Speaking in Tongues :
A Philosophical Comment

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Catholics with some biblical knowledge will clearly be familiar with the expression 'speaking in tongues'. Those who have encountered what is known as 'Catholic Pentecostalism' or the 'Charismatic renewal' will be even more familiar with it. For within this, though not always considered essential,[1] it certainly is regarded by many as a topic of considerable importance. Up to the present, however, there has been little of a philosophical nature said on the subject and the purpose of what follows is to go some way towards remedying the deficiency. My comments will be necessarily curtailed for the sake of space, but, hopefully, something of interest will emerge.

I

Advocates of speaking in tongues undoubtedly have a biblical basis for introducing the topic. According to Acts, on the Day of Pentecost the apostles were 'filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak in other tongues' (Acts 2.3, R.S.V. Cf. Acts 19.6-7; 10.66). In 1 Corinthians 14, although he has some harsh things to say on the subject, St Paul declares: 'I thank God that I speak in tongues more than you all', and he makes it clear that speaking in tongues is a gift from God. The New Testament witness is not, however, a great deal of help in deciding what exactly speaking in tongues amounts to. It is not even clear whether the biblical authors regard the phenomenon as speaking in unknown but genuine languages.[2] St Paul's contribution is meagre enough and could hardly be called a fully worked-out analysis. He alludes to speaking in tongues only to make the negative point that this should not detract from Christian edification. Only when stating what he considers to be edifying does he begin to expand.

Modern writers are less reserved. To the question 'What does it mean to speak in tongues?' there is a fairly orthodox reply. According to this speaking in tongues is first and foremost a gift of the Holy Spirit. More precisely, it is uttering sounds that do not manifestly correspond to items of natural languages. At the same time, it is to speak or to use language and, indeed, to pray. This is made clear by

[1]Cf. Peter Hocken, 'Pentecostals on paper II', *The Clergy Review*, March 1975, p. 173.
[2]Cf. Henry Wansbrough, 'Speaking in Tongues', *The Way*, July 1974.

Killian McDonnell,[3] and Simon Tugwell explains that speaking in tongues 'appears to mean the production of genuinely linguistic phenomena, which may or may not be identified by someone present as some definite language, but which does not convey any ordinary semantic significance to the speaker himself'.[4] In *Did you receive the Spirit?*[5] Tugwell explains that 'It is that one speaks words which do not mean anything in any language known to himself' (p. 67). This, says Tugwell, is 'God's action' in us (*ibid.*), 'the working of the Holy Spirit' (p. 68), a 'manifestation' of the Holy Spirit (*ibid.*). According to Tugwell, 'someone speaking in tongues may turn out to be talking in some known language; even where this is not the case there is generally some linguistic pattern' (*ibid.*). 'You do the speaking, the Lord chooses the words' (p. 69); 'In speaking with other tongues we surrender one little limb to God's control' (p. 70). 'It is a prayer of praise, a prayer of peace' (p. 72). According to a standard work on Catholic Pentecostalism, speaking in tongues is 'praying . . . it is the child's delight, the glee that greets the fireworks display on the Fourth of July, not the display itself'.[6]

Pentecostals may be expected to differ among themselves but we can conclude then that, according to many of its supporters, speaking in tongues may be considered as :

(1)   Using a language.

(2)   God using language through us in order to assist our prayers. Since we find it said that one who speaks in tongues may also be interpreted we can perhaps add as a third point :

(3)   Speaking in tongues can be an aid to a Christian group.

This seems to follow from (2), for if speaking in tongues comes from God and is God using language, then interpreting what God says is, presumably, making clear the word of God. So the chief questions that arise with regard to speaking in tongues are 'Can we indeed regard speaking in tongues as a use of language' and 'Can speaking in tongues be viewed as a use of language where the user is regarded as God?' Neither question can be answered until we have some idea of the necessary conditions of an utterance being the use of language.

II

The nature of language forms an important debating point in contemporary philosophy. Much that has been said on the subject is complex and a really adequate commentary on the issues at stake is not possible here. Normally, however, it would be agreed that if L is a genuine language at least the following conditions must be satisfied :

(1)   L must consist of utterances involving regularity of sound.

(2)   L must be capable of analysis in terms of grammar and syntax.

(3)   L must have rules for the correct application of its elements.

[3]Killian McDonnell, *Catholic Pentecostalism,* Ave Maria Press.
[4]*The Expository Times,* February 1973, p. 137.
[5]Darton, Longman and Todd, 1972.
[6]*Catholic Pentecostals,* Kevin and Dorothy Ranaghan, Paulist Press, 1969, p. 192.

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To these specifications some would add :
  (4)   The utterances of L must employ terms the meaning of which
        is understood by more than one person.
  (5)   L must be rich, i.e., capable of sustaining communication over
        a wide range of human activities and interests.

Are there any reasons for accepting 1-5 as stating necessary condi-
tions for L being a language? We can, I think, take it for granted that
if L is a language then condition 1 is satisfied. Language is a means of
communication. As any natural scientist will agree, not all communi-
cation involves sound but, even where there is no acoustic signal,
regularity of some sort is required for communication. If A is a com-
municative factor, e.g., a gesture or facial expression, it must be some-
how constant on different occasions if it is to remain A. And if A is a
sound the same applies. In the case of language, however, must this
regularity extend to matters of grammar and syntax? Here there is
room for disagreement. We sometimes refer to the language of music
and we frequently interpret a piece of music as if it were an effort in
communication. It is natural to say that a given musical example
expresses, say, hope and confidence and that 'There are grounds for
hope and confidence' is the message of the example. Wittgenstein says
'Understanding a sentence is much more akin to understanding a
theme in music than one may think . . . understanding a sentence lies
nearer than one thinks to what is ordinarily called understanding a
musical theme'.[7] If we can say this then we appear to allow for a
piece of music the substitution of a sentence which is clearly intended
as an assertion. From this it is no long step to regarding the music as
a novel form of language or a substitute of one form of language for
another.

On the other hand, can one say that a piece of music really can
constitute a message unless there are some conventions correlating,
even in the broadest sense, the composition of notes and a proposition?
There must, in fact, be a 'key' for the interpretation of music in terms
of assertion if the music is to be understood in this way at all. Further-
more, the key here relates music to a linguistic unit (whether written
or spoken it does not matter). Independently of this key the music does
not *mean* at all and neither is it language. But this implies that mere
regularity of sound does not make for language. Whether or not such
regularity can be understood as a language, as may be the case with
music, depends on the contingent fact of its relation to language itself,
and where X is only L contingently, depending on its possible asso-
ciation with L, it is not L itself. Music itself is not therefore an
example of language. Rather, it may be considered to stand proxy for
a use of language where the use is itself capable of identification inde-
pendently of the music itself. Language itself presupposes grammar
and syntax.

Proceeding to the idea that rules are important in language we can
begin by noting that some people would deny that any language must

[7]*Philosophical Investigations,* Oxford, 1968, para. 527.

have rules for the correct application of its elements. A unit of language, it is sometimes said, need not be rule-bound, which implies that words need not be regarded as conforming to any kind of convention. This seems to be Kierkegaard's position in works like *Concluding Unscientific Postscript*. According to Kierkegaard, it is possible to speak in the language of theology while admitting that the way one uses words conforms to no criteria for intelligibility posed from outside. He maintains that within theological discourse a word may take on a life of its own so that knowledge of its function in secular discourse is of no concern to anybody wishing to use it theologically. Accordingly, Kierkegaard can offer us the following perplexing occurence of the word 'truth': 'An objective uncertainty held fast in an appropriation-process of the most passionate kind is the truth'.

In response to such a viewpoint, however, there is an important point to be made. In conversation with Humpty Dumpty, Alice says: 'The question is . . . whether you *can* make words mean so many different things', and the answer to this is: 'You cannot unless there is some connection between two terms used in different contexts'. Language is a highly conventional phenomenon and a word whose use bears no relationship to some of its other uses is free from rules and independent of conventions but it is also unintelligible. The rules, we may say, need not be stipulatable or hard and fast, for we frequently find ourselves unable to provide a list of rules for the use of terms. This is hardly surprising since we are constantly applying old words in new situations. But to some extent, as the work of Wittgenstein has surely made clear, rules must be present. 'To understand a sentence means to understand a language. To understand a language means to be master of a technique'—which means that language is itself a technique. As one commentator on Kierkegaard justly declares: 'You do not make a false or doubtful proposition true by calling it true any more than you make socks into shoes by calling them shoes'.[8] And if what is implied by this is true, something of consequence follows regarding the fourth criterion of language noted above. For if we can challenge an individual's use of a word it must also be true that to be part of language an utterance must conform to public rules with reference to which the whole idea of understanding and meaning must arise in the first place. (4) is therefore true; if L is a language L must employ terms the meaning of which is understood by more than one person. Thus we are left with the problem posed by (5).

An interesting passage relevant to this occurs in the early part of Wittgenstein's *Philosophical Investigations*.

> A is building with building stones: there are blocks, pillars, slabs, and beams. B has to pass the stones, and that in the order in which A needs them. For this purpose they use a language consisting of the words 'block', 'pillar', 'slab', 'beam'. A calls them out;—B

[8] Paul Edwards, 'Kierkegaard and the "Truth" of Christianity', *Philosophy,* April 1971, p. 102.

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brings the stone which he has learned to bring at such-and-such a call.—Conceive this as a complete primitive language.[9]

Commenting on this Rush Rhees observes[10] : 'But I feel there is something wrong here. The trouble is not to imagine a people with a language of such limited vocabulary. The trouble is to imagine that they spoke the language only to give these special orders on this job and otherwise never spoke at all. I do not think it would be speaking a language'. According to Rhees, what the builders are doing is more like playing a game with stones than using a language. The implications should be clear. When presented with utterances like that of the builders in Wittgenstein's example we should hesitate to call them language. They need to be part of an institution involving such activities as questioning, asserting, commanding, commending and so forth. I am not, however, convinced that we should agree with Rhees's dismissal of Wittgenstein's classification of the language of the builders. His argument admits that it is *like* a language and I think we can add that it would perhaps be wrong or unjustified to say that it is definitely not a language. In *Zettel,* Wittgenstein also observes that in cases like that of the builders 'the life of those men must be like ours in many respects . . . the important thing is that their language, and their thinking too, may be rudimentary, that there is such a thing as 'primitive thinking', which is to be described via primitive *behaviour*'.[11] So considering language like that of the builders we can remember that 'there is no clear break between these primitive games and more complicated ones : the more complicated ones can be built up from the primitive ones by the gradual addition of new forms'.[12] (5) is therefore not obviously a necessary condition of L being a language though (1)-(4) are. Now that we have some means of testing whether or not an utterance can be regarded as a use of language we can return to the idea of speaking in tongues and the claims made on its behalf.

III

It seems that at least one of our conditions for an utterance being a use of language is satisfied when the utterance is speaking in tongues. For, as we have seen, it is claimed that there is regularity of sound present when someone speaks in tongues. If such regularity cannot be established then speaking in tongues cannot be regarded as using a language. But if it can then at least there is something common to speaking in tongues and using a language. Yet what about conditions (2)-(4)? Are there any rules for the correct application of the elements that comprise the utterances of speaking in tongues? Here there seems to be a more formidable block in the way of easily identifying speaking in tongues and using language. For where are the rules, syntax

[9]*Philosophical Investigations,* para. 2.
[10]'Wittgenstein's Builders', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society Volume* 60 (1959-60).
[11]p. 299.
[12]A. Kenny, *Wittgenstein,* Penguin, 1975, p. 170.

and public criteria? On the face of it there seem to be none and there are no charismatic grammar books that tell us otherwise. One cannot learn to speak in tongues as one can learn to speak German. Nor would this seem to matter, for if one spoke in tongues one could not make mistakes of misapplying words.

Advocates of speaking in tongues might at this point, however, urge the following considerations as relevant in response to these objections. First, they might observe that speaking in tongues, while not constituting speaking a known language from the point of view of the speakers, is nevertheless the utterance of a known language. Secondly, it might be said that when a person speaks in tongues there is always the possibility that what he says may be interpreted by someone in such a way that there may be rendered a restatement in language known and understood by many of those present on the occasion of the speaking. As St Paul says: 'Therefore, he who speaks in a tongue should pray for the power to interpret' (1 Corinthians 14.13). Let us consider each of these replies.

If it is true that speaking in tongues may, on a given occasion of its occurence, be unambiguously identified with the utterance of a natural language then there is absolutely no reason why one cannot claim the instance as an example of a use of language. This is obviously true for it is tautologous that if X is a language X is a language. The question of interpretation is, however, more problematic.

Instinctively one is inclined to say that if a person can produce an interpretation of an utterance in intelligible form then what has been produced is a translation. I may not know what 'Le roi est mort' means but someone who understands French can listen to the sounds involved in the utterance of 'Le roi est mort' and say that it means 'The king is dead'. Here I would admit that 'Le roi est mort' is the use of a language which I do not understand. But the parallel between this situation and that which holds when an interpretation of tongues is offered does not seem to be exact. In the case of translating a language we do not simply accept a proffered translation as a genuine translation. It does not, so to speak, wear its credentials upon its chest. If A claims to translate L by offering Z it does not follow from A's claim that Z is a translation of L that Z really is such. Whether or not it is must be verified. Furthermore, the verification here is public. There must be agreed rules for translating. It must be agreed, for instance, that 'roi' means 'king' and not 'queen'. No matter what I say I cannot make 'queen' a translation of 'roi'. If you are to agree that my rendering of 'roi' is a translation you must therefore have access to agreed rules of translation. But where are the rules in the case of speaking in tongues? As far as I can see there appear to be none—at least where it is admitted that an utterance of speaking in tongues is not the utterance of a known language. Where an interpretation is offered one invariably has only the assertion of the interpreter that what he produces actually is a translation. But it has to be established that the interpretation is a translation. The principles of

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the language of which the instance of speaking in tongues is a usage *must be displayed and the rules of translation established.* Then the translation or interpretation offered must be checked against the rules and a verdict obtained. Otherwise there are no grounds at all for speaking of translation.

It seems then that we must say that on the question of interpretation the parallel between speaking in tongues and using a language can break down. Where the instance of speaking in tongues can be shown to be the use of a natural language this does not hold. But where one has only the translation of an interpreter to go on one is within one's rights in disallowing any claim that what one has here is the translation of a language utterance. But if this is so our fourth condition also remains unsatisfied in at least those instances where the translation offered of a particular occurrence of speaking in tongues is not identifiable as the use of a natural language. For where the principles of the language that is translated cannot be mapped and correlated with the principles of translation, the public rules governing the intelligible use of a term in the supposed language cannot be displayed either. So where T is an instance of speaking in tongues, T may only count as a language where it is identifiable as the use of a natural language. It follows from this that we may regard P (the person who utters T) as using a language only if T can be identified as natural language. But what about regarding T as spoken ultimately by God?

If T cannot be regarded as natural language then it cannot be regarded as language issuing from God. This follows from my previous argument. But if T can be identified as natural language this would not follow, nor does it seem clear to me that T in such an instance cannot be regarded as language ascribable to God. The case against such a conclusion would need to show *a priori* that the idea of ascribing language to God was absurd. And this would take a lot of argument. God cannot be thought to utter sound as a person does and T cannot be *uttered* by God. But it is possible for A to speak on behalf of B (for B may be inarticulate) and this could be held to provide helpful analogy to advocates of speaking in tongues. In *The Concept of Prayer*[13] D. Z. Phillips makes the point that any language user must have a background in a normal linguistic community. But given that God exists and given that, as Christians believe, God is personal (issues which are clearly outside the range of the present discussion) it seems not impossible that an utterance may be viewed as a divine communication. Consider the following hypothetical situation which I borrow with modification from Terence Penelhum's book *Problems of Religious Knowledge*.[14] Two people disagree over the truth of the proposition 'God can work miracles'. Suppose that 'miracle' is defined in the Humean sense as a violation of a law of nature brought about by a god. The parties agree to test their respective positions by calling on God for a sign. They stipulate that if 'God can work miracles' is

[13] Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1965.
[14] Macmillan, 1971. Cf. Richard Swinburne, *The Concept of Miracle*, Macmillan, 1970, chapter 5.

true the stars over London should spell out the words 'PRAISE THE LORD' every Sunday for three weeks. The stars behave in this way and this is verified by all reputable astronomers. If this were to happen I submit that 'God can work miracles' could be claimed by its proponent to be rationally established. He could claim that the proposition was endorsed by God. But if it is endorsed by God it may also be ascribed to God and since what is now ascribed to God is a use of language (i.e. the uttered proposition 'God can work miracles') one can just about see how it might be said that God somehow 'stands behind' a linguistic utterance, which is what is claimed in the case of speaking in tongues.[15] But whether or not such support can be given for particular instances of speaking in tongues is another matter and something for its defenders to tell us.

[15]Phillips would reject this argument on the grounds that it involves a misunderstanding of belief in God. The question is too large to discuss here but for a useful critique of Phillips along lines that I should largely follow see John Hick, 'Religion as Fact-asserting' in *God and the Universe of Faiths*, Macmillan, 1973. I have criticised details of Hick's remarks on related problems in my 'God and Language', *The Downside Review, January*, 1975.