LES FONCTIONS DU DISCOURS GLOSSOLALIQUE

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RÉSUMÉ

La communauté glossolaliste est "bilingue" puisqu'elle emploie alternativement un pseudo-langage et une langue naturelle dans certaines situations. Cette communauté est religieuse, protestante et catholique; et le domaine où s'exerce la glossolalie est toujours religieux. La fonction sociale de la glossolalie est d'indiquer ou d'être un signe d'appartenance au mouvement charismatique. Ses fonctions, à l'intérieur de la communauté, sont celles de la prière (adresse à Dieu) et de la prophétie (adresse de Dieu à l'assemblée). Ces types de discours diffèrent par leur aspect phonologique et prosodique aussi bien que par leur durée. La structure au sens propre du terme est absente du discours glossolalique.

THE FUNCTIONS OF GLOSSOLALIC DISCOURSE

ABSTRACT

The glossolalist community is "bilingual" since pseudolanguage alternates with natural language in certain situations. The community is religious, Protestant and Catholic; and the domain of use is always religious. The social function of glossolalia is that it indicates or is a sign of membership in the charismatic movement. Its functions within the community are those of prayer (speech addressed to God) and prophecy (speech addressed by God to the assembled). These genres of discourse differ phonologically, prosodically, as well as in duration. Structure in the proper sense of the word is absent from all glossolalic discourse.

In studying the functions of language one is continually being obstructed by its most obvious and most pervasive functions. Human beings use language to refer to or talk about experience. The most important features of language are linked to if not determined by this referential function. Man's perception of the universe is reflected in the semantic structures of his languages; the semantic structures are manifested in lexicon and syntax; and phonological systems effect the necessities of the grammatical structures.

It is therefore right that linguistics should concern itself with the intricacies of the inter-related structures of language. The properties of language are worthy subjects for study.
But if we are concerned about fully understanding all of the functions of language we will have to take our attention off the code and look at the code users. In other words, we must situate language in its social context. (This point of view does not assume nor does it require a polarization of research activities. Whereas at a given point in time we, or some of us, may be doing one thing or the other, we will achieve our aim to understand human behavior only by carefully integrating every possible approach.)

If we could set up an experiment where a linguistic community were to engage in speech for no immediate referential purpose, we might gain a perspective that we do not have with communities that use language in the taken-for-granted manner. Such an experiment would at the least throw into focus the non-referential functions of speech, leading perhaps to the identification of vocal phenomena that are usually suppressed or concealed in natural language. On the other hand, we might thereby have to recognize the imperious nature of reference and the derivative nature of all other aspects of language.

Better than experimental communities would be natural ones. This inconceivable combination is provided by a biglottal group of speakers that uses natural language for some functions and pseudolanguage for others. I do not refer to groups that use in-group languages or argots to prevent, among other possible aims, comprehension on the part of outsiders. These are still languages, although frequently if not always pidginized in some degree or other. I refer instead to the users of glossolalia.

Glossolalia is absolutely like language in being used in contexts where natural language would be used. In fact, it is replaceable with the natural language of its users. For these people glossolalia serves as a second language in what might be called a bilingual community.

On the other hand, glossolalia is absolutely unlike language in being entirely devoid of any explicit, structured semantics. From the point of view of linguistics, it is "meaningless" language. Yet it sounds like language. The prosodic features are convincingly language-like. It is only when one looks at the inventory and tactics of both vowels and consonants that one recognizes the inauthentic nature of this pseudolanguage.

The community of speakers I refer to is defined by none of the ways commonly used for this purpose. Its distinguishing feature is religion, a domain of human experience and a domain for language use. The users of glossolalia are co-religionists in the Christian tradition. Until very recently they were almost exclusively Protestant, and within that tradition they were considered to be anomalous, non-orthodox, heterodox, or heretical — depending on one's point of view. The group was called Pentecostal (since early in this century), but since Pentecostalism invaded the traditionally non-Pentecostal Protestant and then Roman Catholic communions (since the 1950s), it is ecumenically referred to as the charismatic movement. It is a movement in the sociological sense.
What characterizes the movement in religious terms is its focus on a quality of religious experience and the means to achieve and live in this state. One is blessed with, among other things, the "gifts of the Spirit". One of these is the ability to speak in "other tongues". Glossolalists, for the most part, believe that they speak in authentic languages unknown to themselves.

For the movement, as it distinguishes itself from the established church, Protestant or Catholic, glossolalia is a sign (and for some groups even a requirement) of membership. "Getting the gift" to speak in tongues can, in some cases, be described as a "rite de passage". One crosses the threshold into communion when one begins to speak in tongues and thereafter by using this gift.

But this group-marking function of glossolalia, where it is an indicator of belonging to a social group, is not the primary concern of this paper. Here we want to identify the ways in which this pseudolanguage is used in speech acts. There are only two principal and acknowledged uses: for praying and for prophesying.

In the Christian tradition praying by definition, is speech addressed to God. The addressee, in this instance, defines the genre. In practice, however, there are different varieties of prayers depending on such factors as the setting, the purpose of the prayer, the role of the one who prays, etc. There are therefore significant differences between cultic prayers, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, personal and private prayers. A benediction, for example, is more "stylized" (its form is more governed by tradition) than an extemporaneous intercessory prayer.

Whatever inventory of prayer types may exist for a particular Christian communion, it is never found fully reproduced in glossolalic form. The more liturgical (or ritual in the anthropological sense) a prayer type is, the less likely will it be expressed in glossolalia. In other words, glossolalic prayers tend to be associated with situations where a person is free to extemporize. Only two types of praying fulfill this requirement: intercession or petition and praise (also known as thanksgiving, adoration, and so forth).

Since the glossolalist community is in a sense bilingual, code switching takes place between speakers and for a given speaker between different discourses and even within the same discourse. Thus, when a group engages in unison praying, some may use natural language and others glossolalia. But when people take turns in a group, natural language may but not necessarily be used by the one whose turn it is while one or more persons use glossolalia in subdued voices. A formal prayer — as when one is expected or is asked to lead the group (at one of the many sequence boundaries in a total religious event) — is always encoded in natural language with or without included bits of glossolalic utterances.

Prophecies contrast with prayers in being addressed to people. They are messages that come from God. Contrary to what the term might suggest, a prophecy need not involve foretelling at all. In fact, prophecies in the charisma-
tic movement are messages of encouragement, admonition, and the like. They are encoded either in natural language or in glossolalia.

Unlike glossolalic prayers, prophecies have to be interpreted. This is a natural-language rendition of the sense of the glossolalic discourse. Since glossolalia has no recoverable semantic base, being "nonsense" in linguistic terms, the interpretation is not in any way a translation. Nor can it be a paraphrase. This is the non-believer's assertion. Charismatic believers, of course, do not question the authenticity of the interpretation: it too comes from God.

Prayers and prophecies in glossolalia tend to be brief discourses. Most of the samples I have been able to examine are less than a minute in length, but some last from two to three minutes. The length of a glossolalic discourse, however, is not a consequence of the psycho-physiological base of the phenomenon. It is clearly a product of the rules that govern the social behavior of glossolalists. Thus, when praying in private, people can go on "for hours". (This is what they report, and even if it is an exaggeration, there is no reason to doubt that a prayer can last at least 30 minutes with, perhaps, some periods of rest.) A prophecy, moreover, is never as long as a sermon. It is more like a short announcement.

Length of discourse is not the only product of social constraints that govern the form and predict the acceptability or appropriateness of a glossolalic act. It is sufficient to say here that a prayer sounds like a prayer and a prophecy sounds like a prophecy according to what the community expects these two genres to sound like. It is the prosodic as well as paralinguistic features that figure most prominently in differentiating them formally. (As one would expect, there are nonvocal differences as well: one is usually standing when prophesying, kneeling or seated when praying, etc.) It would not surprise me at all, however, to find vocalic and consonantal differences between prayers and prophecies even from the same speaker, but I have not had enough data of the right kind to justify making contrastive analyses.

There is a great deal of information that confirms the canons that govern the production of glossolalic discourse. For example, on hearing a tape recording of a prayer in glossolalia non-glossolalists do not find it strange when they have not been forewarned of its nature. It sounds to them very much like something one might encounter somewhere in the world. This is demonstrated in the first of a series of tests in a study that is still in progress. A group of 37 undergraduate university students listened to a two-minute glossolalic prayer, the same that is published on page 77 of Tongues of Men and Angels, and were asked to characterize both the speaker, the "Rev. d'Esprit", and the text in addition to answering a number of questions about the text. Some of the answers are summarized below. The figures indicate actual numbers of persons selecting each of the items presented for choice; they do not necessarily add up to 37.
On a seven-point scale of polar contrasts
1. The speaker was characterized as: humble, calm, sincere, at peace, restrained, concerned; rational, self-confident, decisive.
2. The discourse was characterized as: rationally organized, uniform in style, formal, professional; repetitious, literary, ritual; soothing, reflective.

Answering specific questions (here re-ordered)
3. The audience is unknown to the speaker (15), known, but not very well (12), intimately known (8).
4. The audience is imaginary or not present (13), consists of a large group of people (12), consists of a few people (8).
5. If the discourse is “religious”, it is addressed to human beings real or imagined (12), God or some other high beings (8), the speaker himself (i.e. talking to himself) (4).
6. If the discourse is “religious”, it is a prayer (15), sermon (10), homily (5).
7. The discourse belongs to one of the following genres: narrative (21), poetry (9), dialogue (3).
8. The discourse is wholly memorized (17), partly extemporaneous and partly memorized (8), extemporaneous but based on material previously used by the speaker (5), completely extemporaneous (2).

As for structure, there is very little of it indeed. Apart from the integrity a discourse may have in terms of giving the impression of having a normal beginning and ending, there appears to be no internal structure beyond the breath groups of pseudo-sentences. Even these are often difficult for an analyst to separate from each other. We would of course not expect more than this of glossolalia, since the phonological output is not determined by a semantically organized discourse. But even in natural language lexico-semantic structure is not by necessity systematically or neatly manifested in phonology. (People are generally notoriously bad readers, for example). We must avoid getting the impression, however, that glossolalic discourse is monotonous. It can be (prayers more often than prophecies), but it rarely is.

The glossolalist community has been described in terms of a bilingual one. This was certainly stretching the meaning of bilingualism. One is also entitled to object to calling glossolalist groups speech communities at all, because they do not use glossolalia in interacting in dialogue with each other. The most important fact in a glossolalic speech event is not so much what a human being is saying as where the speech comes from. In every case the glossolalist views himself as a channel for the expression of speech initiated by God. Yet in sociolinguistic terms there is surely a speech community. It exists on the ground that it shares a set of patterns for the use of language (one of whose forms only the outside considers pseudo)language).
With glossolalists we find indeed a group of human beings who use language with a minimum of preoccupation with its referential function. Several million people make this practice a satisfying experience, because they focus on the most superficial and (autobiographically) the most salient features of language. Language teachers as well as teachers of drama will find some useful lessons here.

REFERENCES

1. Although I have made these statements in categorical terms, the fact of the matter is that the language-likeness of glossolalia is gradient. Some glossolalic discourse is more convincing than others. This is as true for the sophisticated linguistic observer as it is for members of the glossolalist groups. See:
   W.J. SAMARIN, Variation and variables in religious glossolalia, 
   *Glossolalia as regressive speech*, *Language and Speech* 16, 1973 pp. 77-89.

2. For an ample discussion of the movement see W.J. SAMARIN, *Tongues of Men and Angels*, Macmillan, New York, 1972. That work also gives more linguistic information than can possibly be given in this brief paper.

3. The relatively small number of glossolalists who are willing to admit that their glossas may not be real languages explain that they are using "expressionist" language: it gives expression to deep-seated, nonrationalized thoughts and emotions.

4. There are other uses, but these are not accepted by the whole believing community. Glossolalia, for example, may be used in exorcism — speech addressed to the Devil or to evil spirits. Whereas this practice is recognized by many, certain private practices of a magical nature would be frowned on.

5. This does not mean that every person in every situation participates as the equal of every other person. There are group-specific constraints on who as well as when one prays in both kinds of "language".

6. Dialogue, of course, is not the only way human beings interact with each other. Glossolalia is definitely a medium of social interaction for Pentecostalists. A social scientific study of these groups that ignores this fact is nothing less than naive and unenlightened.

7. For a discussion of glossolalist attempts to explain how man is a cooperating channel in the production of glossolalia, see: W.J. SAMARIN, Glossolalist folk linguistics, paper presented at the session on "Language and Religion" at the 8th World Congress of Sociology (of the International Sociological Association) sponsored by the Research Committee for Sociolinguistics, Toronto, (to appear).
DISCUSSION

J.C. Hurd, University of Toronto:

We are grateful to Prof. Samarin for his paper. Glossolalia is a fascinating and much misunderstood phenomenon about which there is too little reliable information. In fact, Professor Samarin's book, *Tongues of Men and Angels*, has a dust jacket — for which I do not hold the author responsible — which states that there are only two persons worth reading on this subject: Prof. Samarin and St. Paul. It happens that the New Testament is my field, St. Paul my major interest and *First Corinthians* my special book. I therefore represent St. Paul. There are three points that I would like to touch on.

1. Both in his paper and in his book Prof. Samarin affirms that glossolalia appears to be a solely Christian phenomenon that is only found in groups within the Christian tradition or in contact with that tradition. On the other hand and simultaneously, he says that glossolalia is basically a very simply phenomenon: a simple severance of the connection between the semantic content of language and the phonological production of language. But is it really the case that only Christians are able to do this simple thing and to turn off their intelligence and thereby speak nonsense?

   Historians generally hold that this learned behaviour was learned by first-century Christians from their non-Christian and pre-Christian neighbours. In particular, the Corinthian Christians are usually supposed to have picked up this habit in Paul's absence. Paul then wrote *1 Cor. 12-14* in an attempt to win them away from this non-Christian practice. Actually, I am probably alone among New Testament scholars in holding that it was not an outside influence but Paul himself who started the Corinthian Church on their glossolalie way. He specifically boasts in *1 Cor. 14* that he could speak in tongues better than any of them. Further, although he used every argument that he could think of to persuade the Corinthians to abandon the habit for more profitable pursuits, he stopped short of actually forbidding it. He could not forbid what he himself had begun. But are we to suppose that St. Paul invented glossolalia? To put it in another way, is it not odd that this phenomenon, which is apparently a real possibility for all mankind, is an actual practice only in a rather special Christian community?

2. Professor Samarin notes the widespread conviction among modern glossolalists that they are speaking a foreign language. There are even accounts from earlier days of missionaries travelling to Africa convinced that they could already speak the necessary languages. What surprises me is the difference between this evidence which I accept and Paul's description of glossolalia at Corinth. In *1 Cor. 14* he contrasts speaking in tongues with speaking, as he puts it, "with my right mind." He says that if the Corinthians speak in tongues and outsiders enter, they would jump to the conclusion that the Corinthians were mad. In the famous *1 Cor. 13* he