
Xenoglossy and Glossolalia

Don Laycock

From time to time reports surface in the media about people “speaking in tongues”—reports that range from the credulous to the skeptical, though the prevailing tone is often mere silliness.

The reports always fail to distinguish *glossolalia* from *xenoglossy*—not surprisingly, since the man in the street knows nothing about either phenomenon. But there is nothing difficult about the concepts.

Xenoglossy means speaking a known, natural language that has not been learned by the speaker in any normal way—that is, the foreign language has not been learned in school or by residing in that country, or by studying a grammar book.

There are no conclusively demonstrated instances of true xenoglossy, although there have been hundreds, even thousands of claims (many of which I have investigated). Many instances, such as those of spirit mediums, boil down to outright fraud. There are a number of ways to fake an apparent knowledge of a foreign language during a spirit séance, and I have given a demonstration of one of the ways. Often the claims rest on insufficient documentation, but have an inherent implausibility—such as the instance of a spirit-medium language being identified as an obscure Persian dialect by a person who had no knowledge of it.

Other instances have a prosaic explanation. There was a well-documented case some years back of a man who spoke excellent Russian, though there seemed no way he could have learned it. Investigation showed that his parents had lived next door to a teacher of Russian, whose lessons were clearly audible to the baby in the cot next door. The language was thus acquired by natural means, but the circumstances had been totally forgotten by the speaker.

Xenoglossy was clearly the phenomenon at Pentecost, although this is usually identified with glossolalia. The Bible states (Acts 2:4–11), “And they were all filled with the Holy Ghost, and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance. And there were dwelling in Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad,

the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed, and marvelled, saying one to another, Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea, and Cappadocia, in Pontus, and Asia, Phrygia, and Pamphylia, in Egypt, and in the parts of Libya about Cyrene, and strangers of Rome, Jews and proselytes, Cretes and Arabians, we do hear them speak in our tongues the wonderful works of God.”

However, modern Pentecostals, and adherents of other charismatic sects, indulge in glossolalia, which is something very different. The adherents of such sects often claim that glossolalia does represent speaking in natural languages, but no evidence has come to light. All examined recordings of glossolalia show something very different: a form of babbling, characterized, usually, by extreme repetition and a limited inventory of sounds, of a kind that is impossible in natural language.

Much glossolalia is virtually identical with the kind of babbling that a baby produces at about twelve to fourteen months, and psychologists have suggested that it is in fact such a regression. It is produced by “turning off” the brain connections that associate sound with meaning, so that only meaningless sound is produced.

Some forms of glossolalia, particularly those produced in churches that go in for “tongues with interpretation” (where the “message” of the glossolalist is “interpreted” by another member of the congregation) are a little more sophisticated. We might want to characterize these as *glossomimia*, or phonetic imitation of natural languages. When an actor like Danny Kaye produces a fake but plausible-sounding imitation of German, it is *glossomimia*.

It is not hard to learn to produce glossolalia—and there are records even of Pentecostals practicing it. It is not necessarily even associated with religious fervor; glossolalia can be produced under the influence of alcohol or drugs, or even of extreme tiredness.

Both glossolalia and xenoglossy have a long history. Apart from the biblical men-

tions, there is a recorded “glossolalic” text in an Egyptian ritual, and another in Sumerian cuneiform. In the oldest records, glossolalia is associated with religion and magic, but by the Middle Ages an association with the powers of evil was more common. *The Catholic Rituale Romanum* lists among the signs of demonic possession “speaking many words in an unknown language, or understanding it when spoken.” The possessed nuns at Loudun in the seventeenth century spoke Latin—but the demons inside them kept getting the Latin endings all wrong.

Other religious ladies, like the nun Hildebrand in the ninth century, and Friederike Hauffe, the “Seer of Prevorst,” in the nineteenth century, spoke unidentifiable “angelic” languages of their own—from the sparse records available these appear to have been compounded from glossolalia and deliberate invention.

Edward Kelley, the spirit medium of the sixteenth-century scholar John Dee, also produced a language of the angels, which turns out on analysis to be based entirely on English.

The nineteenth century saw a revival of glossolalia and xenoglossy among spirit mediums. The earliest was Laura Edmonds, the daughter of a New York judge who spoke Greek, Polish, Spanish, and several American Indian languages—but we have only her father’s word for it. Confucian Chinese and Ancient Egyptian were also popular languages. In 1926, and on later occasions, a German peasant girl, Teresa Neumann, showed stigmata of Christ, and spoke several sentences in Aramaic, the language of Christ—but it has also been shown that she had access to books in which these phrases were recorded.

In modern times there have been many claims from occult groups or individuals to be speaking a language from “outer space.” (I have a recording of a man who claims to speak seventeen different extraterrestrial languages, but all of these are demonstrably glossolalia.) The other languages of this type that I have examined often show evidence of deliberate—and often very naïve—linguistic creation.

A recent case is that of a fifteen-year-old schoolgirl in Naples. Her language appears to be xenoglossy, since it is said to be “a mixture of Portuguese, Provençal . . . Spanish, and some Hebrew words.” Yet an “expert” identified it with glossolalia, which he said “was observed in mediums and people in an abnormal mental state.” Pentecostals at least would surely claim to be neither—though they may be just as confused about what it is they are speaking. •

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