



The Skeptics SA guide to **Xenoglossia**

Xenoglossia (or xenoglossy) is superficially similar to Glossolalia (q.v.), but involves people speaking (and/or writing) in known natural languages which they have not, as it seems, learned in any normal way, not usually as part of a religion-related performance or in a trance when acting as a medium, but often when in an apparently normal state of mind and while performing everyday activities (though see later on hypnosis). The main scholarly writer to accept some cases of xenoglossia as potentially genuine is Stevenson.

Usually, people who produce xenoglossic performances manifest what might be termed secondary personalities. These typically begin to emerge when the person is still young, and sometimes end up by being present for large proportions of the person's waking life. The secondary personality often appears unaware of the person's 'normal' personality and vice versa.

The 'other' language spoken is sometimes fragmentary or consists of a limited range of expressions, or else exhibits learner's errors, in some other cases it is — allegedly — highly developed and native-like. In these latter cases the speaker can be engaged in conversation in the 'other' language if a suitable speaker is available.

The 'paranormal' explanation usually advanced for the phenomenon is that the re-incarnation of a deceased person is the secondary personality. This is said to be supported by the stages of the secondary personalities, who may or may not realise that their original bearer has died but who frequently describe a previous life at an earlier date (often, naturally, at a remote location). Of course, even if some cases of xenoglossia should prove to be genuinely mysterious or interesting, it does not follow that this explanation is the correct one; there may be other simpler explanations.

Many of the examples of many cases of xenoglossia (especially details of 'past lives') have emerged under hypnosis. These examples are thus liable to the suspicions surrounding 'false memories' associated with other phenomena heavily reported in that setting (memories of UFO abductions, of childhood sexual abuse, of childhood involvement in Satanic rituals, etc).

In many cases, moreover, it has been shown that the 'xenoglossist' had in fact learned some elements of the language in question. In some cases subjects had done this without realising it, as when a subject had lived next door to a language teacher as a child. They had heard through the thin wall — and memorised — Rus-

sian phrases being taught, without knowing their meaning. Where the supposed secondary personality is monoglot, examining such cases requires finding a fluent speaker of the language in question, which is not always easy.

Occasionally what passes for an unidentifiable language is produced in these circumstances: in which case the issue resembles those which arise in some cases of Glossolalia (q.v.).

Words mysteriously shared between ancient languages

Many writers have developed non-standard and often poorly supported theories about the relationships between different natural languages and language families (both genetic relationships and links involving subsequent contact between groups of speakers).

The writers in question are typically unfamiliar in the methods of historical linguistics (or use methods long ago discredited). The evidence for their claims is usually much weaker than they imagine. It typically involves resemblances between isolated pairs or small sets of words with similar meanings from languages not thought to be related or to have been in extensive contact. One example involves ark (as in Noah) and Argo (as in Jason); both were ships: but this kind of chance similarity is very

common and not really mysterious (especially with short words).

Naturally, the theories in question mostly relate to events in the remote past, before the existence of reliable records and in some cases before the existence of written language (or presumably so). The views in question may be self-motivated (the ideas of 'fringe' linguists *per se*) or may form parts of larger belief systems involving the re-writing of early history (e.g. the theories of von Daniken). Sometimes the linguistic ideas (despite their own flimsy basis) are advanced as support for theories relating mainly to other disciplines.

The belief systems involved run all the way from:

- (a) sheer philological lunacy (e.g. the British Israelite view that the word Saxons is derived from the modern English expression Isaac's sons), through
- (b) the wild philological speculations of Temple in support of his theory about the astronomical knowledge enshrined in the traditions of the Dogon, or
- (c) the increasingly bizarre theories of the origin and development of languages espoused by the Soviet 'linguist' Marr, to
- (d) the looser and wilder versions of glottochronology as offered by Swadesh (who was, at least, a respected linguist) towards the end of his career.

The latter end of the continuum, in turn, fades into merely contentious views within academic

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philology, such as the view that an earlier ancestor language for Indo-European and other language families can be identified (Nostratic).

Associated ideas include some rather confused theorisings of amateur linguists and philologists, for example some discussions of the dating and relationship of Avestan and Sanskrit. There is also continuing amateur speculation on the ultimate origins of human language, which is not usually informed by the (now rather substantial) body of scholarly work on this still somewhat intractable subject.

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