to simplify education on all things Autistic experience to make it accessible for all.”

**Elaine McGreevy** is a neurodivergent speech and language therapist, consultant, trainer and author. In her independent practice, she works with Autistic children and young people to support their communication needs and contribute to their formal autistic identification. She is co-founder of Divergent Perspectives, an online training platform, supporting professionals to transform their practice and become neurodiversity-informed. She worked in NHS for 25 years contributing to the development of SLT, neurodevelopmental and early years educational services for Autistic children and young people. Elaine is passionate about dismantling ableism and oralism in Speech and Language Therapy and education.

**Hat / Harriet Richardson:** Hat is a white, semi-speaking, multiply neurodivergent and chronically ill Speech Pathologist and Neurodevelopmental Practitioner. She is an AuDHDer and has Complex PTSD. They were diagnosed as autistic in 2022 and later identified as an ADHDer. Hat is originally from the UK but moved to Australia with her partner and assistance dog, Rashford, in 2024. Hat runs the social media account @hat.talks.uk across platforms, most prominently Instagram, and shares their lived experience with followers. She is a blogger, public speaker and podcaster. Hat completes neuroaffirming autism and ADHD assessments across the lifespan. Outside of work, you will find Hat on the beach with her assistance dog, with her head in a book or doing any kind of physical activity.

**Jack Wallis** has been a primary teacher within the UK and now teaches in Australia. He has eight years experience, previously working within diverse classrooms and

communities with a range of neurotypes, cultures and languages. Jack is passionate about supporting neurodivergent children within schools and providing accessibility to education for all neurotypes.

“**Jamie and Lion:** we bounce around being helpful & making things. So many things . . . accessibility things, crime fighting things and sometimes even things in space. Millions of people use things we made everyday and our research has been used around the world. For the past 20 years we’ve been working to understand, prevent and remove barriers from the world around us. From the day to day to the digital, we identify the things which prevent, limit and block folks from achieving their goals. We’re monotropic & neurodivergent as heck. Speech, communication and keeping ourselves safe is a constant challenge. It’s never boring. We flow through life, playing and adventuring our way around the place. We use our energy to help people and create cool things.”

**Jo Grace** is a Sensory Engagement and Inclusion Specialist, author, trainer, researcher and Founder of The Sensory Projects ([www.TheSensoryProjects.co.uk](http://www.TheSensoryProjects.co.uk)). The Sensory Projects share the knowledge and creativity relevant to using inexpensive objects as effective Sensory tools for inclusion. Through all the work Jo does she is looking to contribute to a future where people are understood in spite of their differences.

**John** is a 35-year-old AuDHDer who lives and works in the UK. He is passionate about learning more about his and others’ neurodivergence and has recently returned to education in the hopes of being able to directly contribute to current research into neurodivergence. When not at work or studying, he enjoys hiking in nature, building Lego models of spacecraft and looking for spiders in his garden. Hat has been helping him explore his neurodivergence and semi-speaking identity since 2023.

**Julia Tuttle** is an autistic and ADHD trans girl computer programmer. She is both hyperverbal and semispeaking, and started using AAC part-time as an adult after learning about it from other part-time AAC users. She is passionate about reframing a variety of disability accommodations from “last resorts” to broadly helpful tools.

**Kerry Thalia** is a neurodivergent educator and illustrator who works with children and young people to improve their access to communication and education. In 2025, she completed a dissertation for a Masters degree in Inclusion, the focus of the dissertation was the connection between the development of autistic identity, an individuals feelings about their identity and the communication method.

**Kieran Rose** is an Autistic academic researcher, consultant, trainer and author whose work focuses on Autistic identity development, stigma and masking. He has co-authored key academic texts, including *Autistic Masking: Understanding Identity Management and the Role of Stigma* (with Dr Amy Pearson), and delivers training and consultancy internationally to professionals, organisations and policymakers. Kieran's research and writing centre Autistic lived experience and challenge dominant narratives rooted in pathology and deficit, offering frameworks that foreground authenticity, agency and relational understanding

**Kim Mears** is a neurodivergent speech and language therapist who has multiple identities. She is a wife, a mother, daughter and friend. She also identifies as an AuDHD narrator and information sharer who loves learning, unlearning and disrupting. Originally from South Africa, Kim has lived and worked in New Zealand and currently is in independent practice in the UK. She also loves spending time with family and friends, travel, *The Sound of Music*, chocolate and guinea pigs.

**Laura Hellfeld** is a neurodivergent health educator, independent Nurse & Sleep Consultant, specialising in supporting neurodivergent and disabled community members. They are particularly keen to support others in the areas of self-care, like food and eating, toileting, sleep and hygiene. Drawing from lived experience and public health service, Laura creates inclusive spaces, hosts community events and co-authors books like *Gabby's Glimmers*, *Creating Safe Spaces for Autistic People* and *Belonging First* as well as authoring a parent-focused series.

**Leanne Maskell** is a AuDHD ADHD coach and founder of ADHD Works. She is a bestselling author of *ADHD an A-Z*, *ADHD Works at Work* and *Blooming Differently*. Leanne is also a public speaker. Since being diagnosed as autistic, she has set up the first AuDHD coaching course and runs the UK's first CPD accredited ADHD coaching programme.

**Lisa Chapman** is a Speech and Language Therapist, and mum to two teenage boys, one of whom is diagnosed Dyslexic and Autistic. At work, she supports young Autistic people and young people with a learning disability. She loves reading and learning about neurodivergence and is passionate about sharing her learning with others. In spare moments, she enjoys having a cuddle with her two lovely guinea pigs, Smudge and Truffle, and an afternoon of joy would involve walking along her favourite beach, searching for and picking up rocks and other interesting finds.

**Olivia (@itsjustliv)** is a medium support needs autistic ADHDer who shares her experiences about being late diagnosed on Instagram. She has learnt that unmasking isn't always easy or linear as it's often portrayed and not always possible.

**Sarah Winstanley** is a speech and language therapist. Since qualifying as a Speech Therapist in 1997, she has worked in a range of settings and locations including Hastings, New Zealand, Hertfordshire, Lincolnshire and Rutland. She has experience in the NHS, in the education sector and in the independent sector. Throughout her career, she has learnt that a deep respect for each person's individual journey is essential for meaningful and lasting outcomes.

**Scott Neilson** is an Autistic Trainer, Mentor & Consultant based in Scotland. They have several years of experience supporting Autistic people, in addition to delivering a variety of training sessions and presenting at conferences to numerous professionals and groups. Scott is a co-author of the books *Creating Safe Spaces for Autistic People* and *Gabby's Glimmers*. Additionally, they work with organisations such as AUsome Training and GROVE Neurodivergent Mentoring & Education. Scott also holds a Postgraduate Certificate in Autism.

**Tigger Pritchard** AuDHD. An award-winning advocate, consultant, presenter and trainer. Passionate about all neurotypes working together to achieve a more inclusive and neuroaffirming environment for all.

*Also, a huge thank you and shout out to all our contributors who wanted to remain anonymous.*

# ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

## Hat

Firstly, I'd like to thank my co-author, Kim, who has been the frontal lobe to the writing process. Without Kim, we really wouldn't have started the project, and it would have become yet another of my many side quests! A huge thank you to our contributors, who have shared their experiences, it's been a hugely validating process to have community, where previously I believed I was alone.

There are lots of other people I want to thank in the process of learning about my semi-speaking identity. Thanks to the first workplace I disclosed within, those wonderful colleagues who communicated with me, sometimes solely, via Teams chat. They encouraged me to recover some speech capacity in the safety of our shared office, without judgement. Thank you to all the fantastic friends in my life who were compassionate when I didn't have capacity for speech and had to cancel plans, and those who sat with me in shared silence.

And of course, a huge thank you to my partner, Jack, who has been my voice on so many occasions, especially on public transport! Through his patience and acceptance, I have finally created a safe space to be myself, meow in place of speech and safely relearn how to use AAC. Together, with our pup, we've created a home where communication and connection are so much more than words.

## Kim

I also want to start my thank yous with a great big thank you to Harriet. You have taught me so much and your courage to be your authentic self and understand who you are has given me the courage to do the same. We make a great team across the miles, no matter the time zone, and I could not imagine doing this with anyone else.

Writing this book has been exciting and challenging at times. Thank you so much to my support people who held space for me and kept me going, especially my husband, Anthony, my son, Matthew, and my mom, Natalie. Special thank you to my fellow weavers and crafters, Lisa and Elaine, who listened to hours of voice notes, reviewed my writing and stayed with me through the long hours of book writing labour. Thank you also to Alyssa for your support, your generous sharing of information and for writing the foreword for us.

It is wonderful to have lots and lots of people to thank. This book started with Harriet and her sharing her story and it is completed with many, many voices from our community and incredible support behind the scenes. You made this book a rich tapestry of testimonies that we are so proud to have had the opportunity to weave. Thank you to our contributors and to all the people I have spoken to, watched on a webinar and read your work – I have learned and unlearned so much – this book honours and acknowledges you.

# FOREWORD

Semispeaking is not my word, and that's very good news. It means the community conversations I drew from, that I put together with the basic principles of the AAC field in "Augmentative and Alternative Communication for Speaking Autistic Adults: Overview and Recommendations" (Zisk & Dalton, 2019) kept going after I published. Specifically, it means these community conversations continued as community conversations after I put some of our experiences with speech, some of the terminology we came up with about those experiences, and some of what we're doing about them in a place where academics and clinicians might pay attention to them.

We should therefore expect that these community conversations will continue after Kim Mears and Harriet Richardson's book as well – you are holding a guide to conversations that have been happening in Autistic and AAC communities, about experiences we have with speech and communication. You are holding a guide to conversations that you may want to start or continue with people you are working with. You are not holding an image of the exact clinical terms that will be used for these experiences forevermore – or even an attempt at such an image. Enough explanation for you to understand the words you may encounter, not a static image of how they will (must) be used forever and ever amen.

It is important to understand that semispeaking is an identity term. It's not something you can diagnose a person as being, only something they can tell you they are. (It might be a term you can suggest someone look into or even help them look into, if the experiences they're describing suggest they could identify as semispeaking if only they knew about the relevant community conversations. It's still not something you can diagnose them as.)

That makes semispeaking a different kind of word than the ones I brought into academic spaces (intermittent and unreliable speech – Sparrow 2017) or the ones I took a hand in defining (insufficient speech – Zisk & Dalton 2019; or expensive speech – corbin, 2025).

Intermittent, unreliable, insufficient, and expensive speech are all terms where something like differential diagnosis could apply. They're even terms where I, to a certain extent, talk and write about how to do so – because the ways we would

choose to support each with AAC are likely to be at least a little bit different. They aren't identity terms – it wouldn't make sense to identify as intermittent speech or expensive speech.

And grammatically converting these descriptions of speech into plausible identity terms doesn't seem to be the answer either – intermittently non-speaking gets some use among folks who use both AAC and speech (Zisk & Konyon, 2022), and AAC users with relatives who also use AAC will also consider “intermittently speaking” (Zisk, 2024), but across relationships to AAC, other possibilities seem more widely disliked than they are liked or used.

Which meant there was a niche in which to ask: so who are we, if these are experiences we have?

Part-time AAC users? Semispeaking? Demiverbal? I have seen all of these and used some – I describe myself as a mostly but not fully speaking part-time AAC user.

You hold a result of reflections on speech experiences and communicative identity. It's not an endpoint, only a point that was and is worth committing to text to support more people in engaging both in these reflections. It's similarly not a prescription for specific accommodations or changes in clinical or educational practices. It does, however, describe some changes and practices we could consider – and which the authors have tried.

It also holds a variety of experiences. Some of them resonate with me, which is nice as a part-time AAC user. Some of them don't, which is important, in much the same way it's a good thing that semispeaking is not my word: community conversations are moving forward. Richardson and Mears note that there's no reason to expect semispeaking experiences to be unique to autistic people. From my conversations, I have reason to expect they aren't unique. Thinking beyond autism (both to autistic people who have these experiences for more reasons than 'just' autism and to non-autistic people) is a place I hope to see these conversations moving as they continue past any individual snapshot. But where else will community conversations around communicative identity and speech experiences move?

I don't know, but I look forward to finding out – and to seeing how this book contributes to them. I'm hoping it serves as a bridge.

Alyssa Hillary Zisk (they/them/theirs)  
Ph.D. Interdisciplinary Neuroscience  
AAC Research Team Lead, AssistiveWare

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Dr **Alyssa Hillary Zisk** (they/them) is a neurodivergent researcher with too many research interests and no real intention of narrowing it down. Nowadays, *most* (but not all) of their research is done as the AAC Research team lead at AssistiveWare. They are a mostly speaking Autistic part-time AAC user, and they are *extremely* proud of getting to do the foreword for this book.



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# INTRODUCTION

## What I want people to know about the book – Hat's reflections

Until 2022, I didn't know that semi-speaking existed. I, like many other speech and language therapists (SLTs), believed that you were either speaking or non-speaking. I didn't even recognise my own identity as a semi-speaker. This experience is something I commonly come across in the people I work with. So often, people report effortful, unreliable and forced speech to me but don't know about semi-speaking. For many, it can be a life-changing realisation. That is why this book is powerful; it gives us the suggestions required to support people who are semi-speaking and uncover awareness of an identity that can be integral to managing day-to-day life. That's what it did for me.

Understanding myself as a semi-speaker at twenty-six provided me with the permission to use other forms of communication and other strategies that I've been seeking out since childhood. As a six-year-old, I tried to give notes to my parents instead of speaking. At ten, I played being a cat at home so I didn't have to talk in "human" language. At fourteen, I put signs on my bedroom door to tell my parents it wasn't a day for speaking. At sixteen, I chose to text my boyfriend rather than speak whilst we sat on the sofa together. At twenty-two, I had a mental health crisis and stayed in my locked bedroom, only communicating with my housemates via text. I self-advocated so hard to have my communication preferences respected, without awareness of what that looked like for me. It wasn't ever listened to. Time and time again I was told that I was being defiant, difficult, rude or standoffish and I wanted to avoid that at all costs. Instead, I learnt to hide away when I couldn't speak and missed out on life experiences and connections.

I don't want people to experience the same communication traumas as I did. I want other people to have communication choices. I want those choices to be