

Singing in Tongues

Karen Stollznow takes a “hands-on” approach to investigating glossolalia.

During a “faith healing” session at a Charismatic church in Sydney, I was not healed.

The parishioners encircled me, laid their hands upon me, and ordered me to stop thinking “impure thoughts”. The female Minister signed a cross on my forehead with sweet-scented oil, and prayed. The group began uttering unfamiliar “language”... they were speaking in tongues.

Pressing her hand firmly against my forehead, the Minister declared: “The holy spirit flows through you... now!”

Nothing happened.

In disbelief, the entire performance suddenly ceased. Take two. The Minister’s prayers resumed, and the speaking in tongues grew more fervent.

“The holy spirit flows through you... NOW!”

I fell backwards, filled with the holy spirit of the Minister’s fist!

Glossolalia, better known as speaking in tongues, is the production of incomprehensible utterances. This is a seemingly spontaneous, uncontrollable stream of language-like sounds. In trying to unscramble the sounds to unearth a signal among the noise, you might be forgiven for thinking that the speaker has code-switched into a foreign language.

Xenoglossia is a specific type of speaking in tongues where a subject supposedly breaks out into a foreign language, an alien language, or an ancient, dead, lost, unknown-to-any-linguist kind of language.

They didn’t learn this one though Berlitz. These “languages” are allegedly unknown to the speakers. They simply enter into a trance and channel the speech, merely acting as a conduit for any “messages”.

Speaking in tongues is an ancient

practice. As in my anecdote above, it is still practised today. Usually occurring in the context of a religious ceremony, individuals are “possessed” by the “holy spirit” during healing and devotion.

It is not a feature of all Christian denominations, but is a particular ritual of the Pentecostal and Charismatic churches (based in Acts 2:4). In this context, “giving a tongue” to the congregation is conveying a “message from God”.

Recently I encountered an example of “singing in tongues”. I was contacted by Mike, a musician from punk band The Knights of the New Crusade. Mike sent me a copy of *A Challenge to the Cowards of Christendom*, and asked me to analyse the song *Knight Beat: Speaking in the Holy Spirit*. In Mike’s own words, this is an “end of session ‘jam’ where I started speaking in tongues (or scattin, in secular terminology)”. Had Mike stumbled across the simple explanation with this admission?

This is a loud, fast-paced punk song with rapid-fire vocals. Like a mild hysteria, the glossolalia exhibits paralinguistic factors, such as raised pitch, and increased volume and speed. There are also linguistic factors, whereby the glossolalia initially appears to resemble words and continuous speech. However, it is completely lacking in structure, meaning and grammar.

I analysed the song using a sound editor. I played it forwards and backwards, trying to isolate any recognisable words. Although the “lyrics” were mostly gibberish, the mind searches for patterns and I swore I could hear “mosquito”, “Bora Bora” and “Boutros Boutros-Ghali”.

This highlights some interesting aspects of repetition and sound combi-

nations in glossolalia. Examples typically exhibit reorganised syllables and groups of sounds found in the languages spoken by or familiar to the speaker. Like a Lewis Carroll nonsense word, speaking in tongues produces “wrong” but “possible” words. However, glossolaliacs are not as creative as Carroll and his slithy toves. There is a great deal of duplication.

As a mini-experiment, try reciting a large series of numbers haphazardly, or try to speak in tongues by producing rapid, random speech. Chances are you will produce some sequencing and repetition. These factors support the idea that glossolalia is conscious, artificial behaviour, although it is not necessarily deception.

The cover may already be blown. In 2006 a research team led by Andrew Newberg of the University of Pennsylvania conducted a neuroimaging study to examine cerebral activity during glossolalia. In brief, the researchers found that, when someone speaks in tongues, the emotion centres of the brain show an increase in activity while the language centres show a reduction in activity.

This suggests that glossolalia is passionate, stream-of-consciousness babble, not language. The research also makes the important observation that glossolalia is expected behaviour in some religious groups.

We can think of speaking in tongues as inspired babbling, prattling, word-imitating, scattin improvisation. Meaning is the interpretation of the faithful. It is language-like, but it is not language.

In my estimation, *Knight Beat: Speaking in the Holy Spirit* is just a jam session. While great for crowd surfing and moshing, the song is as much a message from the Holy Spirit as Gene Vincent’s Be-Bop-A-Lula or Cab Calloway’s Hi-de-hi-de-hi-di-hi!

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