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Terms of reference for the study of glossolalia*

Il existe une grande variété de phénomènes regroupés sous le terme glossolalie, différentes entre elles ces productions sont vocales anomales. La distinction entre elles se base d’abord sur la différence entre ce qui est la parole et ce qui ne l’est pas. La glossolalie est donc une espèce de pseudo-langage, considérée comme vrai langage par les glossolalistes eux-mêmes. L’étude de la glossolalie a été retardée par les chercheurs qui la considéraient anormale — psychologiquement et sociologiquement —. Nous proposons ici une étude à la fois linguistique et socio-linguistique de ces phénomènes.

1.0. Let us use the word glossolalia with respect to a certain kind of human, vocal phenomenon. Of all the different kinds of utterances that deviate from normal language in both form and function it designates, or it should designate, a range of utterances that are similar to each other in both form and function. These, for the sake of convenience, will be called anomalous linguistic phenomena.

1.1. What writers call glossolalia is not always the kind of speech that we are concerned with here. Thus, when Fernandez' explains the evolution of the Bwiti cult among the Fang people in the Gabon Republic, he says that the original visionary leaders may find themselves unable to deal organizationally with their followers. More powerful leaders take their place, and the “prophet may be exalted at the expense of his effective political power and reduced to talking in tongues” (1966:44). By this he only means that the mark of the upstaged prophet is metaphorical and recondite speech. This kind of ‘language play’, where meanings are manipulated rather than phonological form, is also universal. In Gorki’s “Nilushka” again we find an old money-lender, Antipa Vologonov, saying:

... words should be mysterious, and, so, able to be interpreted in more than one way, seeing that the more meanings words possess, the more are those words respected and heeded by mankind (Gorki 1945:92-95).

For a discussion of the misuse of the word glossolalia see Samarin 1972:131fn.
1.2. The study of anomalous linguistic phenomena assumes that 'normal language' is well defined, that it is not itself problematic. But this is not the case. Even with respect to this concept scholars differ in what they consider acceptable manifestations of the phenomenon. Specimens of language are what linguists study; the ability to produce 'approved' or 'acceptable' language is what they theorize about. Yet linguists are not in entire agreement about the constraints that must be imposed on one's describing and explaining language.

2.0. The concept of 'normal language' must nevertheless be accepted as a starting point in the study of anomalous phenomena. We can do this even though we recognize that certainly in human speech and even in historically transmitted (and individually learned) language, there are phenomena found also in what is more commonly considered anomalous behavior. In speech, on the one hand, there are such things as interjections, some learned and passed on to successive generations of speakers of the same language and some created by speakers for immediate use; in language, on the other hand, there are such things as phonetic or ideophonic forms like wishy-washy in English, forms that appear to have their own 'grammar' (Samarin 1970, and Samarin in press). Some of these phenomena are included in any discussion of 'poetry' in both form and function — that is, the nature and manifestations of expression as opposed to denotation.

2.1. We can proceed to the examination of anomalous linguistic phenomena by assuming that normal language, for the normal human being, is what one produces while speaking to other adult peers (that is, socially and psychologically mature individuals with fully developed language); for the linguist (who is not, from one point of view, a normal human being but one with an unusual interest in human behavior), it is what is amenable to linguistic analysis. It is important that both kinds of criteria are invoked: (a) the distinction between acceptable and non-acceptable and (b) the complementary differences between form and function (or product and use).

3.0. In cataloguing anomalous linguistic phenomena, therefore, we make a distinction between speech — believing or pretending that one is engaged in speaking — and non-speech. Speech is any act of speaking or any product of the act of speaking, whether that act be 'for real' or 'for fun'. The latter distinction is, of course, jeopardized by the 'serious' or playful use of crypto-languages — the so-called 'disguised languages' that are derived from normal languages by the application of certain rules that modify their forms without seriously altering their content (for examples and bibliography see Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976). Pseudo-languages, whether 'for fun' or 'for real', are not related to source languages by a set of rules. Another critical difference is that whereas the act of speaking in a pseudo-language has social meaning (one believes or one pretends that one is saying something), there is no consistent relationship between form and meaning. (By form here we mean larger or smaller segments of discourse. We say that while the discourse is meaningful, its parts are not.)
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3.1. Implicit in the distinctions established above is one more important opposition: what the members of a speech community believe about what happens in their midst and what observers, especially scholarly ones, believe about their behavior. A linguist might agree in one case that a particular stream of speech had a language-like prosody but that, in another case, an utterance consisting of, for example, howls and hisses was in no way like language; but in both instances members, or at least some of the members, of the speech communities in question would accept these as languages, or special kinds of languages, appropriate to speaking with, for example, non-human beings.

3.2. What has retarded the study of the full spectrum of human linguistic behavior has been an a priori distinction between normal and abnormal language. In many cases this has been an invidious distinction that led to judgments prejudicial against those whose behavior was considered abnormal. The logic of this bigotry went as follows: the utterances of these people are abnormal, but the people using or endorsing this kind of linguistic behavior believe that it is normal (although supernatural in origin); therefore they are not normal themselves. In other words, scholars explained anomalous linguistic behavior in terms of social or psychological deviation. (I have dealt with this topic at length in, for example, Samarin 1972 and 1974). It has been only since the last few years that these views have been criticized: linguistic and sociolinguistic perspectives have introduced entirely new ways of describing, understanding, and appreciating paralanguages.

3.3. The contribution that linguistics and sociolinguistics have made is to insist that we start with the data — that we pay very careful attention to the data: what exactly is produced vocally? (what is its form?); when and how do people put this language to use? and what exactly do they believe they do or say? When we submit ourselves to the discipline of these kinds of questions, we begin to make sense out of what at first strikes us as quite frankly ‘queer’ behavior.

3.4. Pseudo-languages found today among both Protestant and Catholic ‘Pentecostals’ (that is, members of the religious movement called ‘the charismatic renewal’) are so similar to each other that one can talk about a single phenomenon. It is this that I would like to call glossolalia; other phenomena like it I would call glossolalic, that is, similar to or having glossolalia-like characteristics. Christian glossolalia, irrespective of the native languages of the speakers (that is, the glossolalists), is characterized (1) by having a reduced number of consonants and vowels when compared to the languages of speakers, (2) by having a simple syllable structure, and (3) by creating a stream of speech (that is, a discourse) in continually rearranging the fundamental units that emerge in spontaneous behavior (that is, syllables and pseudo-words: e.g., kalika, likaka, tikilaka, kalititi, created by myself at the typewriter).

3.5. Pentecostals in my opinion constitute a kind of ‘speech community’ by virtue of the fact that among them glossolalia is quite uniform. Samples of glossolalia
from different parts of the world look very much alike. Moreover, one finds 'favored' sequences that resemble words. The most common one is something like shunta [s/ë/nt/e/] in various permutations. I conclude that glossolalists learn from each other. The fact that the charismatic renewal, and even early Pentecostalism among Protestants, is a social movement held together by frequent social intercourse easily explains the surprising uniformity in its language. Nonreligious glossolalia is sometimes quite different.

4.0. In this overview of glossolalia my approach has been categorial, taxonomic, and empirical. As a social scientist I want to collect data of a certain type and classify them. The approach is inductive. My research is guided by my wanting to answer the question 'What happens when people create languages (especially those created spontaneously)?' Having arrived at a description of the data for this kind of behavior, I proceed to ask 'Where in normal language does one find the same phenomena?' In answering the last question one must be free of all biases. One must look at early child language, at adult baby talk, at pidgins, at dying languages, at poetry, and so forth.

4.1. It is easy to find ideophonic material in normal language, but almost always in special genres of discourse. Portuguese proverbs and Gbeya (living in the Central African Empire) insults can be cited (for the latter, see Samarin 1969). Gbeya insults use idophones, words that constitute a special subclass of adverbs, but taunts and insults in other languages use poetic devices like rhyme. For the latter, here is an example in Russian, found in Maxim Gorki’s sketch “Nilushka”, about a person by this name — the village idiot. Gorki writes:

[The children would] abuse the idiot, put out there tongues at him, and drawl in a nasal chorus:

‘Nilka, the bottle-neck, the neck without a nape to it.’

Then follows a footnote, probably that of the translator:

Probably the attractiveness of this formula lay rather in the rhyming of the Russian words (“Nilka, butilka, bashka bez zatilka!”) than in their actual meaning (1945:92).

4.2. One could proceed in an entirely different manner. One could start with the different purposes or functions of human vocalizations. Limiting oneself, for example, only to expressive function one could describe the various processes that characterize expressive speech. One would therefore ignore the distinction between language and non-language, among others. On the other hand, taking ‘language play’ as a comprehensive concept, one might compare crypto-languages with pseudo-languages.

4.3. The value of a cross-disciplinary approach to the study of glossolalia and related phenomena is that it demonstrates the continuity between natural language and other phenomena of greater or lesser size. Perhaps what is even more important is that it increases the scope of scholarship, that the boundaries of every discipline are broadened, and finally — and most importantly — that we come closer to a fuller understanding of what it means to be human.
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It is not only what man does but what he believes about what he does that is required of the study of human behavior.

Footnotes


Bibliography

William J. Samarin (born 1926) earned his B.A. and Ph.D. in linguistics and anthropology at the University of California, Berkeley. After serving as missionary-linguist in the Central African Empire (formerly Oubangui-Char) for eight years, he taught linguistics at Hartford Seminary Foundation for seven. He is now Professor of Linguistics at the University of Toronto, where he came in 1968. His career as linguist has been devoted almost entirely to anthropological and socio-linguistics, with Africa, pidgins, and the language of religion as topical specializations. In addition to the study of pidgins and glossolalia, topics which had until recently been ignored by linguists, he has addressed himself, both as a linguist and Africanist, to the study of ideophony, with special reference to African ideophones.