

The Psychology of Speaking in Tongues-A Review

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Speaking in tongues has been practised for many centuries, but despite its long history, differences of opinion accompany almost all questions regarding the phenomenon: is it sent from God? Is it of the Devil? Need it be a religious experience at all? Is it the result of a mental disease?

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1. Introduction

I first learnt about "speaking in tongues" as a 19th century phenomenon found amongst spiritualists and mediums during séances. This was an era when mildly interesting people would sit around in the dark in a heavily draped room and summon up spirits of the dead and hold conversations with them. Communication was generally facilitated by a medium, who would on occasion speak in a funny way.

I was thus surprised to hear that this garbled way of speaking was still popular today, although this time it was happening in the

context of the Christian Pentecostal movement. In particular, some members of two Christian organizations in Stellenbosch (His People Christian Church/Every Nation, and Shofar Christian Church) were speaking in tongues. A colleague introduced me to an acquaintance of his, Denise M., who had been a member of the His People organization and had spoken in tongues, and now had some unanswered questions. We met and had several discussions, during which she agreed to write down her personal testimony. During the discussion I learnt that in the Bible, two kinds of tongues are reported: a gift of diverse kinds of tongues (speaking in human languages) and the gift of speaking in an unknown tongue (a heavenly language).

The first type of tongues is called xenoglossia (*xenos* = foreign, *glossa* = tongue), a phrase coined by Charles Richet (1850-1935), a leading investigator of the paranormal from the 1870s to the 1930s (who also won the Nobel Prize for Physiology (1913) for his work on allergic responses). Xenoglossia is the use of an actual foreign language by a person who has had no conscious knowledge of that language. Since Denise M. does not claim to have experienced xenoglossia, I will only briefly examine this phenomenon.

The second category is commonly labelled glossolalia (*glossa* = tongue, *lalia* = *speaking*) and is what Denise M. and many other people have experienced.

The claim is sometimes made that glossolalia is a supernatural phenomenon. If this were true, then a scientific account or explanation of the behaviour would not be possible. This is what I hope to examine in this article: is there any credible explanation for glossolalia?

2. Anomalous event or normal behaviour?

Marcello Truzzi, sociologist and long-time CSICOP collaborator (currently at the Center for Scientific Anomalies Research) investigates anomalous events that seem unexplained by our current bio-physical/psychological models. He notes:

"...we can distinguish between the abnormal, the paranormal and the supernatural. If something is rare or

extraordinary in science but it is explainable, we call it abnormal. The term paranormal refers to something that science can explain some day but at the present moment cannot. These are the scientific frontiers. However, there are things that are fundamentally inexplicable by science, the supernatural." (quoted in Solovey 1990)

I will examine glossolalia with reference to Truzzi's three categories: supernatural, paranormal, and abnormal, as well as asking if it could be normal behaviour. I will first briefly review the supernatural perspective, and then take a look at tongues as it appears in the paranormal literature. Tongues could also be some kind of abnormality: language, psychopathology and altered mental states will be examined as possible explanations. Of course, tongues could also be a normal event that is merely being interpreted as something else.

3. How is glossolalia to be defined?

The definition of glossolalia depends very much on where you look. in the *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967) it is recorded as "a charisma that enables the recipient to praise God in miraculous speech." According to the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* (1990) it is "a neurotic or psychotic symptom." Seen anthropologically, it is one of the ways "man uses language when he practices religion" (Samarin 1972). Other phrases used are "tongue jabbering", "meaningless neologisms" and "unintelligible words". It would appear that the context within which the behaviour is observed significantly influences its definition.

For now, I would suggest simply that glossolalic discourse be described as a human utterance apparently devoid of semantic meaning or syntax.

4. Who speaks in tongues?

The practice of speaking in tongues in Christianity goes back all the way to the beginning of this religion (see "glossolalia and the supernatural" below). Several studies of religious glossolalia

have shown that those who speak in tongues are deeply touched by the experience. Goodman (1972) reports a "before and after" phase in the lives of the tongue-speakers, with a clear, decisive "change" in-between. Kildahl (1975) notes that Christian glossolalics reported positive, and negative consequences, following their exercise of tongue-speaking (for example, an increase in personal happiness, a sense of greater personal power, a joyful and warm personal fellowship among tongue-speakers, dependency on the leader who introduced the person to tongue-speaking and divisiveness that polarizes the religious community).

Tongues is not confined to Christianity, however. In all ages, and all parts of the world, people have spoken in apparently unintelligible fashion (Eliade 1987). May (1956) describes the prevalence of tongue-speaking amongst the Hindus in India. The physical manifestations appear to be analogous to what happens in a Christian context, though the belief system connected with the experience is quite different.

Anthropologist G J Jennings (1968) carried out an ethnological study of glossolalia and observed this behaviour amongst Tibetan monks, certain North American Indians, the Haida Indians of the Pacific Northwest, the Aborigines of Australia, the aboriginal peoples of the subarctic regions of North America and Asia, the Curanderos of the Andes, the Dyaks of Borneo, the Chaco Indians of South America, shamans in the Sudan, Siberia and Greenland, and in various cults (Voodoo in Haiti, Zor in Ethiopia, Shango on the west coast of Africa, and the Shago in Trinidad).

I have heard anecdotal claims that tongue-speaking occurs in the New Age movement, and would appreciate reports from anyone who has knowledge or experience of this. [2006-11-16: See "Comments" below for an update]

5. What about xenoglossia?

Claims of xenoglossia are well known, and are found mainly within the Pentecostal Movement and in the literature of psychic research. In the broader Christian context, there are several historical accounts. For example, in the 18th century work *Lives of*

the Saints, Alban Butler tells of St Pachomius, the Egyptian founder of the first Christian monastery, who could speak in Greek and Latin although he had never learned them.

In *The Pentecostal Movement in the Catholic Church*, (Notre Dame: Ave Maria Press 1971) E D O'Connor claims several cases of xenoglossia. Sumrall (1993:126) gives an example of a man who spoke in tongues after a sermon. Another man interpreted his message. "When they had finished, a young man walked to the front and spoke in a foreign language to the one who had given the message. The brother answered: 'I'm sorry, sir, but I don't understand any other language.' The man replied: 'But you spoke my language beautifully. I am Persian.' . the brother answered: 'No, it was the spirit who spoke to you. it was God talking to you, not me.' "

Not all Christian commentators, however, readily endorse the reality of xenoglossia; Harold Lindsell, in a *Christianity Today* article, comments:

"there is no known case in which a missionary received the gift of speaking the language of the group he sought to reach. Missionaries have always had to learn to speak the required languages the hard way."

In the paranormal literature, numerous cases of xenoglossia are encountered, where it is commonly explained as a feature associated with mediumship, or more rarely, as a manifestation of thought-reading.

An early case of xenoglossia involved a French medium, Madam X. This turn-of-the-century spiritualist wrote long sentences in modern Greek, a language she had not studied. Subsequent investigation showed that many of the phrases came from a particular Greek-French dictionary and it is thought that Madame X may have experienced cryptomnesia - the repetition of forgotten memories.

In his *Polyglot Mediumship* (1932), Ernesto Bozzano (1862-1945) describes thirty-five case histories of xenoglossia, attributing the ability to spirit possession. Bozzano was a leading Italian parapsychologist, and a vocal proponent of the spiritualistic interpretation of the phenomena of mediumship. He was one of the

researchers who investigated the famous medium Eusapia Palladino.

In *They Speak With Other Tongues* (1964), J L Sherrill claims to have encountered a number of people who exhibited xenoglossia. Jennings (1968) tells of Tibetan monks who, in their ritual dances, spoke "in English with quotations from Shakespeare and with profanity like drunken soldiers, or in German, or French."

Inglis (1985:229) recounts several cases of xenoglossia. In 1857, for example, there is an account of a New York judge, J W Edmonds, who had a daughter, Laura, who was psychic. At a dinner party, Laura spoke in Greek with a Greek guest, carrying on an hour-long conversation. At other times, she could also speak Spanish and American Indian. The American medium George Valiantine could speak in Russian, German, Spanish and Welsh. A Brazilian medium, Carlos Mirabelli, was reported to be able to speak nearly thirty languages (including Syrian and Japanese) and could even write in hieroglyphics.

Modern scholars are more reserved in their judgement, however. Anthropological linguist W T Samarin (1972:112) notes:

"It is extremely doubtful that the alleged cases of xenoglossia (miraculous speech in real languages) are real. Anytime one attempts to verify them, he finds that the stories have been greatly distorted or that the 'witness' turns out to be incompetent or unreliable from a linguistic point of view."

Kildahl (1975) points out that:

"There are no reported instances of a glossolalist speaking a language which was then literally translated by an expert in that language..."

Malony & Lovekin (1985:5) conclude:

"Although tongue speakers often claim that their new language is French or Italian or Spanish, and so on – languages they never knew before – scientific studies to date have not confirmed their claims."

6. Glossolalia and the supernatural

Explaining glossolalic speech as divinely inspired has a long tradition. Motley (1967) points out that a tongue-speaker will usually assert that speech is divinely inspired and that his unknown tongue is a manifestation of the work of his God.

Tongue-speaking was known to Plato, who described its use by Greek and Roman oracles. The priests of Apollo, for example, engaged in prophetic glossolalia. Virgil wrote about a Roman Sibyl who spoke that way, in the *Aeneid*, book six.

In Christian scriptures, glossolalia is traced back to Acts 2, verse 4:

"They are all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to talk in other tongues, as the spirit gave them power of utterance."

There are numerous other historical accounts, several detailed by Cutten (1927:48-66). In the late 17th century, when the Roman Catholic Church was attempting to exterminate Protestants in southern France, several Huguenot children are said to have spoken correct French, which differed considerably from their native *patois* of the Cevennes Mountains.

During the 18th century, tongues was a common feature among British Quakers and American Methodists. In the early 19th century it was found among members of the Catholic Apostolic Church in England, and in the US among members of Mormon churches. Later in the 19th century, it became common within the Holiness Churches.

In the early 20th century, speaking in tongues as a religiously-endorsed activity became perhaps the defining characteristic of the Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian groups.

Bynum (1999) describes the origin of modern-day tongues:

"In 1900 Charles F. Parham opened the Bethel Bible School in Topeka, Kansas. Under his teaching and ministry, Miss Agnes Ozman was influenced to speak in tongues. Within a short time a dozen more students had this experience."

The Cape Town-based His People Christian Church, in their *New Foundations Course* (p17) explain:

"With the baptism of the Holy Spirit, comes the ability to speak in tongues. This is the evidence that someone has in fact received the Holy Spirit ... speaking in tongues is a very special gift from

God ... it is a sign for the unbelievers ... speaking in tongues is a way of worshipping God ... your mind will not understand what you will say in tongues. Do not let this be a blockage to flowing naturally in tongues ... you have control over what you say. It is an act of your will. The Holy Spirit gives you the ability but you do the speaking."

Sumrall (1993:117) explains that tongues "is a supernatural utterance, which comes from God through the person of the Holy Spirit" and "when you speak in tongues, you are speaking supernaturally to God" (:122). He also cautions that the Devil seeks to counterfeit the gift of speaking in tongues: "I have seen dozens and dozens of people uttering things that could not be understood either by the other native people in the meeting or by me as a foreign visitor. They were merely stammering out words under demonic power."

7. Paranormal glossolalia

The first studies of glossolalia were carried out at the turn of the century by investigators of spiritualism. Alcock (1987) points out:

"The study of the paranormal was historically associated with the so-called occult sciences such as astrology and numerology; a more direct progenitor was the spiritualism craze of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries."

Investigators examined spirit messages, apparitions by persons at the point of death, automatic writing, clairvoyance and so on. By the early 1920s the term "parapsychology" (besides or alongside psychology) was in use, instead of "psychical research", and may be defined as the scientific study of anomalous events associated with human experience.

A case reported in 1897 to the Society for Psychical Research described an account of glossolalia that was attributed to a spirit talking through the speaker:

When [the spirit] ceased giving me prose, it gave poetry in 'unknown tongues'. As the foreign verbiage came viva voce, I pencilled it down, mostly in an archaic mono-phonetic form..."

Another report described a woman:

"When she gave herself permission, her vocal organs would articulate nonsense-syllables with the greatest volubility and animation of expression and with no apparent fatigue, and then stop at the behest of her will."

A few years later, Theodore Flournoy (1854-1921) published *From India To The Planet Mars*, describing the spiritualistic glossolalia of Helene Smith, who claimed she was speaking in a Martian language. The author describes the experience:

"Presently, Helene begins to recite with increased volubility and incomprehensible jargon . after a few minutes, Helene interrupts herself, crying out "Oh, I have had enough of it; you say such words to me I will never be able to repeat them."

Flournoy was a leading psychologist and psychic investigator. His scepticism about mediums was modified by his experiences with Helene Smith; he showed that although a great deal of her reincarnation testimony was false, he could not explain all her accounts. His later investigation of Eusapia Palladino convinced him that she was a genuine medium.

The Swiss psychologist C G Jung, one-time croney of Sigmund Freud, was very fond of the supernatural. His doctoral dissertation described the case of a girl who exhibited glossolalia while in a séance:

"She went on speaking in the same conversational tone but in a strange idiom that sounded like French and Italian mixed . it was possible to make out a few words, but not to memorize them, because the language was so strange."

Not all early investigators, however, were convinced that this speech was a sign of anything paranormal. Best (1925:1707) writes:

"As to the absurd nonsense talked by mediums when they are possessed by their familiar demons or spirits, such matter is scarce worth regarding, as it appears to be, in most cases, meaningless gibberish."

As the 20th century drew to a close, séances seemed to have become déclassé, and the spirit world less eager to contact us through mediums, mystics and others sensitives sitting around in

dingy rooms. Now, they seem to prefer the bright lights of a TV studio. In May of 2000, the American Fox TV network broadcast a two-hour special, "Powers Of The Paranormal: Live On Stage," which included the "séance of the century". The medium, Bill Burns, settled down, and after some standard spirit-possession twitches went into trance and summoned the spirits of Marilyn Monroe and Andy Kaufman. The spirits rambled on about how "I remember this and that." but when the séance was over, Burns explained that the spirits are always confused when they're contacted because "memory is the first thing to leave the spirit when you die."

A better class of dead people are contacted regularly by John Edwards, whose "Crossing Over" TV show regularly features quite intelligible spirits.

South Africa is not behind in this industry, as we now have our own tannie who regularly speaks to the dead on TV.

8. Glossolalia as psychological abnormality

Ask a member of the public how they determine if someone is mentally ill, and they are likely to reply that the person was "difficult to talk to" (Reda 1992). This layman's attitude towards madness is not entirely unreasonable, and seems to have inspired early researchers in the field. Glossolalics have been described as schizophrenic, hysteric, cataleptic, regressed, emotionally unstable, immature, neurotic, excessively dependent and highly dogmatic (Spanos & Hewitt 1979:429). As recently as 1990, the *New Encyclopedia Britannica* refers to it as 'a neurotic or psychotic symptom.'

Around the turn of the century, scientists understood glossolalia as a form of mass hysteria or psychosis. Cutten (1927), for example, wrote that glossolalics were "schizophrenics at worst or hysteric neurotics at best." However, with no reliable empirical evidence to back up the claim, such a statement is unwarranted.

As psychoses and schizophrenia became better understood, and further studies were conducted into the nature of glossolalia, the psychopathology hypothesis started to weaken. (A broader issue is

the fascinating relationship between religious experience, belief in the paranormal, and mental health; see for example my "Psychology and religion reference list", particularly Aronoff et.al. 2000 and Peters et.al. 1999).

One of the earliest studies that looked into the psychopathology of tongues-speaking was undertaken by Lincoln Vivier for his 1960 PhD dissertation at the University of Witwatersrand (South Africa). This often-quoted and controversial work found that glossolalics were psychologically well-adjusted.

Hine (1969) in a study of Pentecostal glossolalia concluded: "Quite clearly, available evidence requires that an explanation of glossolalia as pathological be discarded."

Spanos and Hewitt (1979) showed no difference between glossolalics and non-glossolalics regarding self-esteem, depressive affects, psychosomatic symptoms, neuroticism, extroversion and dogmatism, noting that this "contradicts the common but empirically unfounded view that glossolalia is symptomatic of psychopathology."

The latest version of the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (American Psychiatric Association) does not list glossolalia as a symptom of psychosis. In fact, it isn't recognized as a diagnostic criteria for any disorder.

Grady and Loewenthal (1997) examined the broader context within which tongues is spoken - they investigated the frequency, content, associated behaviours, feelings and meanings associated with glossolalia. They found that:

Glossolalia was reported by those who practised it to be a frequent, usually daily occurrence, more likely to happen out of religious settings than in them. It was reported to be more likely while driving, relaxing or engaged in domestic activities (thus in relatively private settings) than in explicitly religious contexts or activities. Typically the emotions reported are positive, calm ones, or sometimes 'no particular' emotions.

Those who had not practised glossolalia saw it differently:

"The non-glossolalics believed that glossolalia occurs less than daily, and that it normally occurs in religious settings and while engaged in religious activities, that it is

accompanied by high arousal, usually positive emotions (ecstasy and the like)..."

The authors speculate that the data show that there are two forms of glossolalia – the private and the public. Type A (calm, private) is characterized by being frequent (daily or several times weekly), usually/often in private, mundane settings, self-aware while speaking, can attend to other claims on attention. In contrast, type B (excited, public) is occasional (weekly or less), usually/only in public/religious setting, not self-aware/dissociation/altered state of consciousness, cannot attend to other claims on attention. They then speculate that:

"Use of type A glossolalia is unlikely to be associated with psychopathology. It is suggested that even though a regular practitioner of glossolalia would engage in a more public and ecstatic form of glossolalia, he is likely to practice in private as well. It is suggested that glossolalia with some features of type b only might be more likely to co-occur with psychopathology, but this is obviously a matter for further investigation."

The claim is often made that schizophrenic speech is glossolalia. This is plainly false. The *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* characterizes speech in schizophrenia as vague, overly abstract or concrete, repetitive or stereotyped (less commonly, neologisms, perseveration and clanging may be found). Leff (1993:68) provides a sample of a schizophrenic's disorganized speech:

"In my mind is a gist of something that's coming you see and to get them prepared unto on and then when the Lord is ready that gist that's back in my head when the Lord says so my Lord there's then supplied the people who who's ready to who have been applied to come in and coincide their in on the thing the Lord bringeth forth to for me to say on that day on how and how and there and when to coincide their in unto with me."

Leff points out that in schizophrenese, individual words are recognizable, but the links between them cannot readily be followed. Even in the most disintegrated form of schizophrenic

speech disorder, known as 'word salad', the units of speech are intact. What is obscure, is the meaning of the words. In glossolalia, on the other hand, although the sounds are incomprehensible, the symbolic meaning of the utterances is clear.

Another important distinction is that whereas glossolalia lasts for only a few minutes, the speech disorder of schizophrenics continues for days, weeks, or occasionally for years.

These observations suggest that glossolalia differs in some important respects from unintelligible forms of speech associated with psychopathology in general and schizophrenia in particular.

9. Abnormal mental states

During the 1960s a number of authors published work describing glossolalia in terms of some type of altered state of consciousness - cognitive disorganization, hypnotic susceptibility, trance state, or dissociation.

Are people who engage in speaking in tongues especially receptive to hypnotic suggestion? Hypnosis is a consciousness phenomenon, induced by suggestion, ranging from mild hypersuggestibility to a deep trancelike state. Electrical activity in the brain, as measured by an electroencephalograph (EEG), has shown that the hypnotic state is only apparently a state of sleep, since the EEG patterns of the hypnotized person resemble those of someone awake and not those of a person in any of the phases of sleep. About eight out of ten people can be hypnotized, although only an estimated four will be "good" subjects.

The earliest investigations of a possible link between hypnotic susceptibility and glossolalia yielded inconclusive results, which can probably be attributed to the vagaries of the assessment techniques used (Malony & Lovekin (1985) briefly describe several of these studies).

Lincoln Vivier's 1960 study (mentioned in the previous section) used self-report inventories to determine that glossolalics scored lower on suggestibility than non-glossolalics.

On the other hand, Kildahl (1975) in the USA thought hypnotizability to be a hallmark feature of the glossolalia experience:

"If one can be hypnotized, then one is able under proper conditions to learn to speak in tongues. While people who speak in tongues are not hypnotized, the induction of glossolalia is very similar to the induction of hypnosis. There is a further connection. After a person has been hypnotized for the first time, it becomes increasingly easy for him to be hypnotized on repeated occasions. This holds true also for the tongue-speaker."

Kildahl's work drew attention from the popular media at the time; the *New York Times* (1974 January 21) reported as follows: "John P. Kildahl, a clinical psychologist and professor at New York Theological Seminary, said here today that the Pentecostal practice of speaking in tongues constituted 'learned behavior.' Dr. Kildahl, an ordained Lutheran clergy man and former chief psychologist at the Lutheran Medical Center in Brooklyn, recently published a study of glossolalia... In his address, he said that on the basis of his research and extensive correspondence with charismatic Christians it appeared that five elements were normally present when someone began speaking in tongues. These are a 'magnetic' relationship with a group leader, a sense of personal distress, and 'intense emotional atmosphere,' a supporting group, and the prior learning of a rationale of its religious significance. In the case of people who begin to speak in tongues when they are alone, he said 'these five conditions have been present in the days or weeks preceding the initial experience.' "

Kildahl's hypothesis was tested by Spanos and Hewitt (1979). They examined the trait of absorption in imaginative experiences - the openness to absorbing and self-altering encounters, and to be engrossed in everyday activities such as daydreaming, watching a movie or reading. This trait is known to be an indicator of hypnotic susceptibility. They also employed a standardized technique (the Harvard Group Scale of Hypnotic Susceptibility) for directly assessing hypnotic susceptibility. Their findings showed - contrary

to Kildahl's expectation - that glossolalics did not differ from non-glossolalics on either of these measures.

Thus, being particularly sensitive to hypnosis does not seem a necessary condition for experiencing glossolalia.

The foremost proponent of the trance approach to glossolalia is Felicitas Goodman (1972), who analysed twenty-nine case histories of tongue-speakers and concluded that speaking in tongues always involves a change of mental state similar to trance (with linguistic and cultural influences):

The trance-like state (an altered state of consciousness) - rather than the speaking in tongues - was the focus of their conversion experience; this trance is achieved or learned initially and is the primary manifestation, while the glossolalia is a secondary feature.

She holds that glossolalic speech is a consequence of being in a trance state:

"In my terms, when a person has removed himself from awareness of the ordinary reality surrounding him, he is in an altered mental state . I use dissociation to characterize the subject's divorcement from ordinary reality . the mental state of the glossolalist, with its obvious somatic agitation, seems to me hyperaroused."

Goodman spent a great deal of time observing the participants in her study, and became impressed with the kinetic behaviours (movements) they exhibited, ranging from trembling, shaking, twitching to jumping, rocking, bowing and arm lifting. To her, this was an essential part of the experience:

"While dissociated, the subjects are rarely ever motionless. There is movement, kinetic behaviour, during all phases of this type of mental state."

The response to Goodman's glossolalia-as-hyperarousal was strong. It was rejected by most Pentecostal and Charismatic Christian tongues-speakers, who were against the idea that tongues was usually spoken in an ecstatic state, or as product of a trance. Sumrall (1993:119), an evangelical preacher, comments on his use of tongues:

"When I am speaking in my prayer language, I am alone most of the time. I get more inspiration walking around by myself or driving alone in my car, talking to the Lord."

Scientists, too, provided anecdotal reports that individuals sometimes engage in glossolalia while carrying out activity that involves sustained visual attention to the external environment (Kelsey 1965, Samarin 1972). Samarin notes: "any valid explanation must account for the behaviour of one of my respondents: he talks to himself in tongues while testing new aircraft in the air!" As far as Samarin is concerned:

Glossolalia is sometimes associated with some degree of altered state of consciousness, that this occasionally involves motor activity that is involuntary or, rarely, a complete loss of consciousness, and that in any case subsequent use of glossolalia (that is, after the initial experience), is most often independent of dissociative phenomena.

Spanos and Hewitt (1979) directly tested the trance hypothesis, seeing if glossolalia could be repeated in the laboratory and under distinct non-trancelike conditions. They recruited twelve young adults from a Charismatic Roman Catholic youth prayer group and studied their tongues-speaking, and concluded:

"Glossolalia was spoken easily with eyes open as well as closed and was neither accompanied by kinetic activity nor followed by disorientation. During glossolalia subjects receptivity to external events and their ability to use information learned before glossolalia was demonstrated..."

Thus, while tongues may be accompanied by kinetic activity, eye closure and disorientation in some social settings, it can easily occur in the absence of these behaviours.

The evidence thus strongly suggests that glossolalia is not a trance-like state, nor is it related to hypnotic suggestibility.

10. Is glossolalia an abnormal language phenomenon?

Part of the human condition is a need to understand experiences, and to explain new observations in the light of old, in

terms of what is already known. People want to integrate that which is strange into a system of what is known and knowable.

It is thus entirely reasonable to equate glossolalic vocalizations with speech, fitting the audio-signal of tongue-speech into a previously prepared category, namely language. However, careful linguistic analysis of glossolalic speech samples contradict this common-sense view.

Motley (1967) concluded that there was no evidence that glossolalia represented a known language, structurally it had some similarities to human speech ("was quite language-like"), and did not closely resemble the speakers native language.

Samarin's extensive study of glossolalia leads him to conclude that "in spite of superficial similarities, glossolalia fundamentally is not language" (Samarin 1972). He characterized it as

"...strings of meaningless syllables made up of sounds taken from those familiar to the speaker and put together more or less haphazardly . glossolalia is language-like because the speaker unconsciously wants it to be language-like." (quoted in Nickell, 1993: 108)

11. Glossolalia as normal behaviour

Glossolalics behave in various ways. Some go into convulsions or lose consciousness, others are less dramatic. Some seem to go into a trance, some claim to have amnesia of their speaking in tongues. It appears that their behaviour is determined by the social expectations of their community and that this behaviour is learned. Glossolalics behave the way they do, because it is acceptable and even expected, within their cultural context.

Gerlach and Hine (1968) conducted a study amongst pentecostal Christians and asked them to rank in importance the factors that influenced them to seek the experience of tongues. the study revealed that the most significant factor was contact with an individual who had already had the experience.

At least two studies have been undertaken with the express goal of teaching glossolalia. Samarin (1968) reported that he had taught members of his linguistic class how to speak in tongues, outside of

any religious context, and as expected there were no feelings of euphoria as a result of the speaking.

Spanos et.al. (1986) carried out a similar experiment, showing that glossolalia was a learnable skill. After hearing a recorded sample of genuine glossolalia, 20% of his subjects were able to speak in tongues immediately without further training. After some coaching, 70% of the trained subjects were fluent in glossolalia. the authors conclude:

"Glossolalia, therefore, seems likely to be a type of learned behavior rather than a special altered state of mind."

Kildahl (1975) concludes that "the evidence is strong that one may learn to speak in tongues under certain prescribed conditions" and details what he calls the "induction process" leading up to glossolalic speech and summarizes his perspective as follows:

"My glossolalia research has convinced me that it is a learned behaviour which can bring a sense of power and well-being. It may also lead to excesses resulting in community disruption. It is the use of glossolalia which determines whether or not it is constructive."

Micah said that true religion was to do justice, love kindness, and to walk humbly with God. If the practice of glossolalia produces these fruits, then it appears to me to be a responsible use of the experience.

A similar sentiment is echoed by Peters et.al. (1999), who examined the incidence of delusional ideation in cults ('New Religious Movements' is the preferred term). Hare Krishnas and Druids were compared to Christians, non-religious people, and deluded psychotics.

New religious movement members were found to share a number of less florid delusional ideas with psychotic patients, were equally convinced of their veracity, but were not as preoccupied or distressed by these experiences. These findings suggest that form may be more important diagnostically than content: it is not what you believe, it is how you believe it.

12. Conclusion

Glossolalia is perhaps best understood as a vocal behaviour that can be acquired by almost anyone who possesses the necessary motivation and who is exposed regularly to social environments that encourage such utterances. In our culture, the social groups that encourage glossolalia are almost invariably religious. Therefore, the motivations for engaging in it can usually be best understood in terms of the shared meaning ascribed to this behaviour by the religious groups that practice it.

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See also:

Speaking in Tongues: Denise's personal testimony

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While doing a literature review of glossolalia for the article Speaking in Tongues, I was introduced to Denise M., who had been a member of the His People Organization and had spoken in tongues regularly. We met and had several discussions, during which she agreed to write down her personal testimony, and answered a few questions I had.

Testimony

Denise writes:

I had been attending His People, a Pentecostal church, for a short while and it was here that I was introduced to the doctrine of tongues and where I received 'the gift', like a good pentecostal, myself. I was in a transition period between being a young ignorant Christian and reaching what is called 'spiritual maturity'.

It was a time in my life when I was driven by acquiring knowledge and experience that would qualify me as a mature Christian, on a level above that of the lay-believer. I felt that it was time to move on, nearer to the life-task predestined for me by God himself. So when the call from the Pastor at the pulpit came that evening, I realized it was meant for me. His invitation was to those who felt pressed on their soul to receive the gift of tongues.

I got up and descended the stairs, slowly nearing the pulpit, where I was sure something spectacular was about to happen. My

heart was pounding in my chest, my senses overly responsive to the people next to me in the aisle saying things like 'Hallelujah, Praise the Lord!' and – I remember this distinctly – reeking of too much perfume. Soon enough I found myself hands-in-the-air, open-mouthed, hands being laid on my head and stomach while the pastor asked his Lord to anoint this faithful follower with the gift of the Holy Spirit and as a sign to enable me to speak with heavenly tongues.

So there I was, standing and waiting for God to manifest in lightning and thunder at the blow of a horn. I guess nothing happened for quite a while, as before I knew it, most of the congregation was praying in tongues and elders were giving me instructions through clenched teeth and lowered voices. I remember hearing 'Don't hold it back,' and 'Remember you've got to put the "ball on the roll", God enables you, but you have to do the talking'.

I was expecting a blackout or something while God will take control of my body and my mouth and speak through me in that manner. And then, not quite sure of what to do next I pushed out some word through my numb lips; it was received with great praise and encouragement. Soon I was praying in tongues while various thoughts flashed through my mind like 'Wow this is a lot more effort than I expected it to be'. I understood when an usher told me later to go practice at home; this was obviously an art, something to become proficient in.

And I did get proficient; soon I was teaching the doctrine to others, helping them to receive the gift of tongues as well. I was on the top of the world, I had something supernatural, something no one could explain other than with biblical doctrine. Or so I thought, until much later when I found that indeed other religions and pseudoscientific groups could do the same. Obviously the easy answer was to blame it on the Devil imitating the works of God; this satisfied me for some time until I discovered that science, too, had an answer – an answer that made sense. Immediately I applied the scientific answer to the other occurrences outside of Christianity, but I still I believed that speaking in tongues as was taught in church was of divine origin. But after a couple of months

I had to confess to myself that there was nothing supernatural or divine about speaking in tongues as I knew it. It was but me saying a lot of gibberish without thinking about what to say next.

Learning more about science and the power of suggestion, I began to examine the experiences I had as Christian and I found that there was nothing that happened to me that I thought to be supernatural that couldn't be explained. This led me to believe that there is nothing supernatural and that those people who still believe in the supernatural are holding onto an ancient world view comparable to believing the Earth is flat. People believe something to be supernatural because they can't explain it otherwise.

People expect to speak in strange tongues after hands are laid on them. They then start speaking gibberish and believe that, even if it doesn't feel as supernatural as they thought it would, it still is of divine nature because, they feel, there is no other explanation and besides, it would be wrong to question the ways of God and his manifestations; "one should have faith like that of a child, for God works in mysterious ways."

Q&A

Question: How does it feel to speak in tongues or pray in your prayer language?

Answer: "Well it of itself doesn't feel weird at all, but at first when you remember speaking in tongues it sure feels weird. Unbelievable."

Question: When and where did you speak in tongues?

Answer: "Usually during Christian meetings or when I prayed (especially when I didn't really have anything to say) but it really didn't matter, I could do it anyplace at anytime."

Question: How did speaking in tongues change the way you thought about life?

Answer: "I couldn't explain this phenomenon other than that it was a gift of God, so naturally I saw this as a proof of the existence of God and the validity of the dogma I followed. This was obvious

proof for me that my teachers were right all along and that I should question their teachings as they would probably be correct no matter what they said."

Question: When speaking in tongues do you have to think about what to say next or anything else for that matter?

Answer: "No, you could of course, but usually you don't think of what to say next you just say any random thing (as the Spirit leads you). You can think of anything really as you don't need to concentrate to make random noise in language-like fashion."

Question: In retrospect, was there any pressure applied on you to speak in tongues?

Answer: "Yes, if all around you people are speaking in tongues and you keep hearing teachings and testimonies of people that speak in tongues and you are given literature about it and your teachers speak in tongues and the Bible says you should speak in tongues and people are praying for you to be able to speak in tongues then I guess you are a little pressured to speak in tongues and join the rest."