

THE LANGUAGE OF THE SPIRIT OF THE SPIRIT IN THE LANGUAGE: A PRELIMINARY DISCUSSION OF GLOSSOLALIA PRACTICES IN SOME BOTSWANA CHURCHES

AM Chebanne
Department of Theology and Religious Studies
University of Botswana

... let him who speaks in a tongue pray that he may interpret."

Paul, in I Corinthians 14 verse 13

Abstract

Glossolalia, or glossia, a scientific term from Greek meaning "language of language" is used in the New Testament to refer to what Paul refers to as "tongue(s)" or speaking therefore. The original Greek texts make the distinction between the glossolalia phenomenon and the experience of Pentecost recorded in Acts 2, which the Greek texts qualify as xenoglossia, simply meaning foreign or strange tongue(s). While biblically and linguistically xenoglossia would make sense to interest oneself in its analysis, the question of glossolalia has always eluded logic and analysis, and consequently its practice in the Church has often been a subject of controversy. This paper reports on the investigation undertaken in some Christian Churches in and around Gaborone where glossolalia manifestations have been observed. The discussion will attempt in the first instance to report on the way Churches understand this phenomenon and how they integrate it within their worship service. It will also submit that there is no one form of this phenomenal manifestation, but there are all types – religious/spiritual, eulogical, and pathological and all using some intelligible utterances. All may be found within the Church, and even outside among African traditional healers. Same phenomenon, but the same spirit? An attempt will be made to provide the answer.

Key words: Church in Botswana, Glossolalia

Introduction

Rare are research documents that discuss glossolalia within and without the Church in Africa, especially in Botswana. The reasons could be many, but importantly it could be that since it is practiced in some Churches, and it is mentioned in the Bible, its justification never needs any discussion. When Paul in the epistle of 1 Corinthians 14:21 quoted Isaiah 28:11 and 12, which says, "With men of other tongues and other lips I will speak to this people; And yet, for all that, they will not hear me", Paul opens a controversy of the centuries in the biblical understanding of what exactly "tongue" is all about. Firstly, the "other tongues" may mean other languages, and other lips may mean "other speech practices." Whether it is glossolalia or not the important information in the Isaiah text as quoted by Paul is that God says men "will not hear me." If indeed, as the Greek text will make us believe, we are talking here about glossolalia, then a small problem persists as God was talk-

ing about and to Judah, his remnant from Israel. Paul says in verse 22 of 1 Corinthians, "Therefore tongues are for a sign, not to those who believe but to unbelievers."

While Paul in no way proscribes the "tongue" or even negatively minimizing its usage, the following quotation from 1 Corinthians 14 must be borne in mind as we shall tackle this important phenomenon as practiced by Christian Churches.

But now, brethren, if I come to you speaking with tongues, what shall I profit you unless I speak to you either by revelation, by knowledge, by prophesying, or by teaching? Even things without life, whether flute or harp, when they make a sound, unless they make (are made to make) a distinction in sounds, how will it be known what is piped or played? For if a trumpet makes an uncertain sound, who will prepare for battle? So likewise you, unless you utter by the tongue words easy to understand, how will it be known what is spoken. For you will be speaking into the air. There are, it may be, so many kinds of languages in the World, and none of them is without significance. Therefore, if I do not know the meaning of the language, I shall be a foreigner to him who speaks, and he who speaks will be a foreigner to me (Paul in 1 Corinthians 14 verses 6 to 11).

Paul, while talking clearly about glossolalia, is also giving in these verses an illustration about using xenoglossia to a person who does not understand it, and therefore one may wish to make the distinction here that Paul does not equal glossolalia to xenoglossia. One may have the effect of the other in a situation of communication (Gerhard Hasel, 1991; Roland Hegstad, 1974).

Some Historical Accounts of the Phenomenon of Glossolalia

While Christianity in general and its origins in Africa are elaborately discussed in Sundkler *et al* (2000), Appiah-Kubi *et al* (1979), Groves (1958), Falk (1979), very little systematization is made of the very specific theological manifestations that characterize the broad spectra of theologies and the practice inherent thereof. However, generally, it is important to note that Christianity has had a far-reaching spiritual and cultural impact in African societies (Groves, 1958, repr. 1964; Sanneh, 1989; Mijoga, 2002; Appiah-Kubi, 1979), and the question of the origins and impact of glossolalia can be assumed with confidence that it is nearly as old as the presence of Christianity in the continent. Of importance, and of more relevance to this discussion, is that there has been what one could qualify as the development of Euro-centrism and its opposite Afro-centrism theology with regards to glossolalia interpretation and usage in Churches of Pentecostal or Spiritual tradition, as indeed the multi-spiritual and theological interpretations that have since characterized these Churches and may in part explain their proliferation especially in the non-European theology of the indigenous African founded churches.

While in Africa there are not consecrated studies on this phenomenon, except some allusion to Pentecostal manifestations in some churches, research is rare that analyses this phenomenon and its motivation in worship practices. However, elsewhere, and since some centuries ago, glossolalia has interested religious movements and their critics. The most notable historical and religious study may be found in Lombard (1910) who traces the phenomenon from the first Christians and Alphandery (1931), who links it to the medieval Latin prophetism in some Christian circles. It is the Flournoy (re-edited 1983, first published 1900) publication, *Des Indes à la planète Mars*, which in 1900 caused a lot of debate in psychology and linguistics, agitation among the spiritists in their divinations and Pentecostals in their worship. Flournoy had studied the "language" that Catherine Elise Muller, nicknamed Hélène Smith, had produced, claiming that she spoke the language of Mars inhabitants.

Modern studies of any importance in English and that are related to the scientific approach of analyzing glossolalia are found in the *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, vol. 8 (see Hine, 1969): "Pentecostal Glossolalia: Towards a functional interpretation". Glossolalia is also discussed in Luchsinger (1965): *Voice-Speech-Language clinical communication: Its physiology and pathology*, in the article "Glossolalia" (cited in Courtine, 1988). On the theological side there are interesting discussions in Dempster *et al* (1999) which provide the theological, spiritual and social context of Pentecostalism and its definition and spiritual characterization. While glossolalia is not featuring saliently, the dynamics of Pentecostal model of praxis clearly suggests the "Spirit" manifestation base. However, what is important is the elaboration of this theology and the global characteristic that it is given in this publication. Some few scholars in Botswana such as Byaruhanga-Akiki (1984), Amanze (1994) and Nkomazana (2003) have given a general characterization of Pentecostalism and its associated theology.

With regards to African Independent Churches (Idowu, 1973; Appiah-Kubi, 1979; Amanze, 1994) responding to the label of Christianity, there is not much that is discussed of their glossolalia in the research done and published in Botswana or the region. In the existing literature they are characterized as "indigenous", "independent" or "African", suggesting that they manifest theological features that are indigenized or Africanized or are totally independent of the global Pentecostal religious movement. What is salient in their theological and ecclesiology model praxis is what has been qualified as native cults, sects, separatists, and syncretists (Daneel, 1978). While the African Independent Churches profess Christianity, their theology, unlike some Pentecostal Churches that, inspired by the global Pentecostal movement, claim for themselves as revivalism and engage in glossolalia manifestation to support the charismatic authority of their leaders (Daneel, 1987; Dickson, 1979; Oduyoye, 1979; Appiah-Kubi, 1979). These charismatic manifestations and revivalism have essentially the role to re-appropriate though Christianity the "link with the spirit world" or share in "the wisdom of the ancestors, revaluing their ceremonies, reawakening their names, renewing their languages" (Hastings, 1976:43). The predominance of African culture in these churches means that the engagement of the totality of social structure, art, artifact, language and the intertwining of belief and life makes their glossolalia manifestation a crucial or critical form of their religiosity (Hastings, 1976).

Glossolalia in Churches in Botswana

The phenomenon of glossolalia is one instance that in a visible and salient way characterizes church worship and the authority that is given to the word of God. While for European founded churches "the Bible must speak for itself", though the reader's understanding of the text, for Pentecostal and African Independent Churches (Daneel, 1978; Dickson, 1979; Oduyoye, 1979; Appiah-Kubi, 1979), the "tongue" or the "spirit" are regarded as the manifestation of the Divine authority and power, and therefore this may be taken as complementary means to access the meaning and the purpose of the word of God. To African Independent Churches, without so much referring to the biblical justification, the phenomenon, characterized by "Zionism", "apostolicism", and spiritualism, is essentially found in spiritual healing, revivalism, prophesy, even as they preponderantly used African languages in all spheres of their Church activities (Sundkler, 1948/1961 Barrett, 1968). The worship service uses a local language, and the singing is also based on choruses that are either in IsiZulu or SeSotho depending largely on the origins of the church's theological and spiritual origins. The phonetic form of the glossolalia is mimicked on the structure of these languages.

Table 1: Responses to glossolalia use in the Churches

Type of Church	Glossolalia recognized	Domain/Aspect of Usage	Symbolism/Theological basis
African Independent Churches	Yes	Generally in all aspects (worship, singing, prayer)	Faith, miracle, exorcism and healing and guidance, power/ charisma
Pentecostal Churches	Yes	Generally occurs in all aspects (worship, singing, prayer)	Spirit baptism and faith and healing and power and miracle and exorcism
UCCSA	Yes	Does not feature in any worship activity	Not significant
Adventist	No	Never used or encouraged	Nothing
Catholic	No	Not used	Nothing or hallucination /demoniac
Lutheran/Methodist/ Dutch Reformed/ Baptist	No	Does not feature in any worship activity	Nothing

The table above clearly shows that glossolalia is a controversial phenomenon according to denominations. While Pentecostals and African Independent Churches attach spiritual and religious symbolism, other Churches, especially those of European reformist and protestant tradition, do not accord glossolalia any significance. When asked how they understood the biblical text in which reference is made to glossolalia, the Adventists would not recognize the reference or the importance thereof, but believe prophesy is greater value than glossolalia and learning foreign languages beneficial for the taking the gospel to the whole world (cf. Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974). This is also the view of the Lutherans and the UCCSA churches. Catholics do not believe in the spiritual or religious existence of this phenomenon, and it has no reference or justification in any religious activity.

It is important to note that Pentecostal and African Independent Churches strongly believe that glossolalia has an important role in the worship and praise service. While Pentecostals provide a passionate theological basis for it, and associating it with spirit baptism, African Independent Churches believe glossolalia is a manifestation of the Holy Spirit through faith in the believers and does not need any theological justification. To Pentecostal Churches its manifestation is encouraged in every believer as a sign of spirit baptism and the fruits of spirit-filled life. In this view Pentecostal Churches understand glossolalia as a means of going beyond the I Corinthians 14 Paul's teaching and exhortations to embrace the Acts 2 experience and the Acts 19 reference to spirit baptism. As such the phenomenon is core to the "spirit-filled" life of every Christian. Prophecy is often done through glossolalia expressions and interpretations may be done by the utterer or from the listeners.

To African Independent churches, however, the glossolalia phenomenon is important so far as it is a means of going beyond the profane and the common to reach the divine and the sacred. This transcendence is also seen as a link with the spirit world and the world of the ancestors, who feature prominently in the healing sessions. It is this aspect which creates a common spiritual value between these churches and the African traditional religions (Idowu, 1973; Nkomazana, 2003). Also, importantly, this phenomenon is taken as a means of divination and prophecy and its interpretation is commonly practiced. It is also important that the manifestation of this phenomenon accord the Church leaders the power to explain

scriptures and to teach, not so much what the Bible text speaks for itself, but the interpretation that they give.

The role of ancestors in the life of African Christians (Mijoga, 2002; Kalilombe, 1993) becomes critically important when glossolalia becomes the link to their place of abode or their invisible existence. To neglect this aspect is to deny one's source of power and authority and sense of religious worthiness. The tendency to ancestral cults has therefore the purpose of keeping congregants from becoming spiritually and theologically baseless, blown about by every fickle fashion of religion and ideology. Through glossolalia, the ancestral cults allow some communion with the believers, and the church leader to be the custodians of the African spirit, personality, and vivid potentiality of religious leadership in all socio-religious domains (Oduyoye, 1797). The belief in the living-dead, in the existence of spirits, and in magic and witchcraft are a part of the African Independent Churches' recognition that life is not entirely materialistic but spiritual. To them glossolalia manifestations are an expression of a yearning for life after life. Since the Supreme Being is believed to be a source of Life, the search after the life-force is itself a groping for a closer and more personal relationship with the Being Itself (Oduyoye, 1979:116), and this is the point shared by other scholars (Mijoga, 2002; Kalilombe, 1993).

Does Glossolalia have Linguistic Structure and Sense?

To really discuss the linguistic aspect of glossolalia supposes that a precise and objective definition should be provided. However, through the ages glossolalia has always been only characterized rather than described and defined objectively. The explanation is that there is no-one, but many glossolalia manifestations, and occurring in many diverse situations and psychological conditions. To Puech (1988) the characterizations made of glossolalia in English of "tongue jabbering", "gibberish speech", and the corresponding verbs "to jabber," "to gibber" underscore the unintelligibility of the glossolalia expression, and therefore it could be categorized as a "psittacism", that is, glossolalia would be totally devoid of any semantic content. What remains of it is the phonetic content of repetitive utterances that cannot be comprehended by the listener. As such glossolalia does not fit into the theory of communication where the speaker encoded message is the same as decoded by the listener. Here, therefore, is the most daunting aspect of the problem of analyzing glossolalia. To see in it anything resembling language requires that it be translated, interpreted or be at least communicable.

Since the beginning of the 20th century scientific studies by among others Flournoy (1900) have characterized glossolalia by psychopathological symptoms, and this has necessitated further questions about the phenomenon. What is "speaking in tongues"? What does the logical link of the "psychopathological symptoms" tell us about this utterance? These questions will require that the answers go beyond the framework of scientific analysis and rely on the testimonies of glossolalia subjects. And this is the real difficulty.

However, for what it is worth, since glossolalia utterances have a phonetic content, and have a resemblance of a lexical content too, they can best be described as the "resemblance of language" (Courtine, 1988; Puech, 1988; Luchsinger, 1965), or a pseudo-language, characterized by lexical neologism, and that which qualifies it as a language is its vocal utterance which imitates words and syntactic structure. On this point some have gone as far as submitting that glossolalia was invention of language or an uncontrollable feeling to speak a new language, consciously or unconsciously.

Glossolalia in Botswana Churches: Language in the Spirit or the Spirit in the Language?

Earlier, we alluded to the manifestation of glossolalia as the two categories of Churches in Botswana – the Pentecostal Churches and the African Independent Churches. However, these two religious movements have a lot to separate them theologically and organizationally. Theologically for the two Churches glossolalia has different spiritual and religious appeals. For Pentecostals the “tongue speaking” is anchored in their doctrine of spirit baptism and tends to internationalize. Often this doctrine and the internationalization thereof creates a specific theology that makes a distinction between the historical churches and the charismatic revivalist Churches (Dempster *et al*, 1999). While historically these churches have been characterized by some form of irregularity as to the theology of Spirit baptism, they now have moved towards globalization of their theology and consequently towards a critical and systematic theology which has refined the debate on “speaking in tongues” and its spiritual application to a “spirit-filled lifestyle.” In Pentecostalism (Dempster *et al*, 1999), it is even viewed as a religious culture and a bold claim of its globalization is made, but it is doubtful that this claim could be sustained by a systematic and common theological base. It is perhaps at the level of common and comparable overt features or manifestation that this generalization can be made.

To the African Independent Churches the phenomenon appeals to spiritualism, even spiritism, and refers to magical powers of divination and healing and teaching, all that may take the character of African traditional religiosity. Glossolalia is therefore, among African Independent Churches, a power and authority symbol. This must be understood as the strength of their theology is not so much the biblical text or the comprehensive knowledge thereof, but the charismatic even magical power of the leader. Therefore the lack of systematic theology explains the diversity and the cultism of their practice and denominational organization. However, the preponderant role of glossolalia may surprise as a communicative device in a religious movement that is mono-lingual, because most of the founders of these churches have been preached to by fellow Africans in African languages. The characterizing feature of these churches is that certain “Zionism” and “Spiritualism” (Sundkler, 1948/1961; Daneel, 1987) purport to come from a divine detect and some prophesy, and that arbitrary and subjective reference finds strong support with glossolalia usage. However, what is clear in their development is what Barrett (1968) qualifies as a religious “schism and renewal in Africa” in relation to the founded church theology. This religious phenomenon has characterized the sub-continent theology (Sundkler *et al*, 10000), without so much as receiving specific attention concerning spiritual value.

In submission, the subject of “tongues”, “speaking in tongues,” “glossolalia,” “zenoglossia” and the role they do or do not have in worship, will ever bring controversy and contradiction in the theological debate (cf. Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974). Whether it is a language phenomenon or a spiritual one, there is much to be said, and a controversy is inevitable. A typical controversy may be read between the lines of the Biblical Discernment Ministries (1998) who put the following thesis to explain and criticize the use of tongues in certain churches:

1. The non-essentiality of glossolalia. Only in 1 Corinthians does Paul mention speaking in tongues;
2. This glossolalia manifestation has nothing to do with “praying in the Spirit” (Rom. 8; Eph. 5; Jude 20);
3. Each time the Bible mentions speaking in tongues, it always means languages that really exist(ed). The Greek word “glossa” is also used in the phrase “tongues, as of

fire” (Acts 2:2), to indicate the tongue as a member of the human body. It is further used in Revelation 5:9: “Every tribe, tongue, and people...” to represent the different populations on the earth, with their different languages;

4. The foreign tongue that someone may use is never a proof that such a person is filled with, or even indwelt by, the Holy Spirit, let alone a spiritual believer (cf. I Cor. 1:5; 3:1);
5. In the Bible such signs are given as proofs and characteristics of the work of an apostle (2 Cor. 12:12). The signs are related to the miracles that the Apostles performed (healing, foreign tongues, prophecies) and were given by God to confirm His Work (Mk. 165:17; Heb. 2:3–4). The use of glossolalia is, therefore, a sign for *the unbelievers* (1 Cor. 14:19–25) so that they could understand what was being said (v. 23). There is no mention of this manifestation for the believers (see 1 Cor. 11:30; 1 Tim. 5:23; 2 Tim. 4:20; Gal. 4:13–14; 2 Cor. 12:7).

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The importance of these arguments may shock some, especially the post-modernists or the feminist biblical hermeneutics (Dube, 2001; Kealotswe, 2003); and excite others, especially the conservative fringe of Christianity, but definitely they are illustrative of the great divide that exists in the religion of the followers of Christ. If indeed as the tenants of this dichotomous theological perspective are entrenched in positions that make Christianity a religion of judgment – to have spirit or demons; not to have the spirit or be dead. Did Christ come to judge or will he come to judge on these issues? Tongue-speaking is a subject of widespread Christian interest. Pentecostals and charismatics (which include members of mainline Protestant, Greek Orthodox, and Roman Catholic congregations) practice speaking in tongues as an evidence of spiritual renewal and devotion. Yet, it’s not just a Christian experience. Many in the occult and in Eastern Mysticism, both in and out of the New Age movement, also speak in tongues (cf. Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974).

It is important that Christians heed the biblical characterization of glossolalia in order to derive theological and spiritual guidance. The greatest danger to the faith derived from Christ is the invasion of human systems of belief. However, glossolalia users and rejecters, in their sentimentalism and zealotry for proving their truth, consciously or unconsciously exceed the statements of the biblical texts. According to Bouter (1998) this is partly because some tongues-speakers declare it to be a necessary companion to the baptism of the Spirit and see Christians who don’t speak in tongues as deficient in spiritual experience, and he also says that the fire of this controversy is fanned by an over-reaction on the part of some non-charismatic movements. Moreover, Bouter (1998) states that the testimonies of tongues-speakers and the writings of scholars who have studied the phenomenon give us mixed signals, and on the other hand, Bouter (*idem.*) states that men like John Sherrill tell of instances when they have heard people speak fluently in languages they had never learnt. On the other hand, linguists and anthropologists who have investigated these reports have not been able to verify them.

In the publications of the Biblical Discernment Ministries (cf. Bouter, 1998; Sper, 1989) they point out several errors that often accompany glossolalia (speaking in tongues) See also Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974), and the following can be noted, as contributing to the entrenched polemic, controversy and the radicalization of the debate:

1. Often this practice goes together with introducing, defending or propagating false teachings concerning the Person and the Work of Christ;

2. Women play a dominating role, forsaking the role assigned to them in the Word of God;
3. There is a lack of true spiritual growth in the tongue-speaking movement;
4. There is ignorance with regard to doctrinal or moral evil;
5. There are many conflicts and dissensions because of a carnal condition.

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According to Bouter (1998) and Sper (1989) the Lord has given His people the ability to understand His thoughts (1 Cor. 1:15) provided there is a true spiritual attitude (1 Cor. 2:6). When a Christian is speaking in tongues without knowing what he is saying, then this conflicts with his Christian position. It is also crucial, in our days of ruin in the Christian profession, to make sure from which source, Christ or Satan, one receives instructions, influences or directives. James 3 is quite clear about the possibility of two different sources or fountains (cf. 1 Cor. 12:1–3; 1 Jn. 4:1–3). This is the risk in the debate, and to claim to provide an answer is even riskier, but suffice to say that tongues in Christian belief are God-given, and any similar manifestation in a non-Christian worship situation is definitely not from God (Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974). This certainly calls all in the debate for a spiritual and theological introspection.

Conclusion

The origins of glossolalia may be as old as humankind, perhaps, and scientifically developing before the human language, as it derives from the very elementary human reactions of shouting, crying, laughing and some forms of delirium. In Christianity, the recorded history of the phenomenon links it with the early development of Christianity, where it has been the main medium of prophesy and healing (psychological and physical). Also modern science (psychology) has linked it to psychological conditions in the manifestation of elation, hallucination and certain pathological conditions. Between these manifestations there is no necessary linkage, but a common characterization on the communicative aspects because they are unintelligible, and like xenoglossia requiring interpretation. Paul minimized its importance in religious activities and preferred prophesy and philosophy. Clearly, therefore, this cannot be a simple matter, even within the religious usage or interpretation. Science also, with its psychological or psychiatric perspective, has partial explanation to this phenomenon.

Perhaps as Fife (1980) would wish things to be, it is in the excess of belief in manifestations or not of the Spirit that those who use and those who do not use glossolalia should realize the need of reason and the religious mutual indispensability. For some it is to realize the need for revival, and for others, to recognize the importance of the Biblical text for teaching sound doctrine. Like all things that are manifested in humans, whether faithful or faithless in God, whether common or sacred, it is important to have in theology and religion intellectual or rational checks through the lucid interrogation of the scriptures (Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974). The excess of charisma by the Spirit, through the manifestation of glossolalia, can be as destructive as the absence of it. While Paul does not in any way deny speaking in tongues, he used them himself, but does not put them above prophecy (1 Corinthians 14). But in the history and use of this phenomenon in churches, the biblical passage in which “speaking in tongues” is referred to does not provide all the answers. For Botswana Churches, there is need of studying this phenomenon from its social and theological occur-

rence and to find out how each denomination or theological tendency checks its standing in relationship to Christ and his Mission of Grace and Salvation.

Paul's words to the Corinthians in chapter 14 of First Corinthians, and in the mind set of the preceding chapters, says this: "I thank God that I speak in strange tongues (Greek glossolalia) much more than any of you. But in Church worship I would rather speak five words that can be understood, in order to teach others, than speak thousands of words in strange tongues (glossolalia/xenoglossia) (verses 18–19). In chapter 13, St Paul says, "Set your hearts, then, on the more important gifts. Best of all, however, is the following way." Then Paul proceeds and shares with his readership the greatest gift of all – Love! It is true that in becoming too cautious to avoid false spiritual manifestations, we may not avail ourselves fully of the Spirit's genuine manifestations, even through "tongues." Yet caution is needed as Satan's deceptions are becoming more subtle than ever. There is need for the infilling of the Spirit to give us true spiritual discernment when there is a glossolalia manifestation (Hasel, 1991; Hegstad, 1974).

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