The Art of Speaking in Tongues

Abbreviated version to be read in fifteen minutes

Introduction

Art is 'speaking in tongues.' It has its idioms, its styles, its forms, its semiotics, and its infinite meanings. Indeed art has been called a language.

Language, on the other hand, is not art. Or is it not? It too has its forms, its structures, and its meaning. Wherever it exists, among whatever people, language is beautiful, not necessarily the way it appears in speech, in langage, but in langue. We linguists are awed by all grammars—that is, by the integration of units of sound with units of meaning, with the infinite well-ordered constructions that characterize the syntax of language. As students learning Latin or one of the modern languages, we did not see this. Nonetheless, grammar, as a linguist unfolds it, is awesome.

It is said that language emerged when homo erectus began to imagine, to plan, to create. If this is so, then language emerged at the same time that human beings began to be artistic—when designs with no practical function were scratched on tools, when drawings were chipped or painted on stone.

Languages were never the same, or even very similar, of course. Typologically, there were, and have always been, entirely different kinds of languages. And each has evolved in its own way.

Nonetheless, Art and Language have not been entirely separate phenomena. The wholeness of our cognitive and affective endowments has led to intersections of these two ways of 'speaking.' Note that as soon as we humans discovered that abstract language could be expressed with or on clay and stone and skin and paper, this novel means of expression—writing—became calligraphic: artistic, in other words. As far back as we can go to find examples of writing, we also find calligraphy—written language that is pleasing. Is there any need on this occasion to even cite the art of writing in a Chinese language, in Japanese, in Arabic, and so forth?

Wherever language can take form in sound or sight, we see this intersection of art and language. For just one more example, we might mention the visual aspects of printed poetry.

This, then, is my introduction to what I have time to say now about
the linguistic phenomenon called *speaking in tongues* or *glossolalia*. It
does not refer to every kind of vocal articulation—and even the sounds in
nature—that have been 'language' of some kind. We are considering only a
certain kind of pseudolanguage that we have been able to study
linguistically thanks to tape-recording. It is here that we find the expression
of an aesthetic sensibility: art, if you want.

**Tongues in the New Testament**

The phrase ‘Speak in tongues’ is based on three passages in the New
Testament as found in the Protestant translation in English of 1611, in which
*tongues* renders the word *glōssa* in Koine or Common Greek for both
'tongue' of one's mouth and 'language.'

This is not the place to engage in a textual and theological argument
about the nature of *tongues* at the beginning of the Christian era, but it must
be noted that real ethnic languages were said to have been used by the
apostles on one occasion in speaking to a linguistically diverse audience on
the Day of Pentecost after the resurrection. It was recognized, naturally, as a
miracle. This alleged phenomenon should be distinguished from glossolalia
by the term *xenoglossia*—the ability to speak a natural language without
having learned it somehow. Some Christians still believe that it occurs from
time to time in religious contexts. In profane circumstances it is considered
paranormal, not God-given.

*Glossolalia*, on the other hand, which should be understood as
incomprehensible and unidentified language-like speech, occurred at
religious meetings in Corinth in the first century of the Christian era. This
was such a disturbing phenomenon in the Christian community, that the
missionary Paul felt obliged to give some advice in one of his letters. This
was *glossolalia*, not *xenoglossia*. This was a divine gift, Paul taught, and it
was important that the meaning of the utterance be discovered.

The Corinthian speech events of *speaking in tongues* have been
explained as having an origin in cults in which participants sought ecstatic,
out-of-this-world (that is, dissociative or altered) states of being. Obviously,
these are not explanations but speculations.

**Subsequent history**

Very little is known—but much speculated—of the subsequent
history of the occurrence and distribution of the use of 'unknown' languages
in Christian communities. There are, however, some reports of what might
be called *gibberish* among fringe groups of Christians, and in some cases it
may have been concurrent with dissociation, but there has been no uninterrupted tradition of charismatic religion in canonical and popular Christianity. People may have produced anything in a rather wide range of verbal (or just oral) incomprehensible utterances without having produced pseudolanguage of the recent kind.

**Tongues and the Pentecostal and neo-Pentecostal movements**

Speaking in tongues did not emerge as behavior of religious significance until it was associated among Protestants at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries, when fundamentalists promoted the dogma that believers should seek a ‘second blessing,’ an advanced stage in one’s Christian maturity when one was ‘filled with the Holy Spirit’ and received power and grace. It was also taught that speaking in tongues was the experiential and requisite evidence of this experience. Naturally, when glossolalia spread with the charismatic movement among other Protestants and then Roman and Orthodox Catholics, a different significance was attributed to it. Although many of the millions of glossolalists believed that they were speaking in real languages, other neocharismatics, considered their tongues to be divine gifts, although not understood, for personal use in private worship, praise, and intercession. Some glossolalists believe that they are using an “expressive language.” Here there certainly is evidence of an aesthetic sensibility.

It was not until the rise in the 1960s of the neo-Pentecostal (or charismatic) movement in the United States that we can attest empirically to a single phenomenon that could be studied as one would any language of the world, thanks to the availability of tape-recorders.

**Tongues as a linguistic phenomenon**

Glossolalia is, from a linguistic point of view, pseudolanguage, even though it sounds like language on first hearing. But an examination of tape-recorded samples reveals that all glossolalic discourse is exotic (a) in consisting mostly or entirely of open syllables of the shape Consonant + Vowel, (b) in having a limited number of consonants and vowels, which are (c) almost always sounds borrowed from the speaker’s native language. These characteristics of glossolalia make it possible for a person to improvise something that resembles language in superficial ways. Everyone who has acquired a language, according to this argument, can speak in tongues.

Here is one sample, simplified of phonetic details typical of standard
North American English; pauses, marked by a comma, are real. What is aesthetically noteworthy is the fact that the lax central vowel found in unstressed syllables does not occur: in other words, there is no [θ], just [ɑ].

kolamasiando, labókato horiamási, lamosiándo, labókata handória

There are here ten consonants—b, d, k, t, l, m, n, s, h, and r—and three vowels: a, o, and i. With this inventory the possible sequences of Consonant + Vowel are numerous and the sequences of syllables almost infinite. Even word-like units could be created with these strings of syllables, as here: labo / lamo and kato / kata.

Glossolalia is similar to certain kinds of vocalizations that appear in English and other languages, as in song, play, spells, chants, etc. Thus, abracadabra (or abra ka dabra) is glossolalic in nature, easily becoming the source of kábrá dábrá kakáda brakáda adaká .... And this doesn't sound like English even though all the sounds are from English.

Learning to speak in tongues

I do not believe, and it has not been demonstrated, that there are independent variables that are the causes of or requisite for glossolalia. For example, glossolalia is not an effect of an altered state of consciousness (dissociation, trance, etc.). One can speak in tongues in a normal state, and everyone is cognitively, linguistically able to do so. I could do so on this occasion. Let’s see ...

Glossolalia is so much like ordinary language that people learn some things from each other, unconsciously adopting bits of what they hear. In consequence, a group of people who gather frequently for prayer, some of which is in tongues, can develop its own ‘dialect.’ There are even features that characterize the tongues of the charismatic movement internationally, like the word shendə.

Tongues defined

Glossolalia, now, can be narrowly defined as a vocal act believed by the speaker to be language and showing rudimentary language-like structure but no consistent word-meaning correspondences recognizable by either speaker or hearers, attributed in Christianity to the Holy Spirit (the human being just a channel of communication). Although a wide range of speech that is not typical of human language is found in different cultures, contemporary glossolalia is different.