SOME CLAIMS OF XENOGLOSSY IN THE ANCIENT LANGUAGES

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The principal aim of this paper is to present hitherto unpublished evidence relating to a particular claim of xenoglossy in Ancient Egyptian. It has been thought worthwhile, at the same time, to offer a brief review of some other alleged instances.

I. Introduction: The Pentecost Claim

The ability to speak in languages other than one’s first language is commonly the result of early contact or of study and training. When such an ability occurs without any of these advantages, the term ‘xenoglossy’ is used of it. The restriction is not very logical, admittedly, but it is convenient. As with linguistic ability generally, various grades are normally distinguished. ‘Xenoglossy’ is sometimes used to indicate the mere ability to reproduce the sounds of another language without any apparent instruction. A higher grade is clearly implied by the ability to use the language flexibly and to answer questions phrased in it. The expression ‘responsive xenoglossy’ is occasionally used to denote this faculty.

An instance conveyed through mediumship is described by Ernest Bozzano in Case 30 of his third category (cases obtained by ‘direct voice’). It concerns a séance held near London on February 27th, 1924, when Caradoc Evans, ‘the well-known Welsh writer and dramatist’, was present. The medium was ‘Valiantine’, of whom it is said that she was born and lived in the United States and did not know a word of Welsh. At first Caradoc Evans was addressed in English by a voice claiming to be that of his father. ‘Speak to me in your own language’ was the challenge made by Caradoc—in Welsh. Whereupon the voice proceeded to do so fluently, answering questions about where he had died and giving a detailed description of the house in Carmarthen where he had lived. The conversation was then cut short, but we are told (p. 142) that
‘the sceptical Caradoc Evans had already been convinced of the actual presence of his father.’ Bozzano cites other similar cases, and as an advocate of spiritualistic communication he naturally finds them especially convincing since they often involve languages that are not widely known. What is somewhat unclear in the case cited is the role of the medium. If she simply enabled the ‘direct voice’ to come through, this voice was using its first language and no true xenoglossy is implied.

The phenomenon would obviously have special importance if it could be proved to have applied to the ancient languages. A well-known example from the ancient world itself has been seen by many in the account of the linguistic miracle on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2. 4 ff.), where it is said of the disciples that they ‘began to speak in other tongues, as the Spirit gave them utterance’ (RSV). A Pauline expression (1 Cor. 14. 5) invites comparison: ‘Now I want you all to speak in tongues, but even more to prophesy.’ Paul is referring to ecstatic utterance—glossolalia—and a recent admirable study shows that the same phenomenon was probably activated by the experience of Pentecost, even if Luke wishes to present it mainly as xenoglossy. The possibility also emerges, in ancient as in modern glossolalia, that ‘interspersed among inarticulate utterances would be actual identifiable words;’ and James Moffatt properly pointed to the parallel in the magical papyri of the second and third centuries where incoherent ejaculations are mingled with native and foreign titles of deities. Whereas Paul does not decry ecstatic utterance, he finds higher evidence of the Spirit’s activity in moral behaviour. Luke’s account of Pentecost, while giving priority to xenoglossy, is coloured by the idea of ecstatic utterance, as in the phrase ‘tongues as of fire’. Perhaps he was working on two separate and disparate versions. It is noteworthy that he cites no particular instance of xenoglossy beyond the statement that the listening members of the Jewish diaspora heard the words in their own language, that is, the language of the countries where they then lived.

II. Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Sanskrit

Cases which implicate the ancient languages are related variously to the following methods of converse: