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Prijediplomski studij engleskog jezika i književnosti i njemačkog jezika i književnosti

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Abstract

Since the beginning of their existence humans have used systems of symbols in order to communicate with one another. This system is often referred to as “language” and can be manifested in many ways, as it includes both verbal and sign language. Most linguists agree that the ultimate goal of language is communication. This intentionality is what distinguishes it from other, more aimless sounds one can produce, like coughing or yawning. However, glossolalia is a phenomenon which calls this idea into question, since it is a way of speaking in language-like sounds, often for the purpose of religious rituals. Many linguists have debated if this could be considered genuine language, since it contains no syntactic or semantic properties, although having pragmatic use. This paper aims to examine the use, history, and characterization of glossolalia in linguistic circles, its role in religion and its differences from other linguistic phenomena.

Key words: glossolalia, speaking in tongues, religious rituals, Christianity, linguistics

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1. Introduction

Glossolalia is a linguistic phenomenon of speaking in an “unknown” language. It is more commonly referred to as “speaking in tongues” because of its religious origins and current use which is often based in religious practices. It is interesting to note that glossolalia is never described as an utterance of legitimate languages, but rather as “speaking in tongues,” defined as speaking in an unknown language during religious worship, which gives it a more metaphysical connotation. As much as it is considered a linguistic phenomenon, it is additionally seen as a psychological and sociological one, questioning the mental space of those who manage to produce it and examining its place in society and history.

The first part of this paper will be inspecting the history of glossolalia, while the second part will be more focused on the psychological aspects of glossolalia i.e., how it is produced, what the cognitive mechanisms of it are and how it psychologically affects the speaker who engages in it. The third part on the other hand, will be focusing on glossolalia as a linguistic phenomenon, exploring the ways in which it is represented in the field of linguistics and commented on by linguists, as well as its language-like characteristics.

The fourth part will be delving into its origins in religion and how it manifests in both Christian and Non-Christian circles and their rituals, while the final and fifth part will be distinguishing glossolalia from similar linguistic phenomena such as xenolalia, which describes the ability to speak a language that is not yet learned by the speaker.

2. History of Glossolalia

In its etymological origin, glossolalia comes from Greek, *glossa* meaning “tongue” and *lalien* meaning “talking.” In Ancient Greece, tongue speaking is mostly viewed as speaking a divine and almost esoteric or angelic language that is spoken with the Gods. For the same reason, the practice was known to happen in Ancient Egypt where mummies would be buried with a golden tongue, helping them speak to the God Osiris in the afterlife.¹

The inspiration for the current iteration of glossolalia, however, comes from the Bible, particularly the New Testament. As a concept, speaking in tongues is said to be mentioned in the New Testament four times, although that specific number may be disputed depending on which version of the Bible the believer approves of. This paper will be using the International Version in which speaking in tongues is mentioned most prominently regarding the Pentecost, the fiftieth day after Christ’s resurrection and the day that The Holy Spirit descended onto the Apostles. The Holy Spirit blesses the Apostles with spiritual gifts, one on which being the ability to speak in tongues:

When the day of Pentecost came, they were all together in one place. Suddenly a sound like the blowing of a violent wind came from heaven and filled the whole house where they were sitting. They saw what seemed to be tongues of fire that separated and came to rest on each of them. All of them were filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues as the Spirit enabled them. (Acts 1-4, *New International Version*).

This quotation, however, does not refer to glossolalia specifically, but to speaking in other languages that were unknown to the speaker before. The task of the Apostles is in many ways, the spreading of Christ’s teachings, something that was made easier by the Holy Spirit who gifted them the ability to speak many languages of the time so that foreign cultures who speak foreign languages could understand them and be reached by his word.

In the Bible itself, it was never clear what was meant by *speaking in tongues*. Today it is synonymous with glossolalia because of the groups that practice it, however it is not explained in the text what exactly speaking in tongues entails. One could argue that it more resembles *xenolalia*,

¹ <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-55902631>

an utterance of a language that is not yet learned. Speaking Aramaic for example, the original language of the Bible without having knowledge of it previous could be considered xenolalia. However, most Pentecostals and by extension Charismatic Christians view speaking in tongues as speaking “Angelic” languages, incomprehensible to the modern human.²

The more specific references to glossolalia come in the Book of Corinthians:” For anyone who speaks in a tongue does not speak to people but to God. Indeed, no one understands them; they are utter mysteries by spirit.” (Corinthians 14:2, *New International Version*).

Through the Middle Ages up until Baroque, speaking in tongues was rarely practiced by Christians, neither the Catholic nor the Orthodox Church were known to regularly engage in it. Some individual missionaries were known to speak in languages unknown to their subjects, however it was never confirmed whether these are other, already existing languages or a genuine glossolalic utterance. Although, it was also thought to sometimes be practiced during the performance of exorcisms in the Catholic Church. (De Saussure, 2013:70).

The wave of interest for and the production of glossolalia significantly increased in the nineteenth century, with the arrival of Pentecostal Christianity which initially popularized it and sparked interest of linguists and psychologists set to study it. (Ibid). In the twentieth century, glossolalia has come to be associated with both Pentecostal and charismatic services, a relationship which this paper will further analyze in a later section.

3. Psychological Aspects of Glossolalia

Language has always had its roots in the cognitive space of humans. In many ways, it has served the purpose of a kind of “channel” between the psychological world in which it is produced, and

² <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-the-charismatic-movement.html>

the sociological world to which it is directed. For centuries, it has been the most effective way of expressing oneself, being able to describe one's feelings in the most concrete and detailed ways that paraverbal signifiers like intonation of speech and non-verbal signifiers i.e. body language is unable to reach. However, the psychological mechanisms of speech, only understandable to the speaker and completely unintelligible to the interlocutor, are more complex.

Principle investigator Andrew Newberg, who is an Associate Professor of Radiology, Psychiatry, and Religious Studies, and Director for the Center for Spirituality and the Mind at Penn University and his team of co-researchers of Nancy A. Wintering, Donna Morgan and Mark R. Waldman have done a study regarding glossolalia by using neuroimaging, a technique which scans the nervous system often applying magnetic resonance imaging. By using this method, the researchers compared the activity of the brain when one speaks regular language and compared it to brain activity during glossolalia. The results of the research have found crucial differences between glossolalic and non-glossolalic language. When speaking in tongues, the participants had an increased activity in thalamus, the sensory part of the brain. This is a reasonable assertion, seeing that people who engage in glossolalic language often exhibit a wide range of affective emotions accompanied by crying, yelling and euphoric mumbling. However, the activity in left basal ganglia, the area responsible for motor skills and willing corporal movements, is shown to be decreased. This posits the idea that the participants were not - or rather – did not believe themselves to be capable of self-control. The utterance of glossolalic language is, from the participant's point of view, involuntary, since all of them believed to be under the possession of a supernatural being when producing it. (Newberg et al., 67-71: 2006).

Furthermore, early researchers of glossolalia such as George Barton Cutten who published a book about the phenomenon named *Speaking with Tongues, Historically and Psychologically Considered*, believed in its connection with psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, the assumption possibly coming from the trance-like state that the speakers enter while producing incoherent speech, a characteristic often associated with schizophrenia. (Cutten, 1927). At the time,

glossolalia was a new and rare phenomenon restricted to enclosed religious communities, and as such, attracted many assumptions on its nature.

However, later scholars have written that there seems to be no connection between the glossolalia and schizophrenia. The research conducted by Hungarian psychiatrists Szabolcs Kéri, Imre Kállai, and Katalin Csigó for The National Library of Medicine puts a group of schizophrenic patients and glossolalic speakers through a number of psychological tests and compares the results which show no correlation between psychosis and glossolalia. The only characteristic they share is scoring highly on the hypermentalization factor on one test, which describes the overanalysis and over-attribution of - often negative - mental states to other people. This may include ascribing bad intentions to someone while lacking proof of the same. Contrastingly, while glossolalics maintain their high hypermentalization score on most of the tests, schizophrenic patients acquired the opposite results and scored high on the hypomentalization front, which means under-interpreting and misunderstanding social interactions. (Kéri et al., 2020). The crucial difference between the two is that schizophrenia is completely involuntary while glossolalia is only believed to be involuntary by those who speak it and many outside the circle claim it is a learned behavior.

Although the connection between glossolalia and psychopathology has long been disproven, the correlation between glossolalia and certain personality types is still a matter of debate. For example, in his article: “Psychological Interpretations of Glossolalia: A Reexamination of Research,” James T. Richardson comments on the earlier works regarding the phenomenon and its connection to personality and posits that many linguists of the time thought that people who practiced it were “submissive, suggestible, and dependent on authority figures” as well as having a higher “receptivity to trance.” (Richardson, 1973). This idea was never disproven because people in smaller religious communities do demonstrably have more respect for their own local authority and do show a distrust of outsiders. A group of professors at the Chappel Hill university of North Carolina led by Casandra R. Davis wrote about this phenomenon, focusing on smaller rural communities in the southeastern United States concluding that the reason why those communities seem to be less welcoming to outsiders and stick to themselves is because they believe themselves to be the victims of a larger, cosmopolitan society that is more powerful than them and attacks against them by outsiders to be politically motivated. (Davis et al., 2022).

4. Glossolalia as a Linguistical Phenomenon

Glossolalia and its place in linguistics is often disputed with some claiming that it is pure gibberish i.e., meaningless and unintelligible speech, and others attributing their perceived meaning to the phenomenon. The one indisputable conclusion however is that glossolalia is not and cannot be described as a language.

To be considered a legitimate language, one must fulfill a set of criteria, Hockett's thirteen characteristics of language being one of the more popular ones. Glossolalia inarguably fails at several of those criteria, starting with *semantics*, referring to the meaning of words. (Hockett, 1960). The only meaning that it carries is understood solely by the speaker and from their perspective, by the metaphysical being they claim to be speaking to. Regarding interpersonal communication, glossolalia nevertheless remains an impossible intermediary.

In the syntactic and morphological sense, Hockett lays out the *duality of patterning*, meaning that smaller meaningless phonemes make up meaningful units i.e. words, and *discreteness*, meaning that the languages follow some kind of rules as to how they are produced. (Ibid). Glossolalia does not meet either of those criteria. Languages make coherent sentences out of words who have a correlation with one another and give each other meaning and structure. The sounds uttered in glossolalia not only can they not be considered sentences, but it is also questionable whether they can even be considered words. By their definition, words require a lexical or grammatical role, something this phenomenon lacks. The most correct interpretation seems to be that it is a rhythmic utterance of phonemes or production of syllables. William J. Samarin, who has written on the linguistic properties of glossolalia defines it as "meaningless but phonologically structured human utterance, believed by the speaker to be a real language but bearing no systematic resemblance to any natural language, living or dead." (Samarin, 1968:51).

Unlike the first two factors, glossolalia at least meets the *vocal-auditory channel* factor, having pronounceable units that when spoken, sounding language-like and the producer using the auditory channel, his utterances being directed to the listener. (Hockett, 1960). Though the speech is primarily directed at God, not a human, meaning that the listener in this scenario exists only in the

mind of the speaker, it is still directed and purposeful, nonetheless. Furthermore, glossolalia does sound like a language which is important in Hockett's criteria because it differentiates itself from animal sounds. (Ibid). Samarin explains in his later article that in a phonetic sense, speaking in tongues resembles a language because of a few different points of reference. Firstly, syllables contain a consonant onset that is never plurisegmental, meaning that it has more than one segment. Secondly, the stretches of speech between non-final pauses are of equal duration: fulfilling the role of a comma, and the stretches of speech between final pauses – often signifying “sentences” - are of equal duration as well, fulfilling the role of a full stop. Thirdly, the paused groups always begin with a stressed syllable while the intonation is rising and falling, meaning it contains stressed and non-stressed syllables resembling a regular language. Lastly, phonological patterns are stereotyped for each group of tongue speakers. (Samarin, 1973:86).

These phonological patterns are what one could describe as “glossolalic accents.” Although the phenomena similar to glossolalia has appeared all around the world as it will be elaborated on in later chapters, the modern concept comes from current production of it in Pentecostal Christianity where the “accent” is the biggest common denominator. What this means is that a speaker who engages in glossolalia carries phonemes from their native language. In America, the speakers never utter sounds that are untypical of English. This is often used as a criticism of glossolalia because it is on one hand believed to possess metaphysical properties in the ability to speak a sacred language which is understood only by supernatural beings, but on the other hand this sacred language - apparently spoken on the other side of the world - coincidentally contains the same phonemes, accent and intonation as the speakers' native language. (De Peza, 1996).

This is not to say however that glossolalia does not have its pragmatic uses, namely in its role of connecting people in tongue-speaking communities. Although it cannot serve as legitimate communication of information, it can serve as a legitimate communication of emotions. When performing it, the speaker is seen in a wide range of emotions which are transmitted and shared by every member of the community, coming together in communal sorrow and ecstasy. On an individual level, glossolalia is beneficial for the speaker, the experience being always connected with the feeling of euphoria, relaxation and altered state of consciousness. (Koić et al., 2004).

5. Glossolalia and the Christianity

Glossolalia has had a complicated relationship with Christianity as a whole, with some thinking it is a magical, almost supernatural gift and other detesting it, even calling it heretic. On the point of speaking in tongues and spiritual gifts, there are many disagreements between Christian groups, but the main divide is between the *glossolalists* and the *cessetionists*.

Glossolalists believe in a “continuationist” view of spiritual gifts that the Holy Spirit gifted the Apostoles on the Pentecost, namely the gifts of tongues, prophecy, and healing, and that they can still be acquired today. In their view, speaking in tongues as a way of speaking to God is something that is still relevant and should be practiced. They consider both glossolalia and xenolalia as ways one could channel the Holy Spirit and talk to the Holy Father, as it is the heavenly language. Glossolalists include the Catholic Apostolic Church, the Pentecostal Church, early Mormonism and a lot of modern Charismatic Churches. On the other hand, the cessationist view promotes the idea that spiritual gifts were received and practiced only by the Apostoles, meaning that they ceased to exist after the early Christian Era. There are four main groups of cessetionists according to South African theologian Kelebogile Te Resane. The first are full cessationists who believe that the gifts ended with the first generation of the Apostoles and they serve no ecclesiastical use today. The second group are concentric cessationists who posit that the gifts cannot be practiced inside of current Christendom, however, miracles can happen in unevangelised places. The third group are the classical cessationists who believe that the gifts can only be accessed by humans through interaction with God, who is the only one with the authority to practice them. The last group called the consistent cessationists and view the spiritual gifts as only necessary for the first generation of Apostoles but have no use currently. (Resane, 2022:2).

The Christian canon itself seems to have a conflicting view of glossolalia as well. Although the basis of the practice comes from the Bible and its text concerning the Pentecost, there are additional lines which seem to go against it. For example, Paul the Apostle explicitly warns against the usage of it saying: “So if the whole Church comes together, and everyone speaks in tongues, and inquirers or unbelievers come in, will they not say that you are out of your mind?” (Corinthians 14:27-28,

New International Version). This is meant as a warning to future missionaries to refrain from tongue speaking as to not scare future converts.

In Paul's view, the language of God should be clear and precise, easy to spread, not incoherent and mythical. Even Christ himself once states: "When you pray, do not go babbling like pagans, for they think they will be heard because of their many words." (Matthew 6:7-8, *New International Version*).

In his article "Glossolalia in the Apostolic Church," Ira Jay Martin expands on the interpretation of Paul's comments on glossolalia, stating that he saw it as a threat to genuine Christian expression, and a "glorification of ecstatic speech above all other above all other manifestations of the Spirit." (Martin, 1944:130). She goes on to explain that it loses itself in the vanity of ecstasy, but forgets the edification of other, of spreading real, Christian love. She states: ". He drastically checked the tendency to substitute ecstasy and uncontrollable orgiastic expressions for joy, peace, long-suffering, and above all love, as the standard of Christian life." (Martin, 1944:130).

The idea of achieving the power of directly communicating with God is appealing to a lot of people and one could argue that as much as glossolalia is incoherent and unappealing to the masses who might question the sanity of the speaker, it is also attractive to others who are seeking a more direct relationship with God. In the same article, Martin goes over some enticing qualities of it that contributed to the early rise of the Apostolic Church. She states that: "Converts, expecting some great revelation were overcome at Pentecost by a soul-stirring experience; a number of them broke fourth spontaneously, into ecstatic speech. Peter attributed this experience to the action of the Holy Spirit, and it was accepted as evidence of spirit possession, a manifestation of the inflowing Divine Spirit." (Martin, 1944: 129-130).

5.1.Glossolalia and Pentecostal Christianity

Pentecostalism as a movement started relatively recently, at the very beginning of the twentieth century with its roots directly connected with glossolalia. According to Pew Research Center, its beginnings can be traced to Topeka, Kansas, 1901, when a student Agnes Ozman received the gift

of tongues during a prayer meeting. She was heard by William J. Seymour, an African American Pentecostal preacher and one of the founders of the modern Pentecostal movement, who could not enter the room because of his race. The movement truly gained popularity though when Seymour was visiting Los Angeles five years later and heard Edward Lee speaking in tongues. Shortly after, Seymour was also gifted with the same ability, and newspapers started writing about “weird babbling of tongues.” (Pew Research Center, 2006).³

Kelebogile Resane further explains Pentecostalist beliefs, which include not only practicing glossolalia but also the belief in prophecy and healing, which are also gifts the Apostles received during the Pentecost. This means that they belong into the continuationist camp, viewing speaking in tongues, prophecy, and healing as something that could be practiced today. They affirm God as a Holy Trinity, they practice missionary work and evangelizing and emphasize Christ as the only true way to salvation. (Resane, 2022:4).

Assemblies of God, a Pentecostal denomination, explains their views in a 1961 statement that was retrieved in 2006. They believe in “spirit baptism,” meaning that the reception of the gifts is Baptism in itself and the “three works of grace.” The first work of grace is conversion and salvation through Christ’s blood on the cross, available to any believer. The second is called “sanctification,” meaning that the believer has the ability to “sanctify” themselves through the promise of avoiding sin. The third work of grace is the baptism of the Holy Spirit which gives the believer spiritual gifts or “chrisms,” which includes glossolalia, meaning that one is able to engage in glossolalic practices after receiving the baptism.⁴

³ <https://www.pewresearch.org/religion/2006/04/12/the-new-face-of-global-christianity-the-emergence-of-progressive-pentecostalism/#:~:text=Where%20did%20pentecostalism%20actually%20start,Fox%20Parham's%20Bethel%20Bible%20College>

⁴ <https://ag.org/Beliefs/Statement-of-Fundamental-Truths#7>

5.2. Glossolalia and Charismatic Christianity

Starting in the 1960s, the charismatic movement started gaining traction. It is by many considered to be the spiritual successor of the Pentecostalism, in the way it emphasizes the work of the Holy Spirit and his gifts. It started in 1960, when in an episcopal church, Rector Dennis Bennet started to speak in tongues and claimed that it was the Holy Spirit working through him. Although he was resigned from the church, he started a new movement, called “The Charismatic Movement.”

The name comes from the word “Charisma” or “Chrism,” meaning a spiritual gift directly ordained by God. Similar to the Pentecostals they highlight the importance of the Holy Spirit and its miracles, although being more Christocentric in their message, focusing not on the Trinity as a whole, but on Christ being the only path to salvation which one could only reach by accepting the Holy Spirit inside of themselves. As John V. McHale writes in his 1975 article: “The Charismatic Renewal Movement”: “It is **T**hrough the Spirit that people are joined in a personal relationship with the risen Christ.” (McHale, 1975:260). The main difference between the Charismatics and the Pentecostals is that Pentecostals have a more cohesive, hierarchical structure while Charismatic Christianity is more of a movement, a large tent of churches that adhere to charismatic principles with no hierarchy of structure.⁵

Glossolalia is included in charismatic places of worship, where they perform the spiritual gifts in unison. Tongue speaking is often accompanied by appropriate music, hand lifting, the pastor often joining in on the glossolalic utterances while intense emotions represented by the tears of ecstasy come out of the performers. It is more of a spiritual and emotional experience than a concise worshipping session seen in most churches, and it lacks structure much like the movement itself does. As McHale put it: “The emphasis is very much on praise and joy, those present pray (aloud and privately), share scripture readings and experiences, join together in song and hymn and put their intercessions before the Lord. There is no fixed pattern of procedure.” (McHale, 1975:264).

⁵ <https://www.christianity.com/wiki/christian-terms/what-is-the-charismatic-movement.html>

6. Glossolalia-like Phenomena and Non-Christian Traditions

While most of this paper has been focused on Christianity's relationship with glossolalia, it is also worth noting that other religions and traditions have practiced similar phenomena throughout history. These cultures include but are not limited to North American Indians, Haitian Indians, Shamans in both Sudan and India, Arctic Inuit Cultures, Dykas of Borneo, and the Tibetan Monks. (Koić, 2005:373).

One of the non-religious manifestations of glossolalia is exemplified by the Spiritualist movement started in Geneva in 1892, by a woman called Heléne Smith who gave rise to vocal, verboauditive, and graphic automatisms. She would regularly drop to a trance-like state and speak and transcribe an unintelligible language. She would later name it the "Martian language" and later linguists confirmed the grammatic similarities with French, her first language. (May, 1956:76).

Spirit languages are a similar phenomenon mostly practiced in Arctic, Inuit cultures. Spirit languages are the language of nature i.e., the language of the rushing wind, the trickling water, sniffing of a walrus or growling of a bear. The Shaman is expected to learn the entire language of nature during his trance. The production of it occurs during divinatory and curing ceremonies. (May, 1956:79).

Sacerdotal languages are those that make use of the obsolete, archaic words, only understood by the spiritual leaders of the communities that practice them. For example, in the Dyak culture in Indonesia, the Medicine Man or the *manang*, chants a song in an obsolete language, that the priest also utilizes in his speech. The *manang* additionally produces a more monotonous chant called *timong*, which mixes archaic and disused words. Although it is unintelligible to the most laymen, some claim that they could understand it and those that can, required additional learning and training. (May, 1956:80).

The interpretation of tongues or *ermeneglossia*, is a practice common in shamanic traditions of Hokkaido, Japan's most northern island. During healing practices, the sorcerer, usually a woman,

hypnotizes her patient and puts them in a trance. In this state, the patient starts babbling as if possessed by a spirit, and the sorcerer interprets and translates what is being said, believing that what is being transcribed is helping her diagnose the patient. (May, 1956:87).

An interesting example of both ermeneglossia and glossolalia comes from the Nyabinghi Cult in Rwanda, where a patient presents themselves to a witch doctor, who enters a state like trance and starts uncontrollably rolling on the ground and uttering unintelligible speech which is immediately interpreted by the priest standing beside her. The priest then diagnoses the patient from his interpretation. (May, 1956:88).

Glossolalic utterances are sometimes combined with animal sounds, making what is called the *language of animals*. This is common in the indigenous Siberian population, where the practitioner mimics the sounds of birds, mammals, and other natural phenomena to prove that he can transform himself into a non-human being that can roam freely among the cosmic zones of earth, hell, and heaven. (May, 1956:81).

Sometimes, words from different languages are combined with xenolalic utterances to create the communication between human and God. In Haitian Voodoo rituals, the performer serves as a medium between the human and celestial world by communicating in a language that the followers call *langage*. It is believed to be an imitation of some African speech with some Spanish, African and Indian words interspersed with xenolalia. The priest engaging in it does not know what the words mean, the only one that knows is believed to be the deity of Loa, that the priest is stepping in contact with. (ibid.).

All in all, as it was discussed in the historical section of this paper, glossolalia and similar phenomena were practiced for a long time in non-Christian traditions, starting with the necromancers in Egypt. The practice gained traction in diverse cultures all over the world, in parts of Asia, Africa, across the Arctic, and in many indigenous groups. While in Haiti, much like in Christianity, it is utilized as communication to a deity, in other traditions it is used as a healing medium.

7. The differences between glossolalia and xenolalia/xenoglossia

Xenolalia, more commonly known as *xenoglossia*, is a remarkably similar phenomenon to glossolalia, in that it involves the utterance of an unintelligible language. However, while glossolalia is mostly defined by it being spontaneously invented by the speaker and associated with Christian practices, xenolalia, which literally translates to “the speech of foreign tongues,” sometimes refers to an utterance of a language not yet learned.⁶

Pragmatically, these two lexical units are often used interchangeably, even when referring to Christianity, since it is never quite clear if in the gift of tongues describes spontaneous, glossolalic entrancements or the speech of foreign or extinct tongues which were previously unintelligible to the Apostles. In earlier history, xenoglossia was thought to be the sudden ability to speak and understand all languages of the world, meaning that it referred to already existing languages. Exemplary is the situation from the fourth century, when Pachomius, an early Christian saint, heard of Egyptian monks being able to speak all languages of the world and asked God to give him the same ability. It is said that a written document suddenly appeared in his hand, and after reading it, he could understand every language. (Gumerlock, 2004).

Xenoglossia, unlike glossolalia, is often not related to religion but to “miracles.” People have reported speaking new languages after having an accident, being comatose, having a drug-induced trip, or a natural out-of-body experience. Interesting is the case of Samuel Sandweiss, an ex-psychiatrist who was treating a mentally ill, Christian patient who, prior to the visit, has suffered episodes of headaches, depression, anxiety, seizures and panic attacks after which he had a sudden knowledge of Sanskrit, a language he was not familiar with before the episodes. It was later labeled as a natural out-of-body experience, as he wasn’t under the influence of artificial stimulants during it. (Sellers, 2021).

⁶ <https://encyclopedia.pub/entry/37445>

The crucial difference between the two phenomena is that xenoglossia can refer to already existing and intelligible, translatable languages, while glossolalia claims to only be intelligible either to the speaker or the supernatural entity it is directed towards. Another divergence is the fact that glossolalia is almost exclusively associated with religion, while xenolalia is a broader term that can be connected to religious rituals, but can also be linked to other, non-religious causes.

8. Conclusion

Glossolalia is a long-standing linguistic, social, and psychological phenomenon that has only started to be explored relatively recently. Although starting with ancient cultures, like that of Egypt, it was later spread to the Western world by the biblical text, in which it is named as one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit to the Apostles. Glossolalia as the gift of tongues has for a long time divided different Christian groups, with some seeing it as borderline heretic, and others as a valid communication to God. The practice truly gained traction however with the establishment of the Pentecostal church, and later the charismatic movement in the United States, which normalized speaking in tongues during worship.

Meanwhile, some psychologists of the time tried to link the practice to psychotic disorders such as schizophrenia, although it was later confirmed by contemporary psychologists that there was no such connection. At the same time, linguists analyzing the phenomenon concluded that it is not a legitimate utterance of language, considering that it fails both the syntactic and the semantic test, though it has some phonetic intricacies and pragmatic use.

Glossolalia was present in non-Christian traditions, combining it with other linguistic phenomena such as xenolalia and ermeneglossia. Xenolalia or xenoglossia is despite being similar to glossolalia, still more of a broad term that includes both intelligible and unintelligible utterances.

Conclusively, glossolalia is an under-explored and divisive but interesting practice that will stay mysterious and intriguing for many generations of linguists, psychologists, and sociologists to come.

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