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Glossolalia as Learned Behaviour*

Glossolalia (or 'speaking in unknown tongues') has been judged to be a deviant form of human speech, motivated by religion and produced under certain psychological conditions. The latter have not yet been adequately specified, but the assumption seems to be that glossolalia is correlated with an abnormal state. It has even been suggested that it is a trance phenomenon and can be used to identify the occurrence of an altered state of consciousness.

The common attitude toward glossolalia is far from being scientific in the proper sense of the term, and is based partly on prejudice, partly on ignorance, and partly on laziness. Prejudice has led to a judgmental attitude toward Christian groups (like the Pentecostal ones) that practised glossolalia; laziness has led to the failure to verify statements about glossolalia; and ignorance results from inadequate exposure to the great variety of experiences that glossolalia is associated with.

Glossolalia, as has been pointed out in another paper,¹ is a form of pseudo-language that is available to every normal human being in a normal state. The validity of this assertion is not challenged by the fact that pseudo-language is a marginal form of behaviour, being restricted for the most part to religious experience. It is easy to point to other limited forms of behaviour – some of them, like 'pig latin,' that are linguistic in nature. What glossolalia is, from a linguistic point of view, must therefore be distinguished from its uses, among other things. Although the linguist, the psychologist, and the sociologist all investigate glossolalia, the data specific to their disciplines are inevitably different.

Since glossolalia is a deviant form of human speech, the linguist is interested in it for many reasons. In this study we are concerned with only one topic, its acquisition.

Strictly speaking, glossolalia cannot be learned. It is not like language or any specialized modification of language (like an argot) whose conventions are shared by a community. Each glossa,² the verbal product of a glossolalic act, is produced more or less *de novo*. But in another sense there is learning; there must be, because the acquisition of glossolalia is generally associated

*A paper presented at the annual conference of the Society for the Scientific Study of Religion, Montreal, October 1968.

1. Cf. W. J. Samarin, 'The Forms and Functions of Nonsense Speech,' *Linguistics* (forthcoming).

2. A neologism introduced in W. J. Samarin, 'The Linguisticity of Glossolalia,' *Hartford Quarterly*, 8 (1968-69), 49-75.

with becoming a member of a social group with its own patterns of behaviour and values.

I base my generalizations on two sources: one, the completed questionnaire-booklet of seventy-one questions returned to me by men and women, laymen and clergymen, from a wide spectrum of religious groups, both Protestant and Catholic, in England, Holland, the United States, and Canada; the other, the transcription of a tape-recording of a 'baptism session' at a charismatic meeting.

The questions that pertain to the acquisition of glossolalia in the questionnaire are the following:

9 Did you want to speak in tongues? Why?

10 How many of your friends or relatives spoke tongues at the time you began?

11 What kind of encouragement, exhortation, or persuasion did people give you to speak in tongues?

12 Did anybody talk to you about what you should do or what would happen when you began to speak in tongues?

13 Did you have any difficulties when you began to speak in tongues? Describe them.

14 Was your first experience in speaking in tongues easier than you had expected?

15 Did your ability to speak in tongues improve as time passed?

The striking thing that the questionnaires reveal is that there is far less proselytizing than one expects. Although many respondents had at least a few friends or relatives who were already glossolalists when they were 'baptized in the Spirit,' many others were not thus exposed to influence and indoctrination. But even those who were in personal touch with other glossolalists did not all experience indoctrination. The only necessary, and perhaps sufficient, requirement for becoming a glossolalist seems to be a profound desire on the part of an individual for a new or better religious experience. This is called the 'baptism of the Spirit' by most glossolalists, but the seeker may not identify his longing by this name.

The preceding characterization of the indoctrination that accompanies the acquisition of glossolalia is inadequate, because it fails to make a distinction between what is said to the candidate about the desirability of and the requirements for the 'baptism' as a total experience and what is said about speaking in tongues specifically. The two are conceptually different, and charismatists insist that they are empirically so. The doctrine holds that glossolalia is only the evidence of the baptism. In actual practice, however, the two concepts are not clearly distinguished. In any discussion of 'Spirit baptism,' what happens is that at one point the baptism may be in focus and at another point the speaking. Then again it may not be clear whether it is one or the other.

Instruction relating to the acquisition of glossolalia appears to be minimal

and of a general nature. Some people are taught that the submission of the human tongue is a requirement for baptism, because it is part of one's total submission to God. This is both an act of the will and a state of mind, and it results in a willingness to say whatever comes into one's mouth. (One of the reasons people refuse the experience, as some testify, is the fear of being irresponsible for what they said.) People are therefore encouraged to relax and to say whatever comes to them.³ Some are told to praise God (in their native language) until the new tongue is given, but others are told not to speak in any known language whatsoever. Candidates are forewarned that they may at first utter only a few sounds or words, but that they are to keep on repeating them. (One respondent said that he had only 'two sounds' at the beginning and 'not more than six words within the first month.') One might also add that some people become more fluent in their tongue, a development that my respondents seem to find quite normal. One wrote that the first experience was 'agonizingly difficult,' but others testify to great freedom and pleasure at the first experience. (This may occur at almost any time or circumstance. Many people have reported being awakened at night by finding themselves talking in tongues.)

We can summarize the 'language learning' instruction that my respondents received by pointing out only that they were given no model and that many of them had not heard glossolalia long enough to conceive their own model of it. They did not know what phonological elements to use and how to group them together once they began to appear. They knew only that whatever they said would be real words from a real language unknown to themselves.

There is another group of respondents to whom even this minimal instruction does not pertain. For them the acquisition of glossolalia was unmotivated. They became glossolalists in spite of themselves. Their experience indicates the unimportance, if not irrelevance, of instruction in the acquisition of glossolalia. Three cases are cited here. The first is that of a sixty-eight-year-old woman who reports that when she was thirty-seven, and already the mother of eight children, her husband took two of her sons and deserted her. When this happened, she began to pray; soon she was praying in tongues. At this time in her life she had had no contact with glossolalists and knew nothing about tongues (except, I suppose, what she had learned from reading the New Testament). The second case is that of a Dutch woman who, as a member of the Dutch Reformed Church, had had no exposure to glossolalia. However, following a serious illness, she began to have dreams and visions and to experience the 'presence of Jesus.' It was at this time that she began to utter what she called 'new words,' whose phonetic shape was very different from that of Dutch. Only many years later did she come in contact with other charismatists. The third case is likewise that of a woman with no

3. This advice is in fact similar to that given by a psychiatrist to someone who is being helped to have a good LSD 'trip': 'You've got to surrender and trust' (reported at the third annual conference of the R. M. Bucke Memorial Society on 'Do psychedelic drugs have religious implications?' [Pierrefonds, Quebec, October 1967]).

previous contact whatsoever with glossolalists. She reports that at a small group prayer meeting she unexpectedly began to speak in tongues on thanking God for a miraculous healing.

We now move to the examination of the guidance that was given at a public baptism session by a very prominent charismatist of international renown. The session was held at a regional meeting of the Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International, a charismatic lay organization with strong ecumenical ties. The week-end conference was held in a hotel in one of America's largest cities. There were over a thousand people in attendance. The baptism session was held in the afternoon, after a plenary session at which those who were seeking the filling of the Spirit were invited to go to an adjoining room. The taperecording was made in full view of the clergyman who was in charge of the session, a man with whom I am personally acquainted. The room was filled with over two hundred people; all the seats were occupied, and people stood along the walls. Outside the room there was a noisy milling crowd, as at any large hotel conference.

Only a small proportion of the audience were candidates (as they were called). The clergyman asked them to occupy the front rows; three rows were filled.

There was very little structure to the meeting, the whole of which was supervised by the one clergyman. Throughout the meeting he kept up an almost uninterrupted stream of speech, which went from one topic to another in a very fluid manner. (One could almost call it a banter.) Most of what he said was directed to the entire audience. He started by forbidding anybody but the candidates to speak out in tongues. This exhortation was accompanied by general instruction on the use of tongues in public. Then he addressed the candidates. He said that he was going to pray for them, not that they would speak in tongues, but that they would be filled with the Spirit. Here came a considerable amount of guidance pertaining to speaking in tongues. The clergyman then prayed, first in English, and then in tongues. At this point people throughout the room began to pray audibly (presumably for the candidates), and the leader went up and down the rows, praying for and encouraging each candidate. He then addressed the whole audience again, saying: 'And now I say the river is yours; swimming time,' thus permitting an outburst of glossolalia from the audience. This was finally cut off by 'Let's be quiet now.' The final part of the session was devoted to further general exhortations about the use of tongues.

In the clergyman's exhortations to the candidates we find the following kinds of remarks. He wants them to be 'absolutely relaxed,' so he asks them to put down pocketbooks and other things that might bother them. He asks them to close their eyes and 'Just begin to talk. Just lift up your heads and talk to Jesus standing right here listening to you ... Don't talk English. Stop praying. Stop begging. Stop pleading.' He tells them, 'Let your tongue flip ... Your tongue will be taken over by the Spirit.' He warns them that their

speech will sound funny and childish, but that, 'Unless you become like a child, you can't enter the kingdom.' He anticipates that some will stammer and stutter. This, he tells them, is because they will be speaking too fast. They should slow down and say the syllables 'one by one.' He tells them that they may feel a trembling of the body. This is the Holy Spirit nudging them and saying: 'If you speak, I'll give you a language.' Nor was it necessary to raise one's arms. Then, somewhat facetiously, 'There's no Scripture to say He wants to shake hands with you.' (This counsel is given because it has been the practice of some charismatists, particularly Pentecostals, to have people raise their arms as a symbol of praise, and incidentally as a necessary condition for receiving the baptism.)

After the prayer for the candidates, when the leader addressed himself to each one of them, his behaviour resembled that of a rooter - like someone, for example, who paces along the swimming pool cheering a swimmer on in a race. Here are some of the things he said:

You cannot talk in tongues when you're talking in English. You're still begging. You must stop using English.

Come on now. Speak out.

There you are. He's talking. Keep talking. Say it again. Come on. Hallelujah. He's praying a new language!

There you are. That's the Holy Spirit.

It isn't you making up the words. Your mind says you are, but *you* can't do it.

That's right, Sister. Keep talking.

You start off, and He gives the language as soon as you begin. The beginning is all you do.

It should be clear from the preceding discussion of the instruction which a glossolalist receives that very little of it is of any linguistic importance. A person learns, or can learn, a great deal about the charismatic subculture, but *he does not learn to talk in tongues*. It is not to be denied, however, that it is possible for a person who has been exposed to glossolalia to retain enough information so that he uses some of the same sounds, sequences of sounds, intonational patterns, or paralinguistic devices. It is more likely, I should think, that the passing on of glossolalic patterns will occur among those who are already glossolalists. Their control of glossolalia becomes better with the passing of time, and they learn to use it in different ways. It is not unreasonable to expect that there is even some competition among the members of a tightly knit group.

What should be stressed, therefore, is the *novelty* of the original glossolalic experience. It owes its importance in the charismatic *rite de passage* precisely to its unpredictability. In fact, all glossolalists are unwittingly in collusion to perpetuate a myth: that there is something strange and miraculous about tongues. If it were known how easy it was to talk in tongues, there would be few, if any, glossolalists.