



adelma von vay



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## MESSAGES FROM A MEDIUM: THE LINGUISTICALITY OF SPIRITIST GLOSSOLALIA<sup>1</sup>

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This article proposes an inquiry into the origins of the scientific interest towards glossolalic phenomena. It analyzes the studies and works of two prominent Swiss scholars – the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the psychologist Théodore Flournoy – in their quest to decipher and interpret glossolalic speech in the case of Héléne Smith, a Swiss medium and psychic who gave spiritualistic séances between 1894 and 1901 for a group of academics, inspired and headed by Flournoy. The aim of this paper is to discuss how theoretical linguistics identified and conceptualized its subject matter when encountering marginal and paranormal states of consciousness. From the point of view of modern linguistics, glossolalia can be viewed as a communicative act where the participants are represented by the *glossolalist*, on the one side, who produces the glossolalic speech, and the *glossologist*, on the other, who interprets this mysterious language. In the case of Héléne Smith, the glossolalist and the glossologist came together for the first time in history to perform a ‘field work’, scholarly and visionary at the same time. Deciphering Miss Smith’s glossolalic texts, the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the psychologist Flournoy faced a general theoretical problem: whether language and the sense inherent to it are intentional and conscious or rather whether the unconscious in fact controls the language creativity? From an epistemological perspective, Théodore Flournoy’s studies of Héléne Smith’s case of glossolalia opened linguistics, psychology and religion to a ‘new dimension’ of science that Flournoy called its ‘third path’ to overcome a systematic binary contradiction in which we can include Ferdinand de Saussure’s binary conception of signs (signifier/signified).

Keywords: glossolalia, spiritism, linguistics, language, sense, unconscious

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The case of Baroness Adelma Vay is, among other things, representative of a specific linguistic practice known as ‘speaking in tongues’. As we know, being a medium and clairvoyant, she spoke and wrote in trance-like states of consciousness. The nature of this creativity poses a challenging problem for specialists in linguistics, psychology and religion studies. It may contribute to understanding of how language works in marginal and paranormal states of consciousness like that reflected in mediumistic speech.

The aim of my paper, though, is not to analyze Baroness’s spiritualistic writings – which is yet to be done by Adelma Vay scholars – but rather to propose an inquiry into the origins of the scientific inte-

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rest towards glossolalic phenomena, and to outline the context, in which her glossolalic writings can be discussed. To do so, I will consider the studies and works of two prominent Swiss scholars – the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the psychologist Théodore Flournoy (1854-1920) – in their quest to decipher and interpret glossolalic speech in the case of another medium and psychic – a Swiss clairvoyant known as Hélène Smith (1861-1929), who gave spiritualistic séances between 1894 and 1901 for a group of academics, inspired and headed by Flournoy and who was considered ‘the Muse of automatic writing’ by surrealist poets. This case was highlighted in a number of scholarly writings, both linguistic and psychological (Lepschy, 1974; Cifali, 1985; Cifali, 2004; Puech, 1988; Fehr, 1995; Courtine, 2000; Giacomelli, 2006). The aim of this paper will be to discuss how theoretical linguistics identifies and conceptualizes its subject matter when encountering marginal and paranormal states of consciousness.

First, let us start with what we generally know about glossolalia. The studies of theologians, linguists, philosophers and psychologists investigated the phenomenon in its various aspects throughout the 20th century. According to the encyclopedic definition of the term (Encyclopaedia Universalis [http](http://)), glossolalia (from ancient Greek *glôssa* (‘tongue’ or ‘language’) and *lalein* (‘to speak’), otherwise referred to as speaking in tongues, is considered a gift of tongues, a religious phenomenon of a mystical or paranormal nature which manifests itself in people who have the power of self-expression in a language that they have not learned or use their own imaginary or sacred language. Otherwise glossolalia is defined more specifically as “ecstatic utterances usually of unintelligible sounds made by individuals in a state of religious excitement” (Kildahl, 1972: 53). This episode is first described in the Bible, according to which the Holy Spirit descends on the apostles at Pentecost. In the *Acts of Apostles* this event is accompanied by a noise that attracts a crowd of people. The text of the *New Testament* describes that “they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak in unknown languages.” (Acts, ii, 4) Apostle Paul himself was a glossolalist, judging by Corinthians: “I thank God I speak with tongues more than you all” (1 Corinthians 14/18). From the very outset, already in the Bible, the idea that glossolalia is an unintelligible discourse, appears: “He who speaks in tongues, speaks not to people but to God, as nobody understands it” (1 Corinthians 14/2). Paul demands that those who speak in different tongues should also have a gift of interpretation.

At this point already we are faced with an aporia that will persist in further cases and studies of glossolalia – the interpretation of the incomprehensible, that is to say, making sense of that which is senseless. Mythologically, the idea of speaking in tongues can be regarded as the inversion of the Babylon myth. In constructing the Tower of Babel people pride themselves in an absolute interpersonal understanding with a common language clear to everybody, whereas in the case of glossolalia they try to speak an unknown language of the spirit, incomprehensible to human beings. From the point of view of modern linguistics, glossolalia can be viewed as a communicative act where the participants are represented by the *glossolalist*, on the one side, who produces the glossolalic speech, and the *glossologist*, on the other, who interprets this mysterious language.

After this introduction on the initial mythological sources of the issue, let us proceed to giving some linguistic definitions of what glossolalia is and what it is not. The most theoretical treatment of the term is given by Roman Jakobson, in a passage where he accentuates the creative and communicative nature of glossolalia:

A special kind of verbal or quasi-verbal creative activity with the use of speech sounds totally deprived of a sense-discriminative role throughout an entire pronouncement, but nonetheless destined for a certain kind of communication and aimed at an actual human audience or intended to be received and apprehended by a divine spirit (Jakobson, 1987: 214).

In this statement Jakobson accentuates the creative and communicative nature of glossolalia.

Another definition is proposed by the Canadian linguist William Samarin (1972: 2) who describes glossolalia 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 holds that glossolalic speech resembles human language in certain aspects. Glossolalia, according to him, is a kind of verbal behaviour that has the features of structured language.

The French linguist Jean-Jacques Courtine (1983: 41-45), in developing Samarin’s statement about the nature of glossolalic speech, comes to the following conclusions:

1. Glossolalia is not a language.
2. Moreover, analysis can say, why exactly glossolalia is not a language.
3. The glossolalic utterance is not derived from the system of language, but it produces the same effect as language.
4. The false language is separated from the true one.
5. Glossolalia produces the appearance of linguistic form and exceeds it at the same time: this is the image of language in its excess.

To our mind, Courtine’s statements on glossolalia are the best theoretically elaborated from a linguistic perspective, as they capture the complexity and paradoxality of the phenomenon very well.

The definitions just quoted are based on various manifestations of glossolalic experiences. To name but a few, apart from Biblical contexts, we can mention evidence of glossolalic phenomena in different other cultures and historical periods, such as shamanism and the practices of exorcism in the Middle Age. Worthy of note is the case of Hildegarde de Bingen (1098-1179), a 12th century German mystic who elaborated an artificial language spoken solely by herself, *La Lingua Ignota* (cf. Higley, 2007)<sup>2</sup>.

All examples of glossolalia dating back to the time before the 19th century are, clearly, only indirect, if not mythical, evidence given by historians of religion. This situation remains as such – mythical and exegetical – until the late 19th century when the new linguistics and the new psychology arise, bearing record to the scholarly interest in glossolalic phenomena. It is at that time that cases of glossolalia become empirical and subject to experimental observations. Already in the mid-19th century glossolalia steps over the bounds reserved by religious studies and enters into the domain of psychology and, later on, that of linguistics. As early as in the 1820s, medical science begins to concern itself with speaking in tongues. The most remarkable non-Christian case is the one of The Seeress of Prevorst (1801-1829) described by Justinus Kerner (1786-1862) in his book *The Seeress of Prevorst, revelations of the human inner life and about the penetrations of the spirit world into ours* (1829). However the German romanticist still takes the seeress’ incomprehensible sound sequences for revelations coming from above. But the ‘positivist’ spirit was not slow to arrive in the late 19th century, where glossolalia

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<sup>2</sup> See also the recent apostolic letter addressed by Pope Benedictus XVI, dedicated to Saint Hildegard of Bingen, highlighting among other things her holy gift of speaking in tongues:

[http://www.vatican.va/holy\\_father/benedict\\_xvi/apost\\_letters/documents/hf\\_ben-xvi\\_apl\\_20121007\\_ildegarda-bingen\\_en.html](http://www.vatican.va/holy_father/benedict_xvi/apost_letters/documents/hf_ben-xvi_apl_20121007_ildegarda-bingen_en.html)

was referred to each time a person utters sound series incomprehensible for anybody but him/herself but which this person considers pertaining to an unknown language. It is in this trend, to my mind, that the case of Adelma Vay fits in, publishing her spiritualist writings from 1860s on.

In 1894 Sigmund Freud (1856-1939) and Josef Breuer (1856-1925) publish their *Studies on Hysteria*. Starting from this work, the word hysteria often appears when it comes to states of consciousness where glossolalia manifests itself (apart from Freud, this problematic was studied by other psychologists and psychoanalysts, among which are Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893), Pierre Janet (1859-1947), Oscar Pfister (1873-1956), Gilbert Ballet (1853-1916), Alphonse Maeder (1882-1971), Emil Kraepelin (1856-1926), Jean Bobon (1912-1990) and others). At the same time, there appears a tendency to search for productive causes of speaking in tongues beyond hysteria and aphasia.

It is this objective that leads the Genevan psychologist Théodore Flournoy to his studies of the glossolalia practiced by Héléne Smith, a spiritist medium. The medium and the psychologist were closely connected until 1899 when Flournoy published his book *From India to Planet Mars*,<sup>3</sup> in which he analyzed in meticulous detail the case of Héléne Smith.

Without going into too much detail, it is worth noting that Héléne Smith went through her three imaginary mediumistic cycles, of which first two are of specific interest to glossologists: in the first, she visits the Planet Mars and communicates with stellar beings, in the second – she lives through an oriental adventure that takes place in ancient India. Therefore, Flournoy identifies and transcribes the two languages as being ‘Martian’ and ‘Sanskritoid’. To sort out all these linguistic fantasies, he appeals to many philologists of his time, and particularly to Ferdinand de Saussure, a renowned orientalist of his time.

F. de Saussure is fascinated by the analysis of the ‘hindu’ language spoken by Miss Smith. He comments on the linguistic products of the medium, visits spiritist sessions and suggests his proper interpretations of the case. Flournoy included Saussure’s letters (written during the séances given by Héléne Smith) in his 1899 book, and now they have been published in full by Olivier Flournoy (1986), Th. Flournoy’s grandson.

So what were F. de Saussure’s main considerations on Sanskritoid glossolalia? His answers to Th. Flournoy’s questions are as follows:

As to the question of ascertaining whether all this really represents Sanskrit, it is evidently necessary to answer, *No*. One can only say:

First: That is a medley of syllables, in the midst of which there are, incontestably, some series of eight to ten syllables, constituting a fragment of a sentence which has a meaning (especially exclamatory phrases - *e.g.*, *mama priya*, *mon bien-aimé* (‘my well-beloved’); *mama soukha*, *mes délices* (‘my delight’).

Secondly: That the other syllables, of unintelligible aspect, never have an anti-Sanskrit character - *i.e.*, do not present groups materially contrary or in opposition to the general figure of the Sanskrit words.

Thirdly and finally: That the value of this latter observation is, on the other hand, quite considerably diminished by the fact that Mlle. Smith seldom launches out into complicated forms of syllables,

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<sup>3</sup> The English translation of this book (Flournoy, 1900) appeared just a year later.

and greatly affects the vowel *a*; but Sanskrit is a language in which the proportion of the *a*'s to the other vowels is almost four to one, so that in uttering three or four syllables in *a*, one could hardly avoid vaguely encountering a Sanskrit word (Flournoy, 1900: 328-329).

What is interesting in F. de Saussure's observations, is an ubiquitous search for sense in glossolalias. He seeks to distinguish between what is intelligible and what is not. Some of H el ene Smith's words are interpreted as Sanskritoid, while others are incomprehensible. Saussure understands well that there is no language deprived of sense. As the system, the differences and regularities already create the possibility of sense. Once there are signifiers, there should be signifieds. If there is a system of discreet forms, there should be sense which, according to the Swiss linguist, is associated with continuity: "Generally, it should stand to reason that all kinds of continuous sense, where I entertained myself to look for it, are currently but a simple play" (Flournoy, 1899: 296).<sup>4</sup> Although for Saussure it was a mere play and exercise to analyze the Sanskritoid writings of the medium, it was going to lead him to more serious 'games', specifically those of anagrams in real Sanskrit texts ten years later. The tactics will be the same – obsession with double-sized matter – searching for sense hidden under forms scattered in the texts, or, as Jean Starobinski (1979) put it, looking for 'words upon words'.

To better characterize H el ene Smith's Sanskritoid, F. de Saussure undertakes a curious exercise. He composes a text in quasi-Latin, without a generally intelligible sense, a collection of words that preserve Latin sounds but neglect grammatical coherence. From this text produced by himself – as if he was himself a glossolalist – Saussure draws the conclusion cited by Flournoy: "It also offers a precise value by the fact that it represents nothing contrary to Latin, even in places where it corresponds to nothing due to absence of sense of the words" (Flournoy, 1899: 316). Once again, this is an affirmation of the systematicity of a senseless language. And again there is a correspondence to what the linguist will be seriously playing ten years later, namely in the case of the Italian poet Giovanni Pascoli (1855-1912), his contemporary, who wrote a text in Latin and from which Saussure drew plenty of anagrams, which surprised the poet greatly. So we are faced with the same procedure, with one small difference. In the case of H el ene Smith the question is of an unknown and senseless language, whereas in the case of Giovanni Pascoli the language is well-known but there is a presumed sublanguage anagrammed below, a sense deeper than on the surface. And in both cases, Saussure unwittingly faces a general theoretical problem: whether language and the sense inherent to it are intentional and conscious or rather whether the unconscious in fact controls the language creativity? But, he does not seem to resolve this problem (for him, Pascoli's anagrams are definitely intentional), what he is preoccupied primarily is materiality itself of the signs in texts.

F. de Saussure also made some notes on H el ene Smith's so-called Martian texts. They are interesting because they were translated into French by Miss Smith herself, or, more precisely, by her reincarnated *alter ego* called L eopold. Commenting on one of such excerpts, Saussure remarks in the letter to Flournoy: "The French words that remain the theme or the substratum of what she means to say, and the law her spirit obeys is that each of these familiar words is rendered a substitute of an exotic nature" (Flournoy, 1899: 304-305). A remarkable conclusion, indeed, that refers to what Saussure will be elaborating a decade later: "either the substitution will be completely arbitrary, or it will be influenced or determined by recalling of a foreign word" (*ibidem*). Thus, Saussure highlights the diverse nature of

<sup>4</sup> Hereinafter translations into English are ours, where the phrases cited are absent in the above mentioned English publication of Th. Flournoy's book.

the linguistic sign. But, as different from other linguists and glossologists preoccupied with analyzing Helen's imaginary languages and trying to find real biographical sources of Miss Smith's language learning, Saussure asserts himself as a theoretical linguist, for whom any linguistic fact is pertinent and representing a general problem to solve. Saussure does not withdraw from the senseless, he looks for correlations between the norm and the abnormality. The case of H el ene Smith makes him think over the borderlines of linguistics as a source of explanation to different speech phenomena.

Among other scholars engaged into this case of glossolalic somnambulism, we should mention the French linguist Victor Henry (1850-1907) who published his study *Le Langage Martien* (The Martian Language, 1901) a year after Th. Flournoy's book. If Saussure analyzes the medium's languages on the synchronic level, Henry undertakes a diachronic and etymological research. He proves the etymological derivation of the Martian language by data from French, German and Hungarian. In this, he seeks to confirm his thesis maintained in an earlier book called *Antinomies linguistiques* (Linguistic Antinomies, 1896): that is, that the processes in etymological evolution of languages are the unconscious processes of a conscious subject. In this respect, he concludes: the invented words deprived of sense are in fact derived from other words. The glossolalist's language is a motivated language. Which is not, obviously, in accord, with Saussure's views on the arbitrariness of the sign. In his turn, Saussure reproaches Henry that his observations on Martian and Hungarian are isolated and do not constitute a system.

The two opposing linguistic views – that of Saussure's and that of Henry's – were somewhat reconciled by someone from a different field of knowledge. Th eodore Flournoy, who consulted both linguists while writing his book on H el ene Smith's case, considered it from a psychological perspective. He held that in each of these cases it is necessary to examine further whether, and in what measure, the individual attributes a fixed meaning to the sounds which he utters, whether he understands (or has, at least, the impression of understanding) his own words, or whether it is only a question of a mechanical and meaningless derangement of the phonetic apparatus, or, again, whether this jargon, unintelligible to the ordinary personality, expresses the ideas of some secondary personality (Flournoy, 1900: 196).

Pursuing the principles of parapsychology, Flournoy maintains that this somnambulist glossolalia cannot be reduced to ecstatic and incoherent speech practiced by religious enthusiasts, nor to the use of a foreign language which really exists. It represents rather a kind of neologism in its highest expression practiced in a systematic manner, with a precise signification, by an unknown subpersonality of the normal Ego. According to Flournoy, this is the case of *glossopoiesis*, the production of a completely new language with all its elements through a subconscious activity.

Now, summing up what has been said, it can be maintained that, from the point of view of modern linguistics, glossolalia can be viewed as a communicative act where the participants are represented by the *glossolalist*, on the one side, who produces the glossolalic speech, and the *glossologist*, on the other, who interprets this mysterious language. In the case of H el ene Smith, the glossolalist and the glossologist came together for the first time in history to perform a 'field work', scholarly and visionary at the same time. Deciphering Miss Smith's glossolalic texts, two prominent Swiss scholars of that time - the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure and the psychologist Flournoy - faced a general theoretical problem: whether language and the sense inherent to it are intentional and conscious or rather whether the unconscious in fact controls the language creativity? From an epistemological perspective, Th eodore Flournoy's studies of H el ene Smith's case of glossolalia opened linguistics, psychology and religion

to a 'new dimension' of science that Flournoy called its 'third path' to overcome a systematic binary contradiction in which we can include Ferdinand de Saussure's binary conception of signs (signifier/signified). In pursuing this perspective, further investigations by linguists, psychologists, and philosophers of religion will, I hope, shed light on the nature of the 'spirit world' inhabited and studied by the Hungarian-Slovenian Baroness and other visionaries inspired by sounds and pictures 'from the beyond'.

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