

Making Sense of Glossolalic Nonsense*

BY WILLIAM J. SAMARIN

GLOSSOLALIA is a beautiful, God-given, expressive means of communication for hundreds of thousands of Pentecostals. But for nonbelievers this vocal phenomenon is incomprehensible gibberish, the uncontrollable effect of dissociation, demonic speech, and the like. Judgments have been no less harsh among unbelieving Christians than among secularist nonbelievers.

Glossolalia is indeed anomalous speech. Those who speak in tongues readily admit that they practice something that is out of the ordinary—something, in fact, that is extraordinary. It is a gift from God. If glossolalists stopped here, we would have only one more item in the long list of phenomena that human beings have at one time or another attributed to extrahuman causes. But the tongue speakers have tried to account for their lingual activity. By ignoring their explanations we must surely guarantee the impossibility of ever fully understanding this religious community.

Glossolalist metalinguistics must be examined, I say, in order to get a complete picture of Pentecostal beliefs and behavior. And another reason for doing so is that we can add to the information we have—far from adequate as it is—on naive and prescientific notions about the nature of language and linguistic behavior. This paper is presented with this goal in mind.

Fieldwork

My study of glossolalia began about ten years ago, at the time when the neo-Pentecostal movement began to attract the public's attention in the United States. (Since then the movement has become international and ecumenical. Catholics, both Roman and Orthodox, regularly and in very large numbers meet for religious exercises.) Members of traditionally non-Pentecostal churches—such as Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Baptist—were being converted to an acephalous movement that emphasized the “filling of the (Holy) Spirit.” This is a quality of religious experience that is characterized by, among several other things, a heightened sense of the immediacy of God and a more conscious dependence on God in all matters of daily life.¹ The movement promised that the transformation would be instantaneous, or almost so, and that it would be evidenced or authenticated by God-inspired speech—that is, the person would “speak in tongues.”

I undertook the study because I wanted to know what people did when they spoke in tongues. My interest was linguistic, in the formal sense. My goal was not ambitious: I set out simply to describe the phenomenon within the framework of what had been known as “descriptive linguistics.” (I was also investigating the possibility that instantaneous speech—which is what glossolalia is by definition—revealed features of expressive neologisms like *arsey-turvey*, *diggity-dog*, and *hurdy-gurdy* that one finds in languages throughout the world but in greater numbers in African languages.) I was not yet a sociolinguist, but this research led from linguistic data to human behavior and more than any other single factor transformed me into what I am today. I was filled with a new spirit!

My research was carried out in the field, in the library, and in the “laboratory.” For linguistic analysis I needed, of course,

¹ William J. Samarin, “Religious Motives in Religious Movements,” *International Yearbook for the Sociology of Religion* 8 (1973): 163–174.

tape-recorded samples of glossolalia from a cross section of the adherents of the movement: people who had just acquired the "gift of tongues" as well as those who had been utilizing it for some time, leaders and ordinary members, women and men, and so forth. I also wanted glossolalia from different contexts (large and small meetings) as used in its two principal functions (prayer and prophecy). I therefore participated in neo-Pentecostal meetings of various sizes to observe and record. Several individuals also consented to tape-record their private devotional times for me. (Neo-Pentecostals have been extraordinarily open in their attitude and gracious to non-Pentecostals serious and sympathetic in their research.) In this way, more or less like a field linguist who had set out to describe an as-yet-unwritten language, I collected a large amount of data that would be transcribed and then analyzed.

Very soon it became clear that I would be unwise in studying glossolalia merely as a linguist, treating the recorded texts as if they were merely samples of ordinary language. There was some kind of relationship between what the people believed, personally and idiosyncratically or in consensus, and what they spoke. This is axiomatic to sociolinguistics, the foundation on which we now base all our work. Therefore contextual data became important to the study, and I interviewed all kinds of neo-Pentecostals, and some old-fashioned ones too, concerning their beliefs and attitudes. This was complemented by a wide reading of Pentecostal devotional, doctrinal, and apologetic literature, something few other non-believing social scientists ever seem to have done before. Furthermore, I distributed, as widely as possible, a mimeographed booklet with 71 questions,² for example, "Do you have the feeling that certain words from your tongues have meaning? List the words and their meanings." The questionnaire, since I was familiar with the population being sampled, was meant to be an "open-ended" instrument rather than one that would

² Reproduced in William J. Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism* (New York: Macmillan, 1972).

lead to massive, statisticable data. Finally, I conducted experiments with subjects as varied as university students, a tongue-speaking clergyman, and myself.

Glossolalia as a Vocal Phenomenon

The careful, methodical, and intensive analysis of tongues led to an unequivocal but unstartling conclusion: every person with normal linguistic capabilities can produce glossolalia in a normal and not necessarily altered state of consciousness; many children are glossolalists as they acquire normal language in their early years. Glossolalia is nothing more than the reduction of one's native language to just its phonological component, that too being simplified to its basic and frequently used sound and syllable units.³ Here are two "sentences" or breath groups from a prayer by a male native speaker of English:⁴

*kupóy shāndré filé sundrukumā shāndré lása hóya tāki.
fozhón shētírēloso kumó shāndré palasó shāntre kamóyēntri.*
(Read: a as father; ā, sofa; e, fey; ē, fed; i, see; ĭ, sit; o, bow; ō, bought; u, boot. The accent mark indicates primary stress, as in *He went awáy.*)

Glossolalia is therefore derivative speech. That is the linguist's conclusion. From there he can only go on, if he is interested, to try to account for the apparent similarities throughout the world in such "prototypical" utterances. To understand the movement we must get back to the people. *They* believe that they are really speaking a language.

Glossolalist Explanations

For its users glossolalia is primarily a vocal, physical, emotional, and nonrational phenomenon. Written records of gloss-

³ William J. Samarin, "Glossolalia as Regressive Speech," *Language and Speech* 16 (1973): 77-89.

⁴ From Samarin, *Tongues of Men and Angels*, p. 77.

solalic prayers or prophecies serve no religious function whatsoever. It is not too unusual, however, for people to make an attempt out of curiosity at transcribing their speech, perhaps in seeking to determine what language their private glossa might be related to.⁵ But several people reported to me that writing down glossolalia had the effect of making it vanish. Glossolalia is something one hears rather than sees. When one of my informants ("Rev. d'Esprit") was asked to transcribe a very simple segment of his own tape-recorded tongue, he at first expressed inability. He eventually performed the task, but not without being flustered and embarrassed.

The vocal organs get considerable attention in descriptions of glossolalia, especially when associated with unusual events. A typical report about how and when the gift (as tongue speakers call it) was acquired:

The reason why it took such a time (before speaking) was because I doubted whether I could receive the tongues, and the thought of such a strange thing taking place; that I should suddenly speak in an unknown tongue. . . . As some special manifestation in my jaws and tongue took place my faith was strengthened, little by little, to believe that the speaking in tongues would soon be given to me. . . .⁶

Another person reported that several days before he began to speak in tongues "there seemed to be something very strange going on in my throat" while praying.⁷ In response to one of my questions ("Have you ever felt unusual sensations in the vocal organs while speaking in tongues?"), people wrote things

⁵ For the discussion of glossolalia, the phenomenon. I have introduced the term glossa to refer to a single continuous act of pseudolanguage. It can also be used to designate what glossolalists refer to as a tongue or a language, that is, uniformities in their speech acts perceived as varieties of language different from other varieties. Some claim to speak more than one tongue. More of this below.

⁶ Barratt, quoted in Nils Bloch-Hoell, *The Pentecostal Movement: Its Origin, Development, and Distinctive Character* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1964), p. 133.

⁷ *Voice* (Los Angeles: Full Gospel Business Men's Fellowship International), September 1968, p. 23.

like, "I often feel a gentle electricity, kind of warming of my tongue and lips."⁸

Since physical and physiological aspects of speech get attention, it is not surprising that the chest and breathing also figure prominently. Very early in the Pentecostal movement, J. E. Stiles was advising that "those people who will open their mouths up wide will break forth speaking with tongues more clearly and easily than those who do not."⁹ Several of my own respondents (answering the question "Did anybody talk to you about what you should do or what would happen when you began to speak in tongues?") said that they were told to "breathe in the Spirit." We can assume that this is a standardized instruction for candidates for the baptism in the Holy Spirit and that it is related to the etymological understanding of *pneuma*, "Spirit," as also meaning "breath." One possible text would be John 20:22, Jesus "breathed on them and said, 'Receive the Holy Spirit.'"

Although glossolalists say that they are able to speak in unknown languages because their breath and their vocal organs are energized ("touched") by God, they are not in agreement on how to describe the relationship between the human and the supernatural factors. One view is that the human being is merely a channel or medium for divine communication. Barratt, who brought Pentecostalism to Scandinavia, said that "it is the Spirit himself, who is speaking through you, by taking over the use of your voice, your jaws and tongue and bringing forth the language He Himself desires."¹⁰ James L. Slay, speaking for the Church of God, says that "The Holy

⁸ It is too easy to explain all such statements as giving evidence of dissociation. While I do not deny that dissociation and glossolalia can occur simultaneously, I reject the notion that glossolalia is *caused* by dissociation (see Samarín, "Review of *Speaking in Tongues*, by F. D. Goodman," *Language* 50 [1974]: 207-212, and elsewhere). Not to be ignored are statements about normalcy, like another response to the same question in the questionnaire: the vocal organs "feel just like they always feel."

⁹ J. E. Stiles, *The Gift of the Holy Spirit* (Burbank, Calif.: published by the author, n.d.), p. 120.

¹⁰ Quoted in Bloch-Hoell, *The Pentecostal Movement*, p. 101.

Spirit literally clothes Himself with us and in so doing uses us as an instrument fully tuned for perfect praise."¹¹ A convert from Buddhism repeats this when he says, "I have never heard the Holy Ghost talk through thin air. He always speaks through a channel—an individual."¹² Many other statements could be cited.

Opposed to the "channel" explanation of glossolalia is the "mediated" one that takes the human personality into account. Donald Gee, one of Pentecostalism's important apologists, insisted that the tongue speaker was not a Spiritist-type medium; he was used, but with his own "personality entirely conscious and fully active in will and thought and feeling."¹³ Therefore, Gee continues, it is incorrect to say that it is the Holy Spirit who is actually speaking; he only inspires the utterance.¹⁴ This view is similar to that of "divine-human reciprocity" and what others call "cooperation" with God.

The contrast between the above two views serves only to illustrate the issues that glossolalists have to address themselves to when they attempt to explain the phenomenon of tongues. Also involved are questions such as these: If a person speaks in unknown languages, what is the nature of the miracle? The human is obviously the physical means for the expression of language, but who is the real speaker—God the Holy Spirit, the human, or some combination of both? In what ways are the human faculties employed? Since the mind does not know what is being said, what happens to the mind?

There is no ambiguity in what might be called the "strong" view: God speaks through the human channel. This poses no problem for the glossolalist in explaining prophetic utterances, that is, messages given in unknown tongues but which have to be "interpreted" by another person with this Spirit-given gift.

¹¹ In Wade H. Horton, ed., *The Glossolalia Phenomenon* (Cleveland, Tenn.: The Pathway Press [Church of God], 1966), p. 232.

¹² *Voice*, September 1968, p. 11.

¹³ Donald Gee, *Concerning Spiritual Gifts* (Springfield, Mo.: The Gospel Publishing House, n.d.), p. 75.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 58, 116.

Glossolalic messages in this view are simply another form of inspired utterances. Explanations begin to proliferate with attempts to explain prayers in tongues. Since prayers in normal language are directed by human beings to God, it would follow that glossolalic prayers are spoken by God to God! This conclusion does not escape glossolalists. One of my respondents quite frankly declared that in prayers God was talking to Himself. Scriptural support for this view is cited from Romans 8:26, "We know not what we should pray for as we ought, but the Spirit itself maketh intercession for us with groanings which cannot be uttered." This view leads many to the conclusion that prayers in tongues are infallible, because the words are from God; that one has a "private line" to heaven, because Satan doesn't understand this divine language.

In the strong view the human mind takes no part in the production of glossolalia. This position is (or was) taken by Oral Roberts, the "faith healer" of wide reputation:

We have to bypass our mind and make it inactive for the moment. The mind slips into the background. . . . If one prays through his intellect, his mind creates the speech patterns and words. When one prays through his spirit ("the inner being of the believer"), it is his spirit in cooperation with the Holy Spirit that forms the words of a new language through which the deepest feelings of the inner being are expressed to God. . . . When one prays in tongues it is his spirit praying and not just his mind. His intellect relinquishes active control of the speech centers for a moment. . . .¹⁵

This view is sometimes anti-intellectual, as here: "My faith bypasses the intellectual processes that usually is (referring to faith) contaminated by the processes of the curse of our language due to vocabulary structure."¹⁶ There is a mind at work, but it is the mind of God: therefore glossolalia "is not a mental miracle; the mentality is God's. It is a vocal miracle."¹⁷ An-

¹⁵ Oral Roberts, *The Baptism with the Holy Spirit and the Value of Speaking in Tongues Today* (Tulsa, Okla.: published by the author, 1964), pp. 42, 22.

¹⁶ D. L. Niswander, unpublished manuscript.

¹⁷ Harold Horton, *The Gifts of the Spirit* (London: Assemblies of God Publishing House, 1966), p. 150.

other writer agrees that the supernatural part is the God-given message, but argues that the vocal part is simply human.¹⁸

The nonrational view recognizes the relationship in natural language between linguistic structure and meaning. Not finding evidence for any such relationship in glossolalia, glossolalists—or some of them—locate it all in the mind of God. Others exploit the contrast between the conscious and un- or subconscious levels of the human mind: glossolalia is language at a deeper level, out of reach of normal human consciousness. In this view the vocalization of glossolalia would merely be evidence that “speech” was going on. The consequences of this view are illustrated by statements such as the following: Speaking in tongues “is a mode of expression of my thoughts and feelings to God in prayer. It is effortless since I do not have to think to form English words and sentences; hence I can concentrate on the *communication itself* rather than the *mode of communication*.”

But since inaudible, subvocal glossolalia is possible (practiced only with praying), “thought” takes on a different meaning. For example: “It is possible to ‘think in tongues’ as well as ‘speak in tongues’ since thinking is merely subliminal speech, that is, sounds which do not possess the volume to be perceived audibly.”¹⁹

It is consistent with this attitude toward glossolalia that meaning in the formal, linguistic sense has little significance for Pentecostals. They are satisfied that what they utter *has* meaning or *is* meaningful, but they display little curiosity about “words” they may identify. The exceptions are worth noting, however. Candidates for the Spirit baptism often are beset by the fear that they will say something terrible or improper. In other words, they are anxious about the consequences of releasing the mental and rational constraints on speech, constraints that clearly have social meaning. Meaning

¹⁸ Robert C. Frost, *Aglow with the Spirit* (Northridge, Calif.: Voice Christian Publications, 1965), p. 30.

¹⁹ *Voice*, February 1965, p. 32.

is also important to those whose glossas are identified as real languages on the basis of someone's translation of a few words. (These are alleged cases of xenoglossia that I otherwise ignore in this paper.) Even in these cases, however, interest in meaning is shortlived.

When the mind is de-emphasized, the subjective and emotive aspects of glossolalic speech are emphasized. (This contrast has a time dimension, with the more psychological approach to glossolalia rising among the more recent neo-Pentecostals.) From my respondents, for example, I learn that glossolalia is like impressionism in art or like expressionistic poetry; it is the "opening and releasing of the deep centers of life." In very contemporary language Hall writes that since human understanding includes prerational, metaempirical, and holistic-personal elements, a special language is needed to express them; glossolalia therefore expresses "the larger dimensions of spiritual confrontation and the deeper levels of man's person and experience."²⁰

It should be apparent by now that tongue speakers do not all agree that their glossas are language in the proper sense of the term. Of the 69 respondents who answered a question on this point, only 50 said that their tongues were languages. Of the remaining, 8 did not know, 3 were not interested, 4 had doubts, 3 said that they were at least not earthly languages, and one person said they were languages only "at times." Several of my respondents never wrote the word "speak" without putting it in quotation marks. One even volunteered the observation that there is no "speaking in tongues," just praying. At the time when my questionnaire was made, I did not realize that "speak" had any special meaning. I used the verb generically so as to avoid technical-sounding words like "articulate" and "vocalize." "Use" was too comprehensive and too often employed already. Glossolalists who employ the specific terms "pray in tongues," "sing in tongues" (or "sing in the

²⁰ Thor Hall, "A New Syntax for Religious Language," *Theology Today* no. 14 (1967): 172-184, at 182.

Spirit”), and “give a message (or prophecy) in tongues,” playing down the verb “speak” (and “talk” is never used), are obviously stressing the function of glossolalia at the expense of its linguistic nature. (This is an observation made, of course, in hindsight. That is, when I began my study, I did not know enough to find out how glossolalists categorized their speech acts. I am wiser now, and, along with others involved in the study of the ethnography of communication, I would try as quickly as possible to ascertain the folk categories of speech.) But 85 persons answered my question “What languages have your tongues resembled?” and 50 percent of them either said they did not know or provided no clear answer.

Those who believed that their glossas were language-like also gave some reasons (as they were asked to do): “It sounds too much like a language not to be”; “I speak just as if I am speaking my own language”; “One speaks as though it were a language”; “Not just a lot of sounds.” One person recognized “short words (like conjunctions and propositions) that connect others.” My respondents point out that words are used with different endings, that “words seem to phrase themselves in groups” in sentences and paragraphs. On the other hand, the failure to identify “words” is explained by the fact that glossolalic words “are unknown words: so much so that they are quite indistinguishable in the phrases of which they form part.”²¹ They recognize “inflection and modulation,” “cadence,” “rhythm,” and the “rise and fall of voice and tone.” Much is made of the fact that glossolalia is not gibberish, that one can recognize consonants and vowels, and that they go together to make up syllables. Whereas the recognition of “words” and a “vocabulary” in one’s own or another person’s speech is consistent with the nature of glossolalia, we would not expect people to identify syntactic structures. This is in fact the case. “Sentences” and possibly “clauses” are identified only by pauses and other prosodic features. Repetition, how-

²¹ Horton, *The Gifts of the Spirit*, p. 166.

ever is frequently mentioned, and it is interpreted as emphasis in the glossolalic language.

Insisting on the linguistic authenticity of tongues leads to a concern with better "performance." Repetitiousness ("saying the same thing") is something that should be avoided. One should not imitate others. The vocabulary should become richer and more varied over a period of time. "Sentences" should not be overly long and run-on. There should be freedom (absence of hesitation and stammering), ease, and fluency in delivery. Articulation should be distinct, clear, definite, precise, and uncluttered.²² All of these features are not expected at the first experience with glossolalia. It is recognized that one learns to speak "the same way" one learns a natural language—by practice. But if a person's glossolalia remains rudimentary and his delivery marred by stammering, repetitiousness, monotonous inflection, and the like, people will say that he does not have enough faith, that he has not fully yielded to God, that he has not yet experienced the full joy of praying in tongues, etc.²³ Where speech and nonlinguistic behavior are deviant (by the group's standards), people will say that the behavior comes from "self" (a human production) or that it is demonic. "Harsh" and "guttural" sounds, for example, are associated with negative evaluation.

Even where the linguistic (or language-like) aspects of glossolalia are not stressed, "performance" is a salient feature of the experience. One man said, "I find a close analogy between the gift of tongues and instrumental music. Instrumental music is a 'nonrational' means of self-expression which is most varied and also most profound." A wide variety of statements suggests that many people "render" a glossolalic discourse in harmony with a subjective state. Answering the question "Do some of your tongues sound better to you than

²² Willis, in Horton, *The Glossolalia Phenomenon*, p. 259.

²³ Therefore when one's first glossolalic speech is, for example, clear and varied, there is great rejoicing over the fact. God will be praised for having given such a beautiful language, and the person who was filled with the Spirit will be pleased that he was the object of this blessing.

others?" one man wrote, " 'Sound' has no bearing on my use of them. I switch to the sound which gives me greatest sense of fulfillment in praying." And in another place, "Sometimes I have to 'shift gears' in order to find the 'tongue' which gives vent to my particular burden of prayer." With feelings of love one's glossa is soft or gentle, for example. It is melodious with adoration. It is harsh or brutal when used against Satan.

Concern with expressivity of glossolalia in its phonic and prosodic features is not inconsistent with a more "linguistic" approach, however. Speakers who recognize that different varieties go with different functions simply consider these different messages in the same language. It is my impression, in fact, that glossolalic "polylingualism" has more value than "monolingualism." (Thus Oral Roberts advises those who are new to the Spirit baptism to use their tongues every day in prayer: "Gradually you will become more fluent in the Spirit. You will ultimately go from language to language."²⁴) I would hypothesize that the glossolalist "polyglot"—the one with several tongues in his repertoire—is a leader of sorts in his group. This has already been demonstrated for those with the "gift of interpretation."

An examination of the Pentecostal, glossolalist subculture reveals the way a linguistic theory and a linguistic philosophy are constructed to account for an anomalous linguistic phenomenon. It reveals that the linguistic artifact itself is adapted to these rational formulations. Pentecostal metalinguistics is a rich field for study because of the absence of dogma: beyond the doctrine that tongues are from God and are to be used for his glory and the edification of believers, one is free to interpret and explain almost at will. However, the potential for limitless diversity is never realized. Only a few major kinds of belief systems emerge.

There is a strong theologically dualistic strain in Pentecos-

²⁴ Roberts, *The Baptism with the Holy Spirit*, p. 40.

talism. The human capacity for language is seen as defiled and contaminated: "God must give each of us a brand new language—pure and undefiled—as a worthy vehicle of our worship and praise." Yet this is antimentalist, for rather than making an effort to acquire the "mind of God" and to be "renewed in your minds," glossolalists make mental processes irrelevant.

There is also more than a little prescientific, "pagan," and "primitive" in the belief that speech has power in itself as thing. Here as in other religions, speech (as with recorded language) is efficacious even when not understood. It is only necessary that the texts resemble language. There is an undercurrent of the magical in the personal interpretations and uses of glossolalia.

In spite of the fine strain of magic in the way some individuals interpret and use glossolalia, the principal functions are in accordance with highly valued Pentecostal activities: prayer and, to a lesser degree, exhortation and admonition. Since they occur for the most part in social contexts, much of the theorizing about tongues deals with norms of authenticity and regulations concerning usage. The social meaning of glossolalia determines in some degree both its form and its use.²⁵ Folk linguistics is not independent of sociolinguistics. It is true, as H. D. Duncan asserted, that grammar "cannot be separated from rhetoric."²⁶

²⁵ William J. Samarin, "Variation and Variables in Religious Glossolalia." *Language and Society* 1 (1972): 121-130.

²⁶ Hugh Dalziel Duncan, *Symbols in Society* (London: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 20. Yet he claims too much for sociology when he says that "sociologists are aware of the dangers of echoing what has been said by synchronic linguists (who study language as autonomous systems without reference to anything except other linguistic systems), and of talking about 'structure,' 'pattern,' or 'form' as a way of avoiding the problems of talking about the function of language" (p. 20). In addition to J. R. Firth and B. Malinowski, he cites a couple of nineteenth-century works, but it cannot be said that sociologists exploited these early insights more than linguists did. In any case, things are different now, and they already were when this book was first published in 1968.

Folk Linguistics in Society

Nothing has been said about the continuity and discontinuity between the folk linguistics of the glossolalist community and that of society in general. It would be surprising indeed if nothing was common to the two. But such a comparison, valuable though it would be, is impossible at this date. Little has been done to investigate the folk linguistics of our modern, literate society. Yet linguistics would undoubtedly agree with P. Friedrich that "native models of language seem to be peculiarly deficient."²⁷ If a snake-handling cultist from West Virginia believes that glossolalia is the original language that was lost to mankind at the Tower of Babel, this is probably not more outlandish than some other notions we would find even among our citizens with a basic public education. Joyce Cary as a litterateur must be several rungs above the general public, but in *Mister Johnson* he illustrates the naivete that one often finds in folk linguistics:

. . . a Fada man, like most primitives, looks upon the making of free verse as part of ordinary conversation, and, like an Elizabethan or an Irishman, uses the most poetical expression even in casual talk by the road. . . .

Therefore if we knew more about, say, American folk linguistics, we might understand American glossolalists better. And if it is true, as Hoenigswald has suggested,²⁸ that "Ours is the culture in which mere words are looked down upon and unfavorably compared with things," glossolalist "disenchantment" with words has less of a religious motivation than I have thought.

Nothing, moreover, has been said about the linguistic notions of people who are looking upon the glossolalist scene.

²⁷ Friedrich, in a discussion of Henry M. Hoenigswald, "A Proposal for the Study of Folk-Linguistics," in William Bright, ed., *Sociolinguistics* (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 16-20.

²⁸ Hoenigswald, "A Proposal for the Study of Folk-Linguistics," p. 18.

We might have expected something less than naive from psychologists and sociologists, but apart from the restrained rhetoric of scientific definition their judgments are very similar to those of the lay public. Nonglossolalist Christians condemn this speech as being inarticulate, gibberish, schizophrenic, and the like. But they fail to give reasonable arguments for rejecting the notion that glossas are bonafide languages. Their principal argument is merely that they are meaningless (that is, unintelligible) to the speaker: a person is supposed to know what he is saying. Linguistic features are not singled out for comparison. This is the reason that alleged cases of interpretation—where a discourse in tongues is “translated” by another person supposedly inspired by the Spirit—are so important to the glossolalist community and why such events lead to conversions to the movement. Cases of xenoglossia, where languages unknown to speakers are identified and translated by others, are even more convincing. It is perhaps they more than anything else that support belief in the linguistic authenticity of glossolalia.

I have not carried out any systematic study of nonglossolalists who have been exposed to the phenomenon, but I would expect attitudes and notions similar to those that many people still have with respect to “primitive” languages.

Describing, Understanding, and Making Sense

This discussion is probably the first attempt to characterize glossolalia in terms of the linguistic notions of the glossolalist community. In it I pursue my attempt to understand this phenomenon from the point of view of glossolalists themselves, in other words, how *they* “made sense” of their incomprehensible speech. There has been too little of this in the study of Pentecostalism, as with the study of other groups in

our society whose behavior is judged anomalous.²⁹ It behooves us to take seriously (for research purposes) what people say about their own behavior and to probe where observations are not volunteered. For example, when Werbner, commenting on the speech of Azande witchfinders, says, "Ungrammatical speech, circumlocution, and innuendo all guarantee that the mutual collaboration of a witchfinder and client during a public seance is protected, ominous, and, to some extent, free of self-conscious or recognized fraud,"³⁰ he may have fallen into the trap of a reasonable hypothesis. Evans-Pritchard has said: "After a spirited dance [witchfinders] disclose secrets or prophesy in the voice of a medium who sees and hears something from without. They deliver these psychic messages in disconnected sentences, often a string of separated words not strung together grammatically, in a dreamy, far-away voice."³¹ It may be true that such speech protects the practitioner (even as perfectly grammatical speech protects lawyers and diplomats!), but one would have thought that the Azande had another explanation for it—for example, this is the way spirits talk.

With what I have just said I explicitly find fault with ethnography that ignores linguistics.³² And the other social sciences are not excepted. Linguistics here is to be understood in its broadest sense: the field of study that seeks to understand language and, through language, human beings.

²⁹ It is shocking to find anthropologists who appear disinterested in grounding their work on an understanding of what people believe about themselves: for example, "We are not here concerned with what speakers believe about glossolalia. The belief systems vary from culture to culture (such as Mexican and American Pentecostalism) and are the domain of the group's theology" (Felicitas D. Goodman, *Speaking in Tongues: A Cross-Cultural Study of Glossolalia* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1972], p. 123 n).

³⁰ Richard P. Werbner, "The Superabundance of Understanding: Kalanga Rhetoric and Domestic Divination," *American Anthropologist* 75 (October 1973): 1414–1440, at 1415.

³¹ E. E. Evans-Pritchard, *Witchcraft, Oracles, and Magic among the Azande* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), p. 169.

³² For a critique of a specific monograph, see Samarin, "Review of *Speaking in Tongues*."

This kind of linguistics did not always exist. In my own case it certainly did not always exist. Trained though I was both in linguistics and anthropology by teachers who contributed significantly to both fields, not simply one or the other, I was not oriented in my research and thinking by the universal and ever-present interrelationships between language and human behavior. Anthropological linguistics or linguistic anthropology in my day meant primarily the description of unwritten languages. Therefore my first scholarly tasks were to write grammars of Sango and Gbeya. Although I collected oral literature, it was primarily for descriptive purposes. Dog names, collected for the fun of it, and ideophones (descriptive adverbs) revealed their human, behavioral content only after I had begun to see the connection between language and behavior.³³

I could have stopped with a *description* of glossolalia. That would have been some contribution to human knowledge. We would have learned that it was not pathological or deviant, that it was not gibberish, that it was not restricted to low-class, socioeconomically deprived Pentecostals. However, what I really wanted to do was to *understand* the people—serious and sincere people—who used glossolalia. That goal led to a richer, fuller kind of linguistics, a kind that makes much more sense.³⁴

³³ See, for example, William J. Samarin, "The Attitudinal and Autobiographical in Gbeya Dog-names," *Journal of African Languages* 4 (1965): 57-72, and "The Art of Gbeya Insults," *International Journal of American Linguistics* 35 (1969): 323-329.

³⁴ Although this paper does not duplicate or substantially overlap anything else I have written on Pentecostalism, its burden is the theme of my "Theory of Order with Disorderly Data," in M. Dale Kinkade and others, eds., *Linguistics and Anthropology: In Honor of C. F. Voegelin* (Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1975).

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