

Past Tongues Remembered?

What does linguistics analysis reveal about claims of reincarnation—that people under hypnosis often speak a language learned in a previous life?

Sarah G. Thomason

SUPPOSE YOU want to convince people that you've discovered a genuine case of reincarnation. If you can prove that your subject can speak the language of an earlier incarnation, that would obviously be strong evidence in favor of the reincarnation claim—provided, of course, that the language is not the subject's present native language and that you can also show that the subject has had no chance to learn the "past life's" language in his or her current lifetime. The reasoning would go like this: Speaking a language is a skill that requires extensive long-term exposure to the language. If a person has that skill, but lacks such exposure in his/her current lifetime, then the skill must have been acquired paranormally—for instance, in a previous lifetime whose memory lingers on.¹

There are several published case studies in which reincarnation (or the related phenomenon of temporary possession of a subject by another personality) is proposed as the source of a subject's ability to speak a foreign language. The most impressive of these case studies are in two books written by Ian Stevenson (1974; 1984), who is Carlson Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia Medical School. Stevenson has studied two native English-speaking subjects who, under hypnosis, manifest foreign personalities and seem to speak—very haltingly—foreign languages, specifically Swedish and German, respectively. To establish his subjects' linguistic competence in these languages, Stevenson arranged sessions in which native speakers of Swedish and German interviewed the subjects, questioning them about their past lives; in the second case, Stevenson himself participated in the interviews, since he knows some German.

Sarah G. Thomason is a professor of linguistics at the University of Pittsburgh.



The result of these interviews is what Stevenson calls “responsive xenoglossy”—speaking a language one hasn’t learned in one’s current lifetime, and speaking it in a responsive way in conversation. He considers *responsive* xenoglossy to be crucial for making the case for the paranormal phenomenon, as opposed to what he calls “recitative xenoglossy”—the mere ability to recite some words in a foreign language one hasn’t learned. The reason, he says, is that “one can only acquire the ability to use a language responsively by using it, not by overhearing it spoken” (1984, p. 160). That is, you need practice to acquire the skill of conversing in a foreign language; and, if a subject falsely denies having had such practice, then it should be possible to uncover the fraud by careful investigation.

It must be emphasized that Stevenson is energetic in his search for fraud and also for unconscious recourse by his subjects to former but forgotten experience with the languages in question. For his “German” personality, Gretchen, for instance, he investigated the subject’s opportunities for learning German normally. He visited the town she grew up in, interviewed her relatives and old acquaintances, and established (among other things) that the schools she went to did not offer German classes when she attended them. In this respect Stevenson’s attention to proper methodology is exemplary, and there is no hint, here or elsewhere, that he is trying to fool anyone; perhaps the strongest evidence of his sincerity is his inclusion in his books of partial transcripts of the sessions in which the subjects were producing their xenoglossic Swedish and German, so that an independent investigator could actually check some of his data.² There is also no hint that his subjects are consciously trying to fool anyone.

However, in spite of Stevenson's efforts to provide genuine evidence in support of his paranormal claims, his linguistic evidence is completely unconvincing to a professional linguist. There are two main problems with it. First, his notion of "responsive xenoglossy" is fatally flawed as a methodological criterion for determining a person's ability to speak a language. And, second, most of the explanations he suggests for the obvious inadequacies of his subjects' Swedish and German put his paranormal proposal squarely into the realm of pseudoscience: Ultimately, Stevenson's explanations for the linguistic deficiencies render his hypothesis untestable by emptying it of content. I'll discuss each of these problems in turn, using illustrations from his "German" case. Then, after showing why Stevenson's method doesn't work, I'll outline a method that *would* work as a test of a person's ability to speak any given language.

First, consider the idea that you can't converse in a language without knowing it, and without having practiced speaking it regularly over a considerable period of time. This certainly seems like a reasonable idea, and of course it's also a valid idea if you're thinking of ordinary, normal conversation; anyone who has (say) studied French for a couple of years in high school, and then visited France, has probably noticed that it's hard to carry on a conversation in French with this minimal background. It may even be hard to ask directions to the nearest cathedral, and harder still to understand the answer if it's much more complicated than a pointing gesture. So one must agree with Stevenson that, if his subjects, without having learned Swedish and German, can in fact converse normally in these languages, then a paranormal explanation would seem necessary.

But, as Stevenson himself admits, what his subjects produce is far from normal conversation. He argues that their linguistic behavior is close enough to normal conversation to require a paranormal explanation (barring fraud): I—and I believe this is true of any other linguist who studies the data carefully—would argue that his subjects show no sign of any extensive exposure to Swedish or German, in any lifetime.³ The issue, of course, revolves around the difference between the linguistic skills manifested by Stevenson's subjects and the linguistic skills manifested by a normal (as opposed to a paranormal) speaker of a language.

Consider what it means to know a language. First, any native speaker of any language has a vocabulary of thousands of words—certainly upwards of 10,000, probably many more. This is true regardless of schooling. Second, a speaker knows grammatical rules—not necessarily, and not only, the rules taught by a grade-school grammar teacher, but rules that enable the speaker to produce and interpret connected utterances that will be readily understood by other speakers of the same language. For instance, any speaker of English knows that a sentence like "Willy doesn't eat horseradish" is a perfectly good English sentence, while a sentence like "Not Willy horseradish eat" is not good English—it doesn't follow the rules of English grammar for any dialect of English. Children born into an English-speaking community, or any other community, have most of their native language's extremely complex gram-

mathematical rules under control, and a sizable fraction of its vocabulary too, by the age of four or five.

But compare this normal situation to what Stevenson's subjects are doing. His "German" personality, Gretchen, produced about 120 words in sessions with the hypnotist (her husband, who spoke no German). She produced only a few more words independently in her later sessions with German speakers. A number of these German words were either just like the corresponding English words, e.g., *braun*, which is identical in meaning and very close in pronunciation to English "brown"; or they were similar to the English word, for example, *blü*, the word she used for "blue"—which she pronounced with the non-English German vowel [ü] rather than with the English vowel sound, but *not* with the appropriate German sounds for this word (which in German rhymes with English "cow").

Since Gretchen usually answers with just a word or two rather than in full sentences, her minimal vocabulary does not include the numerous grammatically necessary but semantically empty words like helping verbs; and her answers to many questions indicate that she doesn't understand such words, either. In fact, all she seems to know, either for speaking or for understanding, is a handful of words.

Well, then, how does Gretchen manage to converse? The answer is that she doesn't, in any normal sense of the word *converse*. In the partial transcripts Stevenson provides, Gretchen's spontaneous contributions are almost entirely confined to identical, repeated comments about the danger she's in because people are listening. (Her fears apparently have to do with religious persecution connected with Martin Luther, and Stevenson's own analysis shows them to be completely unrealistic and anachronistic.) Otherwise, she speaks only in short answers to other people's questions. Often her responses are simply repetitions of what the interviewer just said.

Of Gretchen's 172 other responses, 42 are answers to yes/no questions (some asked in German, some asked in English). By "yes/no questions" I mean questions that require only "yes" or "no" as an answer. But yes/no questions don't count for much as a test of language knowledge, because all she has to do is say *ja* for "yes" or *nein* for "no," and she has a 50-50 chance of being right. In any case, since the questions are about her own past life, and no one else present knows anything about it, there is no way to tell whether or not her answers are factually accurate. Furthermore, she can answer any yes/no question even if she doesn't understand the content of the question at all—because the intonation pattern of yes/no questions in German is similar to the intonation of yes/no questions in English and *different* from the intonation of statements and other kinds of questions: Usually (though not always) there is a rise in pitch at the end of a yes/no question, but not in other kinds of sentences. You can check this by saying out loud the questions "Are you hungry?" and "What do you want to eat?" and comparing their intonation patterns. The German pattern is the same. So, for instance, when an interviewer asks Gretchen whether she has a doll, the question is: *Sag mir was von deinen Puppen. . . . Hast du eine?* (Tell me something about your

dolls. . . . Do you have one?) Gretchen can recognize the yes/no question by its pitch rise and can safely answer *nein*, though there is nothing in the following discussion about dolls to show that Gretchen has any idea what the interviewer is talking about.

So I think we have to throw out all of Gretchen's answers to yes/no questions as evidence for anything, except for a few answers other than "yes" or "no" that she gave to such questions. This leaves the other questions, those that require a content answer: 102 of these were asked in German, and 28 were asked in English. Gretchen herself speaks only "German," such as it is; but she does much better in answering English content questions than in answering German ones. When the questions were asked in English, she gave 22 appropriate answers, as against 2 inappropriate answers and 4 dubious ones. By contrast, and in sharp contrast to Stevenson's own analysis, I count only 28 appropriate answers to content questions asked in German, as against 45 clearly inappropriate ones and 29 copout answers, such as "I don't understand" and "I don't know." This isn't a very good score of appropriate answers, even before you eliminate some that are repetitions.

Now some of the answers that I consider inappropriate Stevenson considers appropriate, especially because he counts answers as appropriate when they are, in his terms, "appropriate associations to a preceding question, but not direct answers." Here's a typical example. The topic of discussion is food, and specifically what Gretchen eats at different times of day. The German-speaking interviewer asks, *Was gibt es nach dem Schlafen?* (What is there after sleeping? i.e., What do you eat for breakfast?) Gretchen answers, *Schlafen . . . Bettzimmer* (Sleep . . . bed-room). Clearly, Gretchen has not understood the question, which contains only entirely ordinary German words and constructions; instead, she has understood only the word *schlafen* (sleep), and she answers as if the question had been about *where* she sleeps—a wrong guess—and with the wrong word: her word *Bettzimmer* is made up of German *Bett* (bed) plus *Zimmer* (room), a literal translation of the English word *bedroom*; but the German word for bedroom is *Schlafzimmer*, literally "sleep room."

This is typical of Gretchen's linguistic performance. She does know a few German words—a tiny fraction of what a teen-age native speaker would know. (She is supposed to be about 14 years old.) She occasionally produces grammatically correct phrases, but in general she neither produces nor understands the simplest German grammatical constructions. When she doesn't understand a content question, which is often, she guesses; sometimes she guesses right—the topics of discussion in these interviews are very limited, so some right guesses aren't surprising—but more often she guesses wrong or says, "I don't understand."

The question is, do we need a paranormal explanation for her knowledge of some German words and phrases? Surely not; Stevenson's research into her background turns up a few opportunities for this amount of very limited exposure to German—World War II movies, a look at a German book—and that's all she shows any evidence of. What evidence there is, furthermore,

shows definitely that at least some of her experience with German is with the written language, because some of her pronunciations can only have come from an English speaker's reading of written German, not from a German speaker's pronunciation or reading. And the Gretchen personality can't be responsible for the subject's slight familiarity with written German anyway, because Gretchen says she can't read or write. The point is that Gretchen's level of "responsive xenoglossy" is so very low that Stevenson's argument about the necessity of practice to produce such a skill collapses. At best, she speaks German about as well as someone might who studied the language in high school for a year about 20 years ago.

On the other hand, Stevenson certainly needs some explanation for Gretchen's inadequacies as a German speaker, even with his generous count of appropriate responses to questions. He makes several suggestions to account for her lack of knowledge of her native language. One is that the Gretchen phenomenon represents only a partial manifestation of the foreign personality in the subject, and the part that manifests itself doesn't include much knowledge of the language. I have nothing to say about this, except that it does not seem to be a concept that lends itself to scientific testing.

Another of Stevenson's proposals is that Gretchen may have learned German inadequately because, although her father was supposed to have been a local official who "would presumably . . . have been at least a moderately well-educated man and a speaker of excellent German," Gretchen herself (according to Stevenson's conjecture) "was an illegitimate and neglected child who spent most of her time in the kitchen with a servant"; and since the servant was probably an uneducated person, Gretchen might therefore have come out with poor German-speaking skills (1984, p. 46).

Here Stevenson betrays his profound ignorance about language. Level of education has nothing at all to do with fluency. Even if Gretchen's father spoke educated Standard German and Gretchen herself spoke a substandard German dialect—conjectures which, incidentally, Stevenson makes on the basis of fragmentary and often inconsistent statements of Gretchen's—then their respective German dialects would have differed only in a small number of linguistic features; in most features they would have been identical, and in any case the two people would have been completely equivalent in their abilities to put sentences together coherently. So, though Stevenson could perhaps explain differences between Gretchen's speech and Standard German with such a hypothesis (at least, he could do so if there were any evidence to support his conjectures), he can't in this way explain Gretchen's near-total lack of grammar and her minimal vocabulary.

Stevenson's best attempt at an explanation is also the one he likes best. Perhaps, he says, "the grammatical and other imperfections [in Gretchen's speech] . . . may have arisen from the great difficulties involved in mediumistic communication" (1984, p. 69). Specifically, the earlier incarnation or the possessing personality has to talk through the medium of a native speaker of English, and this presents all the problems one finds (he says) with second-language learning by an adult: The English-speaking medium can't process

the foreign language properly because of the subject's own long-ingrained English speech habits, so things come out wrong—just as your pronunciation and grammar would come out wrong, if, with only a year or so of casual study, you tried to speak German. However, the cases he describes, if they were to be accepted as genuine paranormal phenomena, would not resemble second-language learning by an adult; instead, they would be more akin to cases in which an adult tries to speak a language that she/he learned in early childhood but has not spoken for thirty years or more. In both types of cases, pronunciation might well be affected by the subject's English; but, as mentioned earlier, several of Gretchen's pronunciation errors clearly arose from an English speaker's misreading of ordinary German spelling, not from the influence of the English sound system *per se*. In a long-unused native language, grammar could also be affected by the language normally used by the speaker in later life, but many basic grammatical constructions of the speaker's first language would remain intact.

More important, in all kinds of language learning and language loss a speaker's *passive* knowledge—the ability to understand the spoken language—is considerably greater than his/her *active*, or speaking, knowledge of the language being learned or forgotten. Significantly, Gretchen's German does not fit this well-established pattern at all. She clearly understands German just as little as she speaks it: There is no discernible difference between her active knowledge and her passive knowledge. In both speaking and understanding, her knowledge of the language is limited to words, and not even very many of those. So this proposal of Stevenson's also fails to account for Gretchen's linguistic deficiencies, though it could possibly account for some—just some—of her problems with the actual production of German utterances.

What all this means is that Stevenson's notion of "responsive xenoglossy" is not a good test of a subject's linguistic knowledge, because there is too much room for successful guesswork in a question-and-answer interview. The method also fails for other reasons, such as the investigator's bias in interpreting the results of the interview—namely, in counting appropriate vs. inappropriate responses. (In other words, you get the experimenter effect in judgments about the responses; and, in this respect, my skeptical judgments—as opposed to my strictly linguistic ones on points where there is clear evidence in the transcript—may be just as suspect as Stevenson's believer judgments.) So if you want a good test of a hypothesis about a subject's knowledge of a language, you need to find a method that makes guessing unhelpful and excludes the experimenter effect.

Here it is. It's very simple. First, take a word list of basic vocabulary (there are standard lists that linguists use in their field-work on previously undescribed languages)—100 or 200 words of the sort that any language is likely to have, e.g., words for "mother," "father," "moon," "water," "walk," "sleep," and so forth. Hypnotize the subject so that she manifests the putative earlier incarnation, and have her translate the word list into the language of that incarnation. Also, get translations of paradigms—e.g., "I walk," "you walk," "they walk"; "I walked," "you walked," etc.; "I will walk," "you will

walk," etc.; "I'm walking," etc.; and translations of simple sentences—e.g., "My dog eats bread," "Your dog doesn't eat bread," "Does my dog eat bread?" and so forth. Then wait a month or more. Hypnotize the subject again and have her translate the same items again—without, of course, giving the subject the opportunity beforehand to review what she said in the first session. (In fact, the subject should not be told what will go on in the second session.) If the subject knows the language in question, the translations should be real German, or real Swedish, or whatever the language is. In addition, though they might well show some variation (for instance, because many languages have different words that might translate the same English word), the translations should be mostly identical for the two sessions.

Second, test the subject for comprehension of the language—and remember that, if you want to assume some forgetting during intervening lifetimes, comprehension should be preserved better than production. Read the subject a short story in the language; make sure that the text contains only simple grammatical constructions. Then ask the subject questions about the story—they can be either yes/no questions or content questions, since you can tell what the answers should be, but content questions are preferable.

If the subject fails these tests, she does not know the language. This will not, of course, prove that the case is *not* one of reincarnation or temporary possession; but at least no one will be able to use the linguistic data as evidence in support of a claim that it is such a case.

As a postscript, I should add that I have used the first steps of this method to check the proposals of another hypnotist who believed that his subjects were speaking languages of previous lives under hypnosis. (The later steps turned out to be unnecessary because the first steps yielded a conclusive result; see Thomason 1984 for a description of these cases.) The hypnotist interviewed the "foreign personalities" using a word list I had sent him, and sent me tape recordings of the interviews for analysis. As in Stevenson's case studies, all the participants—hypnotist and subjects alike—seemed to be innocent of any intent to deceive. And, also as in Stevenson's cases, all the subjects seemed to be equally innocent of any systematic knowledge of the languages in question. Unlike Stevenson's data, however, the data I worked with provided sufficient evidence to test the hypnotist's hypothesis that his three subjects were speaking nineteenth-century Bulgarian, fourteenth-century Gaelic, and nineteenth-century Apache, respectively. The analysis showed that the subjects did not know the basic vocabulary of their putative earlier native languages; in addition, and perhaps even more significantly, it showed that their utterances in the "previous lives' languages" were so unsystematic as to be impossible components of *any* natural human language.

The linguistic performances of these three hypnotic subjects and of Stevenson's hypnotic subjects as well, in spite of the indeterminacy that results from Stevenson's flawed methodology, all point to the same conclusion: If you want to speak a foreign language, you will need to learn it through systematic exposure to its words and structures during your current lifetime.

Notes

1. There is also the possibility of divine intervention; this is the source that is sometimes claimed for "foreign-language speaking" in cases of *glossolalia*, or "speaking in tongues," in charismatic Christian churches. In this paper, however, I will be concentrating on reincarnation claims. For a thorough study of glossolalia, see Samarin 1972.

2. In his 1984 book Stevenson also discusses a third case, from India; but he gives very little data from this subject, so there is no way to arrive at an independent judgment on the material.

3. Among other things, this means that in these cases it seems unnecessary to deal so thoroughly with the question of possible fraud. If either subject cheated, the cheating was so unsuccessful that it might reasonably be compared to a case in which a student cheats on an exam by copying from the failing student sitting nearby.

References

- Samarin, William J. 1972. *Tongues of Men and Angels: The Religious Language of Pentecostalism*. New York: Macmillan.
- Stevenson, Ian. 1974. *Xenoglossy: A Review and Report of a Case*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- . 1984. *Unlearned Language: New Studies in Xenoglossy*. Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia.
- Thomason, Sarah G. 1984. Do you remember your previous life's language in your present incarnation? *American Speech*, 59:340-350. ●