

XENOGLOSSY

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1. INTRODUCTION. The concept of **xenoglossy** is most closely associated with Ian Stevenson, Carlson Professor of Psychiatry at the University of Virginia Medical School, who has published detailed analyses of several especially well-documented purported cases of the phenomenon. Stevenson defines xenoglossy as ‘speaking a real language entirely unknown to [the speaker] in his ordinary state’ (1974:1). He says that the term was originally coined by C. Richet (1905-1907). As Stevenson notes (see especially the survey in his 1974 book), there are numerous published reports of cases of xenoglossy, but most of them contain too little information to permit a test of their validity.

Stevenson argues for a crucial distinction between what he calls **recitative xenoglossy** and **responsive xenoglossy**. In recitative xenoglossy the subject expresses ‘phrases and sometimes longer passages of a foreign language, usually learned earlier in life, without the ability to converse in the language’ (1974:2); the subject ‘usually exhibits rote memory only’ (ibid., 5) and may not understand these fragments of the strange language at all. Clearly, recitative xenoglossy does not actually fit under the definition of xenoglossy, because—although the subject may have forgotten most of what s/he knew of the language after many years in which s/he has not used it—the language can hardly be counted as entirely unknown to the subject.

In responsive xenoglossy, by contrast, ‘the subject can converse intelligently in the foreign language’ (ibid.). The significance of this criterion is that, in Stevenson’s view, ‘one can only acquire the ability to use a language responsively by using it, not by overhearing it spoken’ (1984:160). It is less easy than Stevenson believes to characterize the notion of ‘conversing intelligently’ precisely, and therefore not so easy to test for such an ability; but what he has in mind is that the subject must be able to show that s/he has understood questions posed in the foreign language by answering them in an appropriate manner. Given the problem of

earlier normal learning in recitative xenoglossy, it is not surprising that Stevenson's research focuses on cases of the responsive type, which he believes to be the only truly probative cases of xenoglossy. In the rest of this article, I will use the term 'xenoglossy' to refer exclusively to this category.

Stevenson's proposed explanation for the cases of xenoglossy that he considers genuine is that 'a personality surviving death [can] express in another physical body—whether through reincarnation or temporary possession—a language that he had learned in a previous life' (1984:166). He says that he cannot 'decide between the hypothesis of possession and that of reincarnation' in the Jensen case, for instance (1974:84); in that case he first favored reincarnation as the more likely explanation but then switched to possession, without quite knowing why (ibid.). In general, he is cautious in making claims about reincarnation: a phrase that recurs in many of his writings is 'cases of the reincarnation type'. See, for instance, articles like 'A preliminary report on an unusual case of the reincarnation type with xenoglossy' (*The Journal of the American Society for Psychological Research* 74:331-48, 1980) and book titles like *Cases of the reincarnation type* (e.g. vol. 1, *Ten cases in India*, Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1975). Finding evidence to support claims of reincarnation is a major goal of his, and he is correct in his belief that a firmly-established case of genuine xenoglossy should convince skeptics of the need for some paranormal explanation.

In the following sections I will first outline several case studies: Stevenson's prime examples—the Jensen, Gretchen, and Sharada cases—and three less sophisticated examples provided by a Pittsburgh hypnotist (§2). Then, in §3, I will consider whether a paranormal explanation is needed for any of these cases. My conclusion will be that, although fraud can probably be discounted in all these cases, the linguistic evidence is too weak to provide support for the claims of xenoglossy. A fuller discussion of xenoglossy would encompass related linguistic phenomena such as glossolalia (speaking in tongues in a religious setting; see Samarin 1972) and pseudo-foreign accents in the speech of "entities" channeled by modern-day mediums, or channelers (see Thomason 1989); space limits prevent inclusion of these topics here, however.

2. CASE STUDIES. Stevenson begins his 1974 book with a survey of various cases of xenoglossy that have been reported in the literature, but he does not make strong claims for

their validity because, he feels, not enough information is available to permit rigorous testing of the claims. His 1974 and 1984 books focus instead on three cases of responsive xenoglossy that could be subjected to serious testing. I will sketch the first case study in some detail and then, because the pattern of Stevenson's investigations and analyses is similar in the later cases, I will give briefer outlines of the two cases covered in Stevenson 1984.

The 1974 case study is that of Jensen Jacoby, a male personality manifested by TE, a thirty-seven-year-old American housewife, under hypnosis. (The outline of the case presented here is from Stevenson 1974.) Jensen appeared in eight hypnotic sessions, all during 1955-1956, through a technique of age regression that purportedly moved TE back beyond her youth to an earlier life as Jensen, a Swedish peasant. During these sessions Jensen was questioned, first in English but later in Swedish, about his life; he answered in English to English questions and in Swedish to Swedish questions (though some questions were posed first in Swedish and then, when he seemed not to understand, in English). The hypnotist was TE's husband.

TE was born and raised in Philadelphia; her immigrant parents spoke English, Polish, Yiddish, and Russian in the home while she was growing up. The only foreign language she had studied in school was French. She had never been exposed systematically to Swedish or any other Scandinavian language, and her only significant experience with Swedish consisted, as far as she could remember, of a few Swedish phrases spoken in a series of television plays about the lives of Swedish Americans that she had seen some years before 1955 and had remembered rather well.

In investigating the Jensen case, Stevenson went to great lengths to rule out, as an explanation for Jensen's Swedish speech, all possibility of fraud or of forgotten experiences with Swedish or other Scandinavian languages. He had TE take two polygraph tests, a word association test, and a language aptitude test; he obtained signed statements from TE, her husband, and other relatives and acquaintances attesting to her non-acquaintance with Scandinavians and Scandinavian languages; he established that no Scandinavian languages were taught at the schools she attended, and that there were no periods in her life when she could have learned Swedish secretly without the knowledge of her husband and other relatives; and so forth. Stevenson was in fact extremely zealous in his efforts to eliminate

fraud as a possible explanation. He concluded that ‘in this case the capacity to speak Swedish, as this subject did, was not normally acquired by TE’ (1974:71). His demonstration that there was no fraud in the case is convincing, but his claim that Jensen had the capacity to speak Swedish is not.

Jensen’s Swedish is, as Stevenson acknowledges, less than perfectly fluent. First, in the interview studied most intensively by Stevenson (that of session seven), Jensen uses only about sixty words spontaneously (i.e. before Swedish-speaking interlocutors use them) and, according to one of Stevenson’s consultants, eliminating cognates with English and German or Yiddish reduces this number to thirty-one intelligible words (ibid.). Second, in this interview Jensen has a total Swedish vocabulary of about one hundred words; this is not very impressive when compared with the thousands of words known by any native speaker of any natural language, even taking into account the limited contexts in which Jensen spoke Swedish. Third, he rarely answers questions in full sentences; in the complete transcript of session seven that is included as an appendix in Stevenson 1974, the vast majority of Jensen’s answers are one- or two-word utterances, with no complex sentences at all.

Opinions on the quality of Jensen’s Swedish pronunciation vary. On the one hand, two of Stevenson’s consultants praise Jensen’s Swedish accent, and one says that only a native speaker of Swedish could pronounce the word for ‘seven’ correctly, as Jensen does (ibid., 37, 38); Stevenson takes these judgments as evidence for ‘the excellence of the Swedish accent in at least some places’ (ibid., 66). On the other hand, Stevenson refers elsewhere to ‘the peculiarities of Jensen’s pronunciation, especially his habit of adding a vowel at the end of words ending in a consonant’ (ibid., 96), and admits that the transcription of the interviews in ‘correct Swedish spelling’ obscures Jensen’s pronunciation errors.

Other surprising aspects of Jensen’s linguistic competence—surprising, that is, under the assumption that he is/was a native speaker of the language—must be accounted for as well. Several psychic-research specialists who knew Swedish and/or Norwegian interviewed TE while she was manifesting the Jensen personality under hypnosis, and they agreed that Jensen’s Swedish was mixed with Norwegian; Stevenson hypothesizes that this is to be accounted for by his having had a Norwegian mother. In addition, Jensen speaks English, and this, in Stevenson’s view, shows that Jensen must have lived in the 17th century and

emigrated to New Sweden in North America, where he learned English. Analogous proposals are said to account for the apparent mixture of Swedish dialects in Jensen's speech.

In spite of all these problems with Jensen's Swedish, Stevenson concludes that it is 'incontestable' that 'the subject did converse intelligibly in a Swedish of excellent accent (in some places) and fair vocabulary' (ibid., 71). In drawing this conclusion, he emphasizes the fact that, in order to converse in a language, one must practice it; it is not possible to converse if one has merely memorized some words and phrases.

Stevenson 1984 contains two case studies, those of Gretchen and Sharada. Gretchen is a personality manifested in hypnotic sessions between 1970 and 1974 by an American housewife named Dolores Jay. Like TE, Mrs. Jay's previous (remembered) acquaintance with German was confined to television programs and a look at a German book. As in the Jensen case, the hypnotist was the subject's husband. One difference between the two cases (aside from the specific language of the manifestation) is that Mrs. Jay studied a German dictionary at one point during the relevant period, in an effort to learn enough German to please her ailing husband during subsequent hypnotic sessions; but Stevenson points out that Mrs. Jay had already produced 206 words spontaneously before this event (1984:48). In this case too, Stevenson made great efforts to rule out fraud as a possible explanation for the subject's linguistic performance. His conclusion that there was no fraud is convincing in both cases, though both women's desire to please their husbands by manifesting the foreign personalities might have encouraged them to pay close attention to any stray Swedish or German phrases that came their way.

Gretchen's linguistic performance is qualitatively similar to Jensen's. In an appendix (1984:169-203) Stevenson provides 'extracts of transcripts from sessions with Gretchen' (169), which consist of interviewers' questions and Gretchen's answers. The answers are largely confined to utterances of one or two words, and many of them are simply repetitions of the interviewer's question (but with declarative sentence intonation rather than question intonation). Gretchen's German vocabulary is minute, and her pronunciation is spotty. For instance, the word she uses for 'blue' is *blü*—which is clearly the English word with the German vowel [ü] replacing the English vowel; it is not the German word, which is *blau*, rhyming with English *cow*. Some of her pronunciations seem to be influenced by German

spelling rather than by German sounds; for instance, Stevenson says that she pronounces German *schön* ‘beautiful’ like English *shown*, rather than—as one might expect from typical anglicizations of the German vowel [ö]—like English *Shane* or *shern*.

Unlike Jensen, who speaks English as well as Swedish (with Norwegian mixed in with the Swedish), Gretchen speaks only German. She clearly understands English, however, since she can ‘respond in German to questions put to her both in English and in German’ (ibid., 32). She does, however, use an occasional English word, e.g. *schicken* for ‘chicken’ (ibid.). Perhaps because there is no plausible analogue here to his New Sweden explanation for Jensen’s English, Stevenson offers no explanation for Gretchen’s ability to understand English or for her knowledge of some English words.

Gretchen says that she is illiterate (ibid., 40), but at one point she writes about forty words (some of them repetitions) in German (43), with spelling errors that one might expect from an English speaker who had learned only a little German.

In Gretchen’s case too, Stevenson is confident about the need for a paranormal explanation for the subject’s linguistic performance. In a letter responding to criticisms of the Gretchen case, he says that ‘[a]lmost anyone might pick up casually a little German, but not the amount—small as it was—that Gretchen knew’ (letter to the editor of *The Journal of Parapsychology* 51:373, 1987).

The Sharada case differs markedly from the Jensen and Gretchen cases. First, the subject—an Indian woman named Uttara Huddar (henceforth UH), born in 1941, who speaks Marathi natively—was not hypnotized; rather, the Sharada personality was manifested ‘spontaneously, although almost certainly first when the subject...was in an altered state of consciousness’ (Stevenson 1984:73). Second, unlike Jensen and Gretchen, the Sharada personality speaks her supposed native language, Bengali, relatively fluently, often using long and complete sentences (ibid.). In addition, Stevenson claims that (again in contrast to the Jensen and Gretchen cases) ‘a substantial number of Sharada’s statements have been verified and a family corresponding to them has been traced in the part of Bengal where she said she had lived’ (ibid.). Certainly Sharada is much more informative and explicit about her life than either Jensen or Gretchen.

Sharada first appeared in 1974, speaking Bengali and dressing in Bengali style rather

than in the style appropriate for her home state (Maharashtra), in a hospital where UH was being treated for psychological illness. Stevenson judged her to have lived in the early nineteenth century, an estimate based in part on her ignorance of modern objects like trains and fountain pens (p. 106). Until 1976, when she began to make less frequent and briefer appearances, Sharada manifested about twice a month at irregular intervals.

UH has long had ‘a special interest in Bengal and the Bengalis’ (ibid., p. 81), and so has her father. However, according to Stevenson the family does not know Bengali and has no connections with Bengal. The city in which UH has spent much of her life, Nagpur, has about 10,000 Bengalis in a total population of about one million (p. 137), so UH could have had contact with Bengali speakers during her present lifetime. She had had a few lessons in reading Bengali (p. 139); this would have been an easy task, as she already knew a related script for her (UH’s) own language, Marathi. UH also studied Sanskrit, which would help both with learning to speak and with learning to read Bengali. UH’s knowledge of Bengal may also be accounted for by normal means: she read Bengali novels in translation (p. 143).

As in the Jensen and Gretchen cases, Stevenson was thorough in checking possibilities for explaining Sharada’s Bengali by normal (as opposed to paranormal) means. In this case, however, he does not focus on the possibility of fraud, perhaps because normal means for learning Bengali were demonstrably available to UH during most of her life before the Sharada manifestations. The Bengali-speaking experts he consulted about Sharada’s linguistic competence disagreed. A Dr. Roy, for instance, said that Sharada ‘demonstrated a complete command of the Bengali language’ (120), and a Professor Pal agreed (121). By contrast, M.C. Bhattacharya said that, ‘although Sharada could speak Bengali intelligently, she did not speak it fluently and sometimes had to search for words’ (120); this judgment was echoed by Ranjan Borra, who added that her Bengali accent ‘was definitely not that of a native Bengali speaker...[but] was rather that of a non-Bengali who has learned to speak Bengali after childhood’ (122). Even Dr. Roy commented that her pronunciation of Bengali was not good (124).

Probably most significant, however, is the assessment of Professor Sisir Kumar Das, Tagore Professor of Bengali at the University of Delhi (126) and ‘the only trained linguist’ among all the native Bengali speakers who studied Sharada’s Bengali (133). He concluded

that her Bengali was neither natural nor fluent, that her accent was foreign, that her Bengali represented a substandard dialect of West Bengal (127), that she spoke a non-native variety of 20th-century Bengali—definitely not a 19th-century variety—and that, in sum, her Bengali ‘resembles that of someone who acquired Bengali as a second language, though not very perfectly’ (132). Stevenson presents Professor Das’s testimony in full, but suggests that, because Das’s conversations with Sharada were brief, it might be that Sharada had too little time to ‘warm up’ in talking to him, and therefore did not display her Bengali skills to full advantage (133); similarly, he argues that Sharada’s Marathi-influenced pronunciation of Bengali might be accounted for by her need to speak through UH’s mouth. Neither Das’s testimony nor UH’s deep interest in Bengal and Bengali shakes Stevenson’s belief in the paranormal nature of Sharada’s Bengali.

The Sharada case study differs from the Jensen and Gretchen cases in one other important respect: for the other two cases Stevenson provided transcripts of the actual interactions between the subjects and the interviewers, but for Sharada he gives only a few extracts from English translations of the interviews (206-209). There is therefore no data that would permit the crucial linguistic evidence for the claim of xenoglossy to be evaluated. In a brief table Stevenson does provide 24 Bengali words uttered by Sharada, together with their Sanskrit, Modern Bengali, Marathi, and Hindi equivalents (128-29). Of these words, 8 resemble Sanskrit but not (or at least not as closely) Bengali; 7 resemble both Sanskrit and Bengali; 7 resemble Bengali but not Sanskrit; and two do not resemble any of the four languages closely (though for one of these a different dialect of Bengali is said to be a plausible source). There are no words that are very similar to Marathi or Hindi but not to Sanskrit and/or Bengali, and none of the words that are similar to Sanskrit but not to Bengali resemble Marathi or Hindi more closely than Bengali. The sum total of the linguistic evidence provided by Stevenson is thus inconclusive, though it does suggest a reliance by Sharada on UH’s Sanskrit training; there is no evidence that Sharada herself had studied Sanskrit.

A final point that should be noted here is that reported cases of xenoglossy and other reincarnation phenomena are very common in India, presumably because of the strong Indian religious traditions concerning reincarnation. Although classical traditions of reincarnation

in India do not assert the possibility of memories of earlier incarnations, a popular belief in such memories is not unusual (Fred Clothey, personal communication, 1985). Sharada's case thus fits generally into a pattern that recurs elsewhere in India.

I will close this section by describing briefly three less sophisticated cases of purported xenoglossy (see Thomason 1984 for a fuller discussion). These cases were studied much less intensively than those of Jensen, Gretchen, and Sharada, and the personalities were manifested over much shorter time periods (usually in just a few sessions). No systematic attempt was made to rule out fraud as an explanation for the phenomena; the question of fraud did not arise, because the subjects produced no words of the languages they apparently believed they were speaking. (My impression was that all the subjects and the hypnotist himself believed in the genuineness of the manifestations—that is, they believed that the subjects had been age-regressed into earlier lives and that, encouraged by the hypnotist, they were speaking the languages of those earlier lives.) In these cases the claims about xenoglossy could be, and were, tested directly. The hypnotist, Ralph Grossi, provided me with tape recordings and, more substantively, with word lists in the supposed xenoglossic language. He asked me to 'verify' the languages his subjects were speaking, and at my request he contributed to the evaluation by eliciting words (from a standard list of basic vocabulary items) from his subjects while they were under hypnosis.

I studied three of his subjects' speech. All the subjects were native speakers of American English. In the outlines that follow, all references are to the subjects' speech while they were under hypnosis and manifesting the purported foreign personalities. Subject A said that she lived in Bulgaria early in the 19th century, and that she spoke Bulgarian. Her connected speech, which was slow but fluent, contained one sound ([x], as in the German pronunciation of *Bach*) that is not found in native English and a few sound sequences, e.g. [št], that are common in Bulgarian but not in English. However, the word list she provided contained no Bulgarian words at all; and the forms she gave for the numerals '4', '5', '7', '8', '47', '48', '49', and '50' showed no patterning of the type that is universal in numeral systems (see Thomason 1984 for a detailed analysis and discussion). When I told Grossi that Subject A was not speaking Bulgarian, he suggested that she could have been speaking some other language—perhaps Russian, because she had told him (under hypnosis) that she had been

born in Russia but later moved to Bulgaria. He was skeptical when I assured him that her speech was not Russian, and that it was, in fact, no human language at all. It should be noted, however, that at first hearing A's connected speech did sound vaguely Slavic; when a professor of Slavic linguistics listened to it briefly, he knew that it wasn't Polish or Russian (which he spoke himself), but thought it might be Bulgarian or some other South Slavic language (which he didn't speak). This point is worth keeping in mind when one considers Stevenson's consultants' comments that Jensen mixed some Norwegian with his Swedish.

In his reported previous life Subject B was a knight called Sir Guy de Maupassant [sic], who lived in the village Chanson in 14th-century Normandy. He said that his language was Gaelic—which would be a Celtic language, like Irish or Scots Gaelic, except that neither of these is or was spoken in Normandy—but in fact B's speech had a distinctly French accent, with such phonetic features as nasalized vowels and stress on the last syllable of the word. As with Subject A, Subject B's connected speech struck two people who knew French as some sort of French: they couldn't understand the actual words, they said, but they felt that there was 'some basic French in there'. The great majority of his word-list translations, though closer to French than to Celtic, belonged to neither language. Instead, they resembled a French-accented distortion of Church Latin pronunciation.

Finally, Subject C was (she believed) regressed by Grossi to a previous life as a 19th-century Apache squaw named Chloe. In spite of Grossi's urging, C was extremely reluctant to speak any Apache while she was manifesting the Chloe personality. Instead, she spoke Pidgin English, and eventually Grossi himself lapsed into Pidgin English while he was speaking to her. But his faith in the previous life she was describing was unshaken by this, or even by her response to his question about how she knew she was born in 1852: 'When born, chief write on head year born and what month.' He was similarly unmoved by her assertion that she died in 1873 at the age of 29. When he persisted in his efforts to get her to speak Apache, she finally did produce a few words; but since these words had numerous English sounds that don't occur in Apache (notably *r*) and lacked all non-English sounds that do occur in Apache, they did not help to establish the case for C's xenoglossy.

Unlike Stevenson, I did not gather detailed information about Grossi's subjects' language backgrounds. But educated guesses can be made about them: A showed little or no evidence

of having studied foreign languages, though somewhere she had learned that Bulgarian has [x] and a common sound sequence [št]; B, by contrast, must have studied a little French (though not enough to translate more than a few words from English into French), and he must have been exposed fairly extensively to Church Latin, though not to Latin as it is taught in U.S. public schools. Subject C was much less sophisticated linguistically than B and somewhat less sophisticated than A; her Pidgin English was (I infer) her idea of how an Apache squaw would have talked.

3. ARE THESE CASES PARANORMAL?. In each of the cases described in §2, the claim has been made that a paranormal explanation is required to account for the linguistic performance of the subjects—that, in fact, the subjects exhibit the phenomenon of xenoglossy. Grossi’s claims should not be compared directly with Stevenson’s: Stevenson is a scholar, and Grossi is not; Stevenson subjected his three main cases to close scrutiny and as much testing as he could think of, while Grossi accepted his at face value. Linguistically, however, Stevenson’s more elaborately studied cases are just as unconvincing as Grossi’s.

Fraud is not as important a consideration in Stevenson’s cases as he believes. Sharada, who is relatively fluent, is the only subject who shows enough linguistic ability to require any assumption of significant exposure to the language, in any lifetime. But in her case the paranormal explanation cannot be fully tested, both because Stevenson provides almost no Bengali data (and no connected Bengali speech at all) and because she grew up with an interest in Bengali and with opportunities to learn it. Moreover, the very close relationships among all the Indic languages—including UH’s native language Marathi and Sharada’s native language Bengali, both descended from a language almost identical to Sanskrit—means that acquiring a little Bengali would have been very easy for UH; and it is significant that the only Sharada data that Stevenson does cite, the 24 ‘Bengali’ words, contain more Sanskrit than Bengali. Just as Grossi’s Subject B seemed to make use of the languages he had apparently been exposed to (French, Church Latin) in subconsciously constructing his “Gaelic”, so Sharada seems to exploit her Sanskrit in subconsciously constructing her Bengali, although she has also learned some real Bengali too. The only person who investigated Sharada’s Bengali refutes the claim that Sharada lived in the early 19th century, because the Bengali she knows is modern. The fact that Stevenson was able to verify some of the information she

provided about her previous life in Bengal is not probative: some of her statements checked out, but others did not, and the possibility of accidental matches remains. More importantly, only solid **linguistic** evidence can help to establish the case as xenoglossy.

The same is true of Stevenson's other two cases, and here he was able to verify only a few of the statements that Jensen and Gretchen made about their lives. He speculates about retardation and mental disorders to account for some clearly inaccurate statements, and about such factors as immigrant parents, emigration to New Sweden, and illegitimacy to account for other oddities in their accounts of themselves. But Jensen's and Gretchen's odd statements are a rather close match for the kinds of stories told by Grossi's subjects about their lives. Gretchen's anachronistic concerns about religious persecution, for instance, are similar in kind to Sir Guy's anachronistic statement that he and other 14th-century Norman knights are subjects of the English king but would prefer a French king—in spite of the fact that the English lost Normandy to France more than 150 years earlier, in 1204.

In the Jensen and Gretchen cases, Stevenson successfully eliminates the possibility of any systematic study of Swedish or German by the subjects in their present lifetimes. But in these cases deliberate fraud is already effectively ruled out by the poor quality of the linguistic performance: someone who had secretly studied Swedish or German would surely know more than these subjects do. Stevenson has attempted to make a strong linguistic case with his notion of responsive xenoglossy, arguing in various places that understanding questions and answering them intelligibly requires extensive practice, not just casual contact with a foreign language (see e.g. 1974:75). My objection is that his test is inadequate. A word list of the type elicited by Grossi at my request provides much better evidence of vocabulary knowledge, and other linguistically conclusive tests can easily be devised for grammatical knowledge; adequate tests would not include the types of uncontrolled interview situations that Stevenson relied on.

Stevenson is mistaken in his belief that a subject could not be expected to guess what an interviewer is asking and to respond to it within the limits of a minimal foreign-language vocabulary and almost no foreign-language grammar. First, in both the Jensen and the Gretchen transcripts, the interviewers very often pose yes/no questions—that is, questions to which the appropriate answer is simply 'yes' or 'no'. Such questions, in Swedish and German

as in English, end with a rising intonation, so they can be recognized as yes/no questions whether or not the subject understands the actual content of the question. But then the subject merely has to know the words for ‘yes’ and ‘no’ in order to answer intelligibly and appropriately; and the answers will generally be right by definition, because the questions are about the subjects’ own past lives, which only they can be expected know about.

Second, in both cases many of the questions in the transcript were asked in English. Understanding these questions requires no knowledge of Swedish or German at all, so the subject is not engaging in responsive xenoglossy by Stevenson’s definition—even when, as sometimes happens in the Jensen transcript, the interviewer first asks the question in Swedish and then repeats it in English.

The interviewers do, of course, pose other questions besides yes/no questions, to Jensen in Swedish and to Gretchen in German. The subjects’ answers to these questions are very spotty. Jensen, for instance, answers ‘my wife’ to a question about what he would pay for some item at the market, and Gretchen, asked what she eats for breakfast (‘after sleeping’), answers ‘Bettzimmer’—a literal translation from English ‘bed-room’ but not the German word for ‘bedroom’, which is *Schlafzimmer* (literally ‘sleep-room’). The subjects’ minimal acquaintance with the foreign languages in their present lifetimes is consistent with the level of understanding that they display in the interviews. TE had a bit of experience with Swedish, and many of the 60 Swedish words that Jensen uses spontaneously are very similar to words in French, English, Yiddish, or Russian, all of which TE had studied or heard at home as a child. Mrs. Jay had a bit of experience with German, and many of the words Gretchen uses have close parallels in English. As noted above, all three of Stevenson’s subjects had pronunciation errors and foreign accents. Sharada made grammatical errors in her Bengali, while Jensen and Gretchen were so laconic that their utterances displayed very few kinds of grammatical constructions.

Stevenson has various explanations for the inadequacies of his subjects’ Swedish and German. Some errors in Jensen’s Swedish, for instance, are attributed to a Norwegian admixture. Stevenson speculates—without evidence in her account of herself—that Gretchen was ‘an illegitimate and neglected child who spent most of her time in the kitchen with a servant’, and that her faulty German results from the fact that the servant was unedu-

cated (1984:46); but since uneducated people have vocabularies of thousands of words and grammars as complex as the spoken language of an educated person, this explanation is not promising. More plausible proposals (if one accepts Stevenson's paranormal arguments) are that the foreign personality, in particular its language, may be only partially manifested, and/or that 'the great difficulties involved in mediumistic communication' may impede the linguistic performance (1984:69). These explanations are not, unfortunately, amenable to scientific testing.

But in spite of the subjects' problematic performance, Stevenson is firmly convinced that their competence in Swedish and German requires a paranormal explanation. Since their demonstrated active knowledge of the foreign languages is confined to one or two hundred words and a bit of grammar—which one could certainly learn without straining the memory, even with minimal exposure to the language—his belief clearly rests on the responsive nature of the linguistic performance: sometimes they do answer questions appropriately, even questions that require an answer other than 'yes' or 'no'. (For Gretchen, I counted 28 such responses, including some repetitions, out of a total of 102 questions in the transcript; see Thomason 1987, 1988 for discussion of this case.) Can these appropriate responses, scattered among the clearly inappropriate ones, be accounted for normally, so that no paranormal explanation is needed?

The answer is yes, and the explanation lies in the subject's ability to use clues in the conversational context to make educated guesses about the interviewer's intent. This is not a rare talent, but is a faculty that is possessed by all language users, educated and uneducated. Certainly TE and Mrs. Jay knew that they were being interviewed about their previous lives, and that the questions pertained mainly to details of daily living. In both cases, the line of questioning was already signalled by questions posed in English. Not only was the conversational framework highly restricted, but the interviewers generally used very simple sentence structures and repeated their questions frequently, making the guesswork easier if the subjects did not in fact understand the questions. Anyone who has traveled in a foreign country can provide examples of successful guesswork of this kind; examples can also be found in American courtrooms, where judges, after posing a few simple questions (such as 'What is your name?', a question that was asked of both Jensen and Gretchen), have

decided that non-English-speaking defendants know English well enough to follow the court proceedings without the help of an interpreter—even when, in many cases, the defendants knew about as much English as Jensen and Gretchen knew Swedish and German. In other words, the level of responsiveness in Jensen and Gretchen was much too low to convince a linguist that it reflected any significant degree of language learning. Contrary to Stevenson’s beliefs, these subjects showed no facility in the languages beyond the knowledge of a handful of words and grammatical features. Significantly, too, their passive knowledge of Swedish and German—their ability to understand what was said to them—was if anything weaker than their active knowledge of words and phrases; but real speakers of real languages, including second-language learners, have a much greater passive than active knowledge of the language.

The most likely explanation for the linguistic performance of both Stevenson’s and Grossi’s subjects is that they had ideas about what the relevant languages sound like—ranging from virtually no accurate knowledge in the case of Grossi’s subjects A and C, to a little (erroneous) knowledge in the case of Grossi’s subject B, to knowledge of one or two hundred words and a bit of grammar for Jensen and Gretchen, to more substantial knowledge for Sharada—and they exploited whatever knowledge they had in producing the language they believed they had spoken in an earlier lifetime. Stevenson’s responsive xenoglossy is flawed as a criterion for establishing knowledge of a language, at least at the low level of understanding displayed by Jensen and Gretchen. So, although one can readily agree with Stevenson that a genuine case of xenoglossy would be impressive evidence for a paranormal phenomenon, it is still true that no convincing case has yet been made.

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