



The Skeptics SA guide to Glossolalia

Glossolalia, or ‘speaking in tongues’, is what occurs when people (usually Pentecostals and adherents of other charismatic sects) produce strings of utterances in what appears prima facie to be a natural language, albeit not (one of) the language(s) which they normally speak in everyday life. Exponents seem to lose control of their speech faculties and to become possessed by an external power. The context is most typically during and shortly after lively services of worship in which the procedure is encouraged and perceived as normal (although outsiders may perceive the performer as, e.g. drunk and incoherent). Spiritualist mediums have also been known to give glossolalic performances.

The usual rationale for the belief in glossolalia relates to incidents in the Christian scriptures where devotees are described as speaking ‘other’ languages when ‘filled with the spirit’, etc. The ‘language’ used may be recognised by others present as a known human language (which the speaker apparently has never learned, or at least is never known to use in other situations); or it may be regarded as an unidentified language (perhaps as a human language which might be recognised by or known to others. More usually however, advocates of glossolalia claim that the material

is not in any natural language, but rather in a language associated with spiritual entities such as angels (or by some, more recently, with intelligent extraterrestrial entities).

In the case of allegedly angelic languages and the like, other congregation members often claim the ability to interpret the utterances and sometimes offer interpretations, although they are unable or unwilling to provide analyses of the ‘other’ language or information about its structure.

Glossolalic events of this latter type are mentioned in ancient Egyptian and Sumerian texts, but the case from which Christian advocates of glossolalia draw their inspiration, that of Pentecost (Acts 2:44 1), is of the former type, since the languages were recognised as human (thus, some might regard it instead as a case of Xenoglossia). This event was interpreted as a sign of the indwelling of the Holy Spirit. However, St. Paul’s reported comments, made when he was dealing with ‘spiritual gifts’ in the Corinthian church, suggest that his attitude towards glossolalia was, at least in part, negative: unintelligible utterances could scarcely have much value unless they could eventually be reliably interpreted. The potential for abuse was also clear.

There have been numerous documented cases of glossolalia throughout history: the possessed nuns at Loudun in the 17th Century; the nun Hilderbrand in the 9th Century; Friederike Haufe, the ‘Seer of Prevoist’ who in the 19th Century spoke ‘angelic’ languages; and Edward Kelly, the spirit medium of the 16th Century scholar Jon Dee. There were also many others in the 19th Century when there was a revival of Glossolalia and Xenoglossia among spirit mediums.

In recent times, a German peasant girl, Theresa Neumann, allegedly spoke several sentences in Aramaic, the native language of Christ; and in Naples a 15-year old schoolgirl began speaking in an unknown tongue during a religious lesson in December 1985. Psychiatrists, linguists, exorcists and parapsychologists who visited the girl at her home in Sara Sarracino were baffled, and as a last resort, Father Andrea Roesch, the only parapsychology teacher employed by a Vatican university, said that the cause could be divine inspiration. Exponents of glossolalia better known to most include evangelists Jim and Tammy Bakker, Jimmy Swaggart, Oral Roberts, Pat Robertson and singer Pat Boone.

Examination of cases of glossolalia reveals that there are a number of distinct types of linguistic entity involved:

- a) Elements of an identifiable human language not normally used by the speaker;
- b) Sequences of what appears, structurally speaking, to be a genuine natural language (with — to all appearances— the usual arrangements of phonemes, morphemes, etc), but one which cannot be identified;
- c) ‘Babbling’ (i.e. a quasi random sequence of syllables not resembling a string in a natural language; typically confined to the syllabic patterns of the speaker’s first language, etc).

Cases firmly identified as type (c) appear of some psychological interest but not of any great importance for skeptics. In cases of type (a), the suggestion may sometimes be made that the speaker has in fact acquired elements of the language in question (perhaps subconsciously, by overhearing). This is particularly plausible in cases where the speaker’s repertoire in the ‘other’ language is apparently restricted to certain sentences, etc, and/or where the speaker produces characteristic learner’s errors. Where (if) this cannot reasonably be asserted of a type (a) case, or where the case genuinely appears to be of type (b), some dramatic explanation would seem to be required (if not necessarily that proposed by ‘believers’).

The commonest psychological explanation of glossolalia as a natural manifestation defines it as a hypnotic phenomenon resulting from

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religious excitement, or as a neurotic or psychotic symptom, or, less frequently, a partially aborted form of epilepsy: or, in some cases, a charlatan’s technique.

It is not normally possible to try to engage a glossolalic speaker in a conversation in the ‘other’ language, owing to the circumstances of the ‘performance’ and the speaker’s accompanying mental state. However, analysis of glossolalic performances is possible, and the various hypotheses as to the nature of the material can be examined.

This topic has been relatively fully examined by linguists as well as by theologians and psychologists; the two most important linguistically informed sources are by Mills and Samarin, and there is also a considerable amount of literature on the subject in French. Samarin argues that some types of glossolalia, at least, represent learned behavior patterns. That some aspects of glossolalia can indeed be learned is borne out by Sid Caesar and the late film star Danny Kaye, who were masters in this respect, able to give the impression that they were speaking a recognisable foreign language when in fact it was pure gibberish.

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